The MSM Initiative

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HIV/AIDS Among MSM: An Epidemic Growing in the Shadows

HIV/AIDS rates remain dangerously high among men who have sex with men (MSM), particularly in resource-limited settings. Discrimination against MSM and denial of male-male sex continue to fuel this health crisis.

“MSM have been largely ignored by both social and public health structures in many countries for too long,” stated a recently published study in the journal *PLoS Medicine*. While available data indicate a widespread threat that could devastate MSM populations around the world, HIV transmission among MSM is still not tracked in most countries.

A Population Ignored

Globally, fewer than one in 20 MSM has access to HIV prevention, treatment, and care services. A study of 16 countries in the Asia-Pacific region revealed that no more than two percent of MSM in those countries had access to HIV prevention programs. In most developing nations, HIV prevention campaigns are aimed at the general public. While countries are starting to recognize the HIV/AIDS needs of more easily identifiable vulnerable groups such as female sex workers and injection drug users, MSM are still largely ignored. Compounding the problem, MSM programs rarely benefit from bilateral funding and grants from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria because they flow primarily through local governments.

Stigma and Criminalization Fuel the Epidemic

Laws against male-male sex exist in 85 countries around the world. Even in countries without legal prohibitions against same-sex behavior, widespread stigma often prevents MSM from seeking or receiving essential HIV/AIDS prevention services or care. Moreