



JOURNEYS OF COURAGE

Pains and triumphs of diverse women and girls
in accessing and enjoying SRHR in Mozambique

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Foreword

Planting Seeds, Nurturing Change

This book is not just a collection of stories; it is a vibrant mirror of resilience and transformation journey of young women in Mozambique. The Journeys of Courage booklet is born out of the pressing need to give voice and visibility to young women who face various forms of marginalization. They are young women with disabilities, those living with HIV, those from the LGBTIQIA+ community, and the internally displaced, whose lived realities are often ignored; but who hold the key to true social change. Our goal, as the We Lead Consortium, coordinated by AMOFEA, was to show that women's empowerment is not a concept, but rather a driving force capable of reshaping policies and practices.

In Mozambique, we have made important progress in the field of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), from the existence of a Safe Abortion Law to the Law Preventing and Combating Child Unions. However, the road to the full realization of SRHR is far from complete. Profound structural challenges remain. We continue to deal with the lack of preparedness of public services to inclusively serve people with disabilities and LBT youth. Gender-based violence (GBV) is amplified by climate crises that push young people into forced unions, continuing cycle of abuse.

The magnitude of the problem lies in the persistent denial of the fundamental right to live and express one's sexuality without fear, shame or discrimination. That's why the stories told here are so vital. They are not mere victim reports, but irrefutable evidence that when you invest in the voice of young women, they become the most effective agents of change, transforming the theory of politics into lived practice.

Each page of this booklet is a courageous step toward dismantling myths and breaking down invisible barriers that society has imposed. These narratives demonstrate that the problem is not about the young woman, but in the attitudinal, communication, and accessibility barriers that society and services impose on her. Instead of accepting this exclusion in silence, these young women, activists, and rights 

← holders, are demanding their inclusion in decision-making tables. These include participation in school councils to the demand for more humanized and quality health services.

What inspires me most about these stories is the unwavering testimony that dignity and self-love always succeeds over prejudice. Meet Helena Matule, the young woman with a disability who was labeled “spirit-posessed” and discredited by the community. Her participation in a collective marriage and her steadfastness in building a family proved, without words, that a relationship is not based on physical condition, but on the feelings that two people share.

Today, Helena feels empowered to influence other women to fight. Or the story of Suzana Céla Djedje, who transformed fear and insecurity about her sexuality and employability into a new chapter of success. From shy and excluded, she became a valued intern in a company that embraced inclusion, proving that her dedication and willingness to learn are invaluable.

And finally, the cry of hope of Elisa Manuel Pascoal, a young woman who lived with HIV and suffered domestic violence that prevented her from accessing her medication (ART) and health services. Her recovery and rise to leadership, summed up in her own words, echoes the promise of this program: “I believed that my life was no longer worthless, but thanks to We Lead, I have discovered that I can be heard, respected and loved. Today, I’m not just a survivor, I’m a leader.”

I invite you, dear reader, to go beyond reading and actively interact with these stories. Let yourself be touched by the courage and determination of these young women. They are not asking for charity; they are demanding their human rights.

May this book serve as a catalyst in eliminating the barriers against women enjoyment of SRHR that still persist in Mozambique. By flipping through these pages, you’re not just reading about success, you’re participating in building a future where diversity is celebrated and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights are a reality for all young women in Mozambique.

Marcia Mandlate Chavane
Community of Action Facilitator
We Lead Program, Mozambique

Acknowledgements

The Journeys of Courage booklet is a result of the collective vision, passion, and dedication of many individuals and organizations who have walked this journey with us. To the young women rightsholders: your courage lit the path, your voices stirred the winds of change. To our Host Organizations, and Community of Action (CoAs): you nurtured the soil where these seeds could grow. To every hand that wrote, photographed, designed, and dreamed: you gave this story its colors. This booklet is a celebration of us all.

Our immense gratitude to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who funded the We Lead program under the SRHR Partnership Fund, which is part of the Strengthening Civil Society subsidy framework. Without your support, these stories of change would not have been possible.

