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THE HUFFINGTON POST

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Empowering Sex Workers in Ethiopia

JUNE 13, 2012

By David J. Olson

SHASHEMENE, Ethiopia — Three years ago, Munayie, 25, made her living as a commercial sex worker here in Shashemene, a city of over 100,000 in the lake resort area of southern Ethiopia, about 240 kilometers south of Addis Ababa. She wanted to do something else but sex work was the only thing she knew that brought in the money she needed to provide for herself and her 8-year-old son.

Eventually, she and other sex workers found their calling as café owners with support from “Wise-Up,” a condom promotion program of the non-profit organization DKT Ethiopia that targets sex workers, their clients and gatekeepers, and other “most at-risk populations.” Wise-Up is grounded in the belief that promoting condoms to these groups will reduce prevalence of HIV and other sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) because 1) prevalence is generally higher among these groups and 2) they act as “bridging” populations that spread HIV and STIs to the general population.

In 2009, Wise-Up created a cooperative of 15 sex workers and Munayie became its leader. In 2011, the cooperative opened a café and condom shop in Shashemene.

One of Wise-Up’s activities is empowerment of sex workers through cooperatives that stimulate alternative economic activities. Currently, there are 21 Wise-Up cooperatives engaged in food preparation, hair dressing and café operation. Yet Wise-Up is “non-judgmental” and does not require the women to leave sex work. That’s up to them.

Munayie said she is working harder now than she did as a sex worker (the café is open daily from 6am to 9pm), but she is much happier. “Before, we were working at night and sleeping during the day,” she said. “Now we are living like other people.”

Munayie is a study in charisma. Even before I met her, I’d heard her described as “a strong woman,” “a great saleswoman,” “full of energy,” and “tough.” As I watched her speak in Amharic about how her life had



The sign in front of the café in Shashemene opened by 15 sex workers in 2009.

changed, I didn’t understand the words she was saying but it was absolutely clear from her face, voice and gestures that she was articulate, poised and passionate.

The café represents a collaborative effort. The City of Shashemene donated the land. DKT paid for construction of the café. Munayie and her colleagues provided the rest.

Munayie said business is good but they lack capital. One result of that is that the cooperative had to rent a coffee maker. In Ethiopia, where coffee’s energizing effect is thought to have been discovered in the northeast region hundreds of years ago, good coffee is absolutely critical to the success of any restaurant.

Another activity of Munayie’s cooperative is a condom shop adjacent to the café and open 24 hours a day. It carries DKT Ethiopia’s full line of condoms, distributed through a social marketing program. The condom shop is one of six set up by DKT across Ethiopia so that sex workers have alternative sources of income and so that late-night revelers can find condoms when they need them.

And if that were not enough to keep Munayie busy, she also sells condoms through another DKT program called Young Marketers in which DKT Ethiopia sells products to participating anti-AIDS clubs, who resell them in their communities. The salespeople earn 75% of the profit, while the

clubs keep 25%. Young Marketers, which began in 2007, is a cost-effective means of ensuring supply and increasing demand for products at the community level. It also provides employment for youth and revenue for the clubs. As of May 2012, Young Marketers were working through 185 clubs in 150 cities with monthly average sales of 2 million condoms. That represents around 30% of DKT Ethiopia’s annual condom sales.

Munayie became a Young Marketer in 2011. Like all Young Marketers, she received training in finance, bookkeeping and salesmanship from DKT. Now she sells to 10 outlets in Shashemene and earns between 300 and 600 birr per month (US \$17-34). DKT says that in some large towns, Young Marketers earn as much as \$170 per month. In Ethiopia, that’s big money.

The original cooperative of 15 sex workers that started three years ago is now down to 10 — one died of breast cancer and four are now students. But the remaining 10 are working hard to make the restaurant and the condom shop both successes.

“Now we are the equal of other people,” said Munayie. “We have confidence.”

NOTE: *Wise-Up is funded by the U.K. Department for International Development, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Irish Aid and UNFPA, and led strategically and technically by DKT International. Wise-Up is implemented by Timret Le Hiwot, an Ethiopian non-governmental organization, and Wise-Up Sex Workers Cooperatives. In 2010, Nikat Women’s Association, one of Wise-Up’s implementing partners, won the Red Ribbon Award at the Vienna International AIDS Conference for its work in Wise-Up.*

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