

Blue Light Star Women's Group of Ndivisi, Webuye, Kenya

History and objective of the group – why was it formed and what does it do now?

A group of primary school teachers came together in 1997 and identified the challenges they were facing as professionals at the grassroots, especially their inability to support needy children from the community. This came out of the realization that many of the children especially girls were dropping out of school due to lack of fees and other basic requirements. Most of those unable to pay fees (both boys and girls) were orphans. It pained them that children with so much potential missed out on this singular opportunity (education) that could transform their lives.

They started by contributing for one child then realized the numbers were soaring. That forced them to re-evaluate their own financial ability before committing to sponsoring the needy children hence the engagement in table banking activities. Table banking is a group funding strategy where members of a particular group meet once every month, place their savings, loan repayments and other contributions on the **table** then borrow immediately either as long term or short-term loans to one or a number of interested members. The monies are borrowed and repaid at a minimal interest of 10 percent for short- term borrowing (monthly) and 12 percent for long- term borrowing (6-12 months). This revolving fund of members borrowing and repaying with interest is continuous and at the end of the year, there are dividends paid to the group members depending on one's shares.

The money helps the members improve their businesses and income-generating activities, including stocking their kitchens, and are able to feed their families and communities. The **Blue Light Star Women's Group** later invested in school fees for their families and have now grown over the years to embrace economic activities like poultry rearing, dairy cattle, honey harvesting and growing sugarcane.

They have initiated poultry projects for all the **Blue Light Star Women's Group** members in order to identify common market for their produce as well as benefit from Bungoma County government sponsored trainings on agriculture. Some have taken off while others are undergoing training and induction. (There are forty-seven Counties in Kenya under the devolution arrangement of government alongside the National government.)

The women in the Blue Light Star Women's Group have become role models in the community, sharing their stories, inspiring and mentoring other women especially the younger ones. They have found strength in their numbers and have been identifying issues affecting women with the view of championing through advocacy and policy formulation at the County level.

Who are members in the group?

The group started off with ten (10) members but the membership has grown to twenty five (25) to date, but it is expanding by the day. They range from 28 to 65 years of age. They are all teachers (some retired) who can communicate well in English, Kiswahili and the local Luhya dialect. The initiatives and visible outputs of their projects have attracted four male teachers who have applied to be considered for membership. They argue that the group does not meet the constitutional requirement of gender equality. (Membership list has been requested from group – expected soon.)

What are some results of the group so far – in line with why it was formed and its objectives?

Each of the members has greatly benefitted from their table banking which focused on lending school fees for the families. This has been a worthy investment for the members of the **Blue Light Star Women's Group** and the results are visible.

In 2003, the Blue Light Star Women's Group lobbied the government to provide bursaries for the orphans and a programme was put in place though it fizzled out with the change in administration.

The programme to support orphans ended and the pilot project will through case studies document it, and who benefitted will share their stories. Besides, our proposed project will give the **Blue Light Star Women's Group** the platform to begin to engage with the administration again and lobby for support for vulnerable children.

The group has a savings plan that acts as a Savings and Credit Cooperative Organization (SACCO), where they can borrow money for emergency cases and repay with little interest.

The dairy and poultry projects by each of the members are a huge success. They are now working on establishing a common market for all their products since this will give them better bargaining power and cut off the middle men.

This project comes in timely to provide the required platform for advocacy, lobbying and engaging with the County leadership as well as using the mobile phones for economic empowerment.

Why is the group interested in joining this pilot project?

Kenya has made great strides in the area of information and communication technology (as mentioned above), but despite this progress, IAWRT's research on how women access and use the internet remains at 30%. Therefore, capacity building for women is important in order to make them techno savvy. We have identified the gap in the group who are equally yearning for a platform to share their success stories but also use their numbers to lobby the County government on issues that affect the women and children in their community.

While IAWRT equips the group with the skills to engage on both traditional and social media, the women have the chance to share their success stories with others, and to embrace the use of technology for economic as well as social and political development. How will they access and navigate the E-government services like applying for passports, driver's license, ID's and so on if they don't have the requisite knowledge? How will they participate in agitating for their rights if they can not reach the leaders?

This project will give them the voice through radio and social media platforms.

How does the objective of the project match the general mandate and objective of the group?

They both focus on women empowerment of women to influence decisions that affect them and the children in communities. These are women that the people at the grassroots will identify with. They are respected hence will have a following and support. They can identify with them because they have lived amongst them and they trust them.

How does the group (and facilitator) foresee the organisation and individual steps in the process?

This is an eye opener that broadens the scope of the group and gives them the platform they have been yearning for. Their skills on engaging the political leadership and holding them accountable will be greatly enhanced hence work towards tangible results.

The IAWRT facilitators will start with training the whole group but identify a **pilot group of ten women cutting across the different age groups** for the first five months.

Results from the pilot phase will give us the opportunity to also broaden the project to include other chapters or areas. The project is practical since it will require continuous engagement and evaluation of the process as it progresses. We will eventually grow to include the rest of the group based on the findings of the pilot. Sharing across different countries and continents will further enhance it.

Who will facilitate the work?

IAWRT has been working on empowering women with ICT skills and media engagement. Two IAWRT Kenya members will carry out the training; they are Ms.Racheal Nakitare and Ms.Josephine Karani.