Many thanks to our consortium partners: Positive Vibes, Restless Development, Marsa, FEMNET, and the Central American Women's Fund. Your support and thoughts contributed to changing the lives of hundreds of women in the countries we intervened in. To the team at Hivos, the Lead consortium partner: thank you for your tireless efforts that ensured the program was implemented seamlessly. To M&C Saatchi World Services, thank you being our much-valued technical partner.

We sincerely thank the review team, specifically, Cynthia Omondi, Mary Kuira, Nyambura Gathumbi, Catherine Ferrer, Mickey Andeweg and Mark Schleedoorn for their time, insights, and thoughtful feedback, which enriched the quality and depth of the stories. Your keen eye and commitment ensured that the booklet truly reflects the spirit and impact of the We Lead programme.

Special appreciation goes to Arthur Okwemba, Faith Muiruri, and Ruth Omukhango, who worked tirelessly to compile, edit, and design the booklet. Your creativity, persistence, and teamwork have made this product both inspiring and memorable.

Because when We Lead, Change Blossoms.

A wedding that changed community attitudes about women with disabilities

They told her she would never amount to anything. Her prospects for success, happiness, or even a normal social life were dismissed as impossible dreams. Community members whispered that people with disabilities simply didn't "make it" in life, while others went further, branding her as "possessed by spirits" and visibly shunned any contact with her.

This was the reality facing Helena Matule in Maputo city, Mozambique. A reality shared by countless women with disabilities across the country. For Helena, discrimination wasn't just an abstract concept; it was woven into the fabric of daily life, creating formidable barriers to the most basic services, including sexual and reproductive health rights.

A case in point was the appalling treatment she suffered when she went to give birth, when some health care providers asked how she had even conceived in the first place.

For Helena, the treatment at the hospital was an echo of what she had faced in her community. Fellow villagers and some family members had discouraged her from getting married, let alone raising a family. This, together with social stereotypes and bias, meant Helena never imagined enjoying a married life and raising children of her own.

Verde's strategic approaches

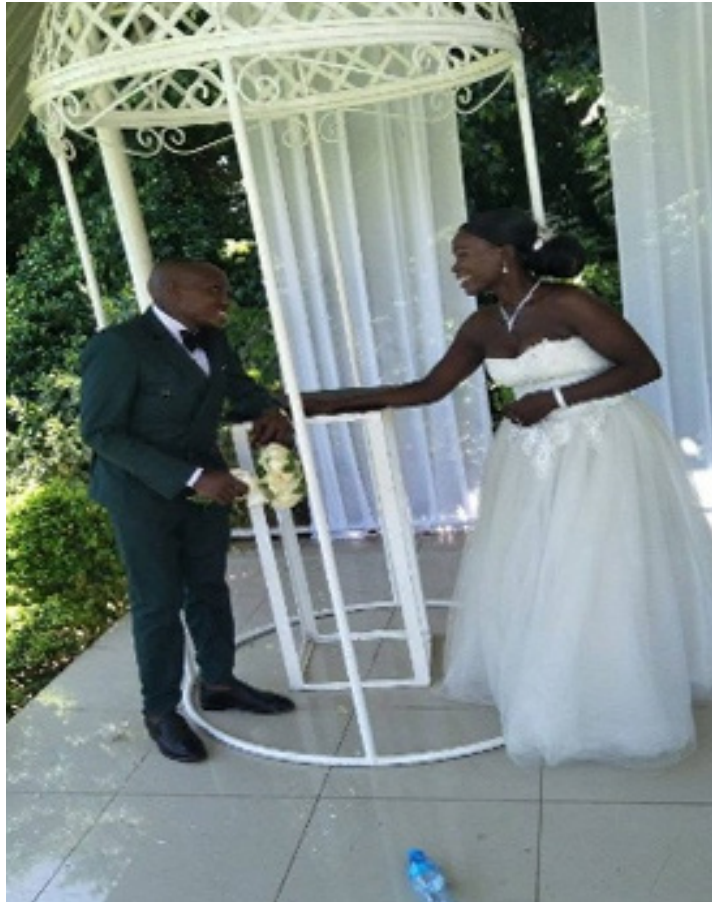
Life began to change for the better when she received support from Folha Verde and the Mozambican Association of Women with Disabilities (AMMD) to join the We Lead program as an activist promoting the rights of women and girls with disabilities.

