

When Women Lead, Communities Gain

From the Netherlands to the Great Lakes region of Africa, women leaders are advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). They challenge taboos, mobilise communities, and help women and girls access accurate information and essential health services. Through advocacy and community engagement, these leaders also drive policy change and work with community and religious leaders to shift harmful social norms.

Ahead of International Women's Day 2026, we spoke with four Executive Directors co-leading the Solutions for Supporting Health Adolescents and Rights Protection (SHARP) project, about women's leadership in advancing SRHR and what support is still needed to sustain locally led impact.

Renée Vasbinder, Executive Director of Health Action International, The Netherlands

In many health systems, women face disproportionate barriers to accessing essential medicines and care. Which of HAI's programmes do you see as most directly addressing gender-based inequities in healthcare access, and how can these efforts be expanded?

Our SHARP programme in the Great Lakes region, directly addresses gender based inequalities in access to healthcare and essential medicines. It is dedicated to improving adolescents' sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) and reducing the high unmet need for family planning. It strengthens the supply of youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, while also increasing community demand through engagement with religious leaders, families and other socio-cultural influencers.

Despite progress, many girls still face barriers due to harmful social norms, education gaps and policy barriers that limit access to SRH services and commodities. Expanding this work requires stronger multi-stakeholder collaboration, sustained investment and increased international support. Continued funding and partnerships with civil society organisations in the Global South is essential to scale locally led solutions in the long term, and ensure girls and young women can access the information and healthcare they need.



Nooliet Kabanyana, Executive Director of Rwanda NGOs Forum on HIV/AIDS and Health Promotion, Rwanda

What lessons from SHARP implementation would you highlight as most relevant to advancing the International Women’s Day agenda in Rwanda and beyond?

The key lesson for advancing the International Women’s Day 2026 agenda “Give to Gain” is clear: when women’s leadership is supported, civil society organisations adolescents and young women are empowered with credible evidence and coordinated platforms, transformative reform becomes possible. SHARP implementation has shown that investing in women/adolescents-led advocacy, awareness, strengthening multi-sectoral collaboration, and maintaining consistent engagement with decision-makers can shift systems, not just narratives.

Rwanda’s progress illustrates that giving space, resources and recognition to women leaders and youth advocates yields measurable gains in policy reform, healthcare service access and social accountability. These lessons remain relevant not only for Rwanda but for broader regional and global efforts to advance gender equality and women’s health rights.



Dorothy Okemo, Executive Director of Access to Medicines Platform, Kenya

Reflecting on this year’s International Women’s Day “Give to Gain” theme, what is one piece of advice you would give to other women and allies working in global health advocacy?

In the spirit of this year’s International Women’s Day theme, “Give to Gain,” I

believe that the greatest investment we can make in global health advocacy is the intentional mentorship and elevation of the next generation of women leaders. In my work advancing reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health, and SRHR in Kenya—where we face the profound urgency of mitigating the “triple threat” and ending preventable maternal mortality—I have seen that progress is never a solo endeavour.

My one piece of advice to fellow advocates and allies is this: Give your platform to gain collective power. By sharing our seats at decision-making tables and centering the lived experiences of the women and girls we serve, we do not diminish our own influence; rather, we multiply the impact of our advocacy. When we invest our social and professional capital into building a more inclusive leadership pipeline, we gain a more resilient, equitable health system for everyone.



Mimi Mopunga, Executive Director of Le Cadre Permanent de Concertation de la Femme Congolaise (CAFCCO), Democratic Republic of Congo

What role do community women leaders play in advancing sexual and reproductive health rights, and what support is still needed from international partners to ensure these efforts are sustainable and locally led?

Community women leaders play a crucial role in advancing sexual and reproductive health rights by challenging taboos, raising awareness, and connecting women and girls with accurate information and essential services. In many communities where sexuality remains a sensitive topic influenced by tradition and religious beliefs, these leaders organise education sessions on family planning, promote prenatal and postnatal care, and guide people toward modern contraceptive methods and qualified health providers.

Through training, activism, and advocacy, they also influence policies and push decision-makers to improve laws, standards, and access to services, while gradually shifting harmful social norms by engaging traditional and religious leaders. However, to ensure these efforts remain sustainable and locally led, international partners are still needed to advocate for stronger government commitment and funding, support access to essential supplies, such as contraceptives, and invest in

skills transfer and capacity strengthening so local women's initiatives can continue protecting the health and rights of their communities.