The first thing the program did for women like Helena was to encourage them—using inspiring stories of other women like them who had overcome similar challenges—to dream about whatever they wanted to be in life. Addressing the self-esteem and agency of women with disabilities became a key area of focus.

This was followed by training on the rights of women and girls with disabilities, and how to advocate for them. The training focused on how to advocate for their rights to access sexual and reproductive health and creating an enabling environment for them to realize their full potential.

The inspiration, knowledge, and skills Helena gained from the We Lead training began shaping many things for her. It was like a seed of change had been planted.

Under the program, Helena began visiting health facilities in her community to →



← advocate for health services that were disability friendly. She called for the removal of barriers like poor pathways, limited access to information, and the negative attitudes of health care workers towards the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health rights by people with disabilities, especially women and girls.

She undertook the same task in the community, advocating for young women to enjoy marriage and exercise their rights to sexuality, getting married, and having children.

Helena's new-found agency

At a personal level, Helena was also going through a major transformation. We Lead had made

her vocal about her views and rights, especially about the sexual and reproductive health rights of women with disabilities.

"I was a woman without a voice who did not know her rights, especially those related to sexual and reproductive health. I was even afraid of having a relationship with someone, fearing the person might get tired of me or just want to use me because few people like me are married or living with a partner. But when I joined the project as an activist, I gained more information about my rights, and my self-confidence improved," says a contented Helena.

The empowerment sessions had sparked Helena's determination to set and achieve →

← goals. She says that, for the first time, she dared to dream of things that society had written off her list. Raising a family of her own was one of them. Quietly, she was thinking of doing something major that would forever challenge and change attitudes about women with disabilities.

A wedding to remember

In February 2025, Helena's family and community had the shock of their lives. Helena and six other women with disabilities—three with physical disabilities, three visually impaired, and one with psychosocial disability—decided jointly to wed the loves of their lives. The church organized a mass wedding for them, reducing the cost of the event significantly.

For Helena, this was not just a wedding but a major message: women with disabilities have the right to marry and raise a family. Indeed, things for Helena and other women with disabilities began to change afterwards. Some of the social barriers they had faced started to disappear, and their communities began including them in the ordinary events of community life.

For Helena, who formalized her marriage through the ceremony, the wedding reinforced the recognition of women with disabilities as people with the same capabilities, wishes, and aspirations as any other person in society. It also proved that a successful and fulfilling relationship is not based on a person's physical condition but on the feelings two people have for each other.

Folha Verde also celebrated this significant development in the lives of women with disabilities. The organization observed: "Despite the many stereotypes, taboos, and myths about women with disabilities, such as 'How can a woman with a disability care for children or express her sexuality?', the wedding proved many people wrong."

Still, naysayers were trying to scuttle what had happened even as Helena celebrated her wedding. They said that her partner would eventually leave her and that he was just playing with her emotions. They argued that a person with a disability cannot have a functional relationship.

"What can she even do at home? She will not manage to care for the household or the family," was the type of comment Helena recalls they made.

What they did not know was that the skills and confidence Helena gained from the We Lead program had strengthened her to where she could easily weather their negativity.

Transformation and lasting impact

Helena says her marriage has blossomed and her relationship with her family and other people is improving greatly. She now enjoys considerable respect from both the community and her family.

"Their reactions have been positive, and even those who once doubted I could marry now look at me differently," says Helena.

She notes that her life has become more meaningful and rewarding after participating in the We Lead program.

Today, Helena has become an inspirational figure, influencing other women to fight for their rights and to think positively about their capabilities. She is now a leading advocate encouraging young women with disabilities to overcome their fears.

"My greatest moment was the transformation I went through and having the ability to transform the lives of other women and girls with disabilities." ■

How young Mozambican rightsholders helped rewrite the rules of inclusion at three schools



The student council meetings happened every month; decisions were made, voices were heard, but not all voices. In the schools of Moamba and Marracuene districts in Maputo Province, Mozambique, certain students had learned to accept their place on the margins.

Adolescents living with HIV, those with disabilities, and LGBTIQ+ youth watched from the sidelines

as policies that affected their lives were debated and decided without them.

For years, these schools had inspired people with their student-centered governance structures. But diversity in these structures was lacking. The very students who needed representation the most were the ones being left out.



← There was another conspicuous omission. Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) matters were absent from these governance structures, even though many students relied heavily on them for information.

School managers and teachers were seen as responsible for creating this restrictive environment, closed to diversity and open discussions on the SRHR needs of adolescents.

Challenging the old guard

The Associação dos Estudantes Secundários de Moçambique (Association of Secondary School Students of Mozambique, AESMO) knew what needed to be done. Teachers and managers had to see things differently. In 2024, with support from the We Lead program, the organization formed strategies to address the twin problems of inclusion and access to SRHR information and services within the institutions of learning.

Their first target was school managers. They were invited to follow training on SRHR and on how to ensure a diversity of adolescents was fairly represented in school governance structures and decision-making processes.

“These sessions were designed not only to educate but also to challenge school leaders to rethink traditional power dynamics in educational institutions,” AESMO explains.

Promises made public

The training had far-reaching positive implications. “The five school managers publicly pledged to support the We Lead program by integrating rightsholders, including girls and young women living with HIV, those with disabilities, and

“These sessions were designed not only to educate but also to challenge school leaders to rethink traditional power dynamics in educational institutions”

members of the LGBTIQ+ community, into school councils and other decision-making bodies,” AESMO notes. They also committed to pursuing a rights-based approach to matters related to SRHR.

With this, marginalized young people were for the first time welcomed into decision-making spaces where school policies, resource allocations, and freedoms are discussed.

From commitment to action

The managers reformed their school councils to reflect the new realities and implement what they had learned. In Moamba, Guija, and Samora Machel Secondary Schools, student councils began to include all rightsholders: adolescents living with HIV and those with disabilities.

SRHR conversations also began to appear on these councils’ agendas, with 16 rightsholders invited to discuss their issues →



← and solutions for accessing reproductive health information and services.

The school managers went on to create School Health Corners that linked young people in schools to nearby Adolescent Friendly Health Services, increasing access to SRHR information and services. The Corners are designated physical spaces within schools where students can access counseling, health information, and referrals to local healthcare centers.

A ripple effect

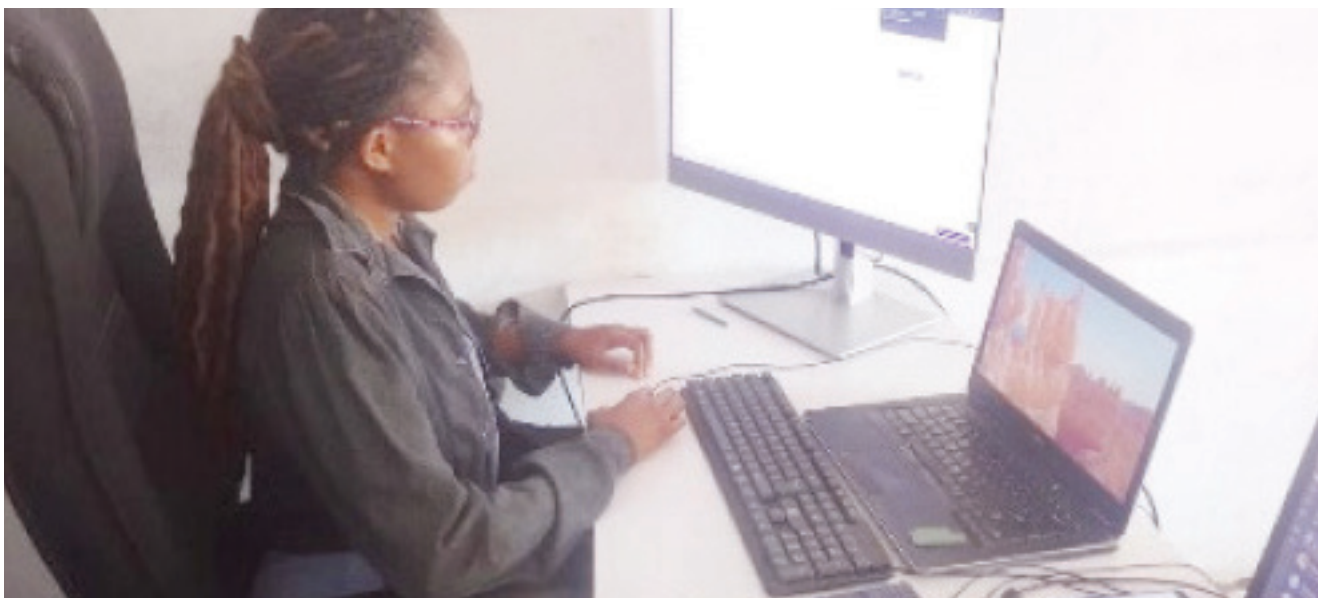
Teachers at other schools, health providers, and government authorities started working closely with young people to identify their SRHR problems, co-create solutions, and work as a team to influence policies in state and non-state institutions. This continues to date.

These successes didn't occur in a vacuum. AESMO conducted six advocacy sessions led by rightsholders to get government and other actors to remove barriers to youth access to SRHR and services.

The result: 103 barriers hindering youth access to SRHR information and services in Maputo and Gaza provinces were removed. These included unfriendly healthcare service providers who were retrained; having services closer to where could access them; having sexual and reproductive health information in formats the young people could access, among others.

This massive achievement in expanding the space for discussing and accessing SRHR proved that when young people, especially marginalized ones, are empowered and included in decision-making on SRHR matters affecting them, change is transformative and sustainable ■

Power of hope: the story of Suzana Djedje



Growing up with a physical disability in a world that saw only limitations for her, Suzana Céla Djedje's childhood was marked by profound isolation. Where other young girls discovered their potential and embraced their rights, Suzana learned to see herself through the lens of society's low expectations. The message was clear and unrelenting: she simply wasn't worthy of the same opportunities.

Family members and community alike had written her off, viewing her abilities as negligible and her future as predetermined. These attitudes slowly eroded her sense of self-worth, leaving

her shy, fearful, and withdrawn.

Like many women with disabilities, Suzana was unaware of her rights, particularly those related to sexual and reproductive health. She had no understanding of how to confront the discrimination that stymied her every attempt to find work or access essential services. The doors she knocked on remained firmly shut, with potential employers seeing her more as a financial burden than a valuable contributor.

Simply put, Suzana felt excluded from social life and deeply insecure about her future.



← Actions that changed Suzana's world

Until the day she started attending the We Lead program's sessions on capacity building and self-recognition conducted by Associação Moçambicana para o Desenvolvimento da Família (AMODEFA) - Girls Not Brides.

These sessions were designed to transform women with disabilities into agents of change using AMODEGFA's expertise in promoting the rights of women with disabilities and advocating for their inclusion in social, economic, and political development.

The training taught Suzana about her rights and how to advocate for other women with disabilities. She felt newly emboldened, with increased self-esteem, and able to recognize and seize opportunities. The first one was securing pre-professional internships. For the first time, life began to have meaning.

Prospects that had seemed impossibly distant such as finding work, getting married, and raising a family, suddenly became tangible possibilities.

"After going through these sessions, I overcame my fears, gained confidence, and realized that it is possible to challenge stereotypes about me, knock on doors for support, and explore new opportunities," says Suzana.

She explains that the program helped her become emotionally and intellectually stronger, enabling her to know and defend her rights while expressing her views on issues that significantly affected her and other women with disabilities.

Winning against all odds

As Suzana became more vocal about her identity and rights, her increasing visibility and determination to transform her life began to impress people and organizations alike.

One such organization was Motivation Design Gráfico, a communications company that specializes in marketing and graphic design and promotes the inclusion of people with disabilities in the job market.

The company awarded her a scholarship to pursue her interest in design at its headquarters in Maputo. Her responsibilities include digital marketing, content production, social media management, and supporting promotional campaigns.

She has also been enlisted by the company as one of its experts to help evaluate and improve its inclusivity principles, policies, and procedures, particularly for women with disabilities. This has given Suzana the perfect platform to flourish beyond her dreams.

Suzana's plans are ambitious, but doable. She aims to set up training programs for young women with disabilities.

"We Lead contributed significantly to dismantling myths and proving that we are all equal in our differences. We are capable and can realize our dreams. We hope that Hivos, AMODEFA, and other partners will continue supporting us to realize our dreams and promote greater social justice," she says ■

From invisible to unstoppable: LGBTIQ+ youth reshape rural Mozambique

They lived among their neighbors but remained invisible. They walked the same streets, shared the same markets, but kept their truths locked away.

For LGBTIQ+ individuals in Manhica District, rural Mozambique, life was an exercise in self-erasure, hiding who they were from the very people who should have known them best.

Stigma and discrimination had consigned them to a life of exclusion and fear. The isolation was fueled by the ignorance and misconceptions of their families and community members about LGBTIQ+ persons. Behind closed doors, they nursed the pain of rejection. In public, they wore masks of conformity.

They couldn't have imagined that one day they would get a platform to voice their views and receive greater recognition. A platform to share their pain of exclusion and lack of access to basic rights like their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Breaking the silence

Kutenga, a civil society organization, and Associação de Mulheres Vivendo com HIV e SIDA (Association of Women Living with HIV and AIDS) believed increasing community awareness and acceptance of LGBTIQ+ individuals was the solution to their exclusion.

In early 2025, with support from the We Lead program, the organizations created safe spaces to hold community dialogues with LGBTIQ+ individuals. Issues discussed included: gender identity and sexual orientation, gender-based violence, human rights, bodily autonomy, and other issues around SRHR.

What emerged from these dialogues was both shocking and empowering.

The 25 LGBTIQ+ individuals who shared their stories revealed to the audience to what extent they had been living in fear and isolation, many of them suffering painful rejections by their families. They recounted how stigma and discrimination had forced them to keep who they were a secret from both family and community members. How they had remained silent even as they witnessed blatant abuse of their rights.

The power of being heard

Sharing this pain was in itself empowering. For the first time, they found confidence to speak truthfully about who they were and about their rights. These conversations enlightened those in the audience while creating an opportunity for SRHR advocates such as Kutenga to understand better how to address LGBTIQ+ needs.

As one LGBTIQ+ person said, "Thank you for accepting me even without me coming out, →



← thank you for listening and for the support. I am grateful to be seen as a success.”

Kutenga managed to get the LGBTIQ+ individuals to speak about their situation by creating a safe space where they shared freely, without fear, their stories of agony and joy.

“Using the ‘Tree of Life’ methodology, participants shared personal stories of pain, resilience, and hope,” recalls Kutenga.

“These story-sharing circles sparked something remarkable: healing, solidarity, and empowerment. As more voices joined the conversation, individuals began to realize they were not alone.”

From hiding to leading

Kutenga’s safe spaces and training on confidence building and SRHR were bearing fruit. The Manhica District LGBTIQ+ community formed two councils at the community and health unit

levels to address issues affecting their members.

At the same time, three young LGBTIQ+ persons came forward to mentor other youths at the Adolescent Friendly Services that are part of Manhica’s School Health Corners.

Their mentoring also includes raising awareness on sexual and reproductive health in the wider community and advocating for equal treatment for all people regardless of their sexual orientation.

“Their efforts are pushing the boundaries and slowly reshaping societal perceptions,” Kutenga says. “They have become symbols of change, with their work pushing for inclusive societies where diversity is no longer feared but embraced.”

Kutenga believes that what has happened in Manhica, bringing LGBTIQ+ individuals out of the closet and opening conversations in their communities about who they are and the rights they have, is a demonstration of turning fear into strength and silence into power ■

"We are what we choose to do with what happened to us."

At 24, when other women her age were pursuing their academic dreams, Elisa was battling an abusive marriage and HIV.

Her troubles started in 2023 when she dropped out of school and started a relationship with a 56-year-old man. Coming from a poor family, Elisa thought getting married was the only way out.

But the marital bliss she was expecting soon turned sour. Her husband, who had promised she could go back to school, became aggressive, subjecting her to physical and emotional violence.

He stopped her from seeing other young women and going to a health center to pick up her antiretrovirals. Her condition started to deteriorate.

Depressed, Elisa quickly lost hope for a better life. Then a friend who knew what was happening told her about the We Lead program supported dialogue sessions conducted by Associação Shingirirai, in partnership with AMODEFA (Mozambican Association for Family Development).

Lives transformed by safe, inclusive spaces

In the 2024 dialogue sessions Elisa joined, other young women like her shared their stories of pain and triumph. The Shingirirai team also offered Elisa psychosocial support, which helped her start the healing process.

As she gained confidence, Elisa joined forums for young women living with HIV, where many young women shared stories that resonated with hers. There, Elisa was introduced to the Family Support Office for counseling and legal guidance on how to deal with her situation.

"Through psychosocial support, legal guidance, access to health services, and empowerment training, the program is transforming lives and creating safe, inclusive spaces for young women across the district," Associação Shingirirai tells us.

Elisa came out of these sessions a changed and empowered woman. "I thought my life had no value, but thanks to the We Lead program, I discovered that I can be heard, respected, and loved. Today, I am not just a survivor; I am a leader," says Elisa.

Elisa reported her abusive partner to the police. She also resumed her visits to the clinic and started taking her antiretrovirals again. With the local social services in Dombe, the We Lead team managed to find her a safe place to stay away from her abusive partner.

Freedom, growth, and giving back

Her new life of freedom and growth had begun. Today, Elisa educates other young women living with HIV on positive living and advocates for SRHR in her community. In We Lead supported leadership forums, Elisa is a constant figure of hope to 



← 1,200 girls in vulnerable situations who receive support from the program.

One of them is 22-year-old Erica Paulo Valiero, a mother of one girl and resident of Kamubukwana District, in Maputo.

Erica was working as a street vendor when one day a man offered to buy all her stock. He asked her to come with him to get the money.

Unsuspecting his intentions, Erica went along. Once in a secluded place, he raped her and ran off. She was found unconscious and taken to hospital. Several weeks later, she was diagnosed with HIV.

Like Elisa, she learned from friends about the support offered by the We Lead program. She enrolled and followed counseling and empowerment sessions.

And like Elisa, Erica is now also confidently heading up We Lead initiatives that advocate for the sexual and reproductive health and rights of young women.

260 young women and counting

Since gaining this confidence and a new sense of purpose in her life, more than 260 young women living with HIV have benefited from Erica's guidance and emotional support. Erica and Elisa's stories show that with support, dignity, and love, every woman can rise from desperation to great fulfilment.

"We are not what was done to us. We are what we choose to do with what happened to us," says Erica ■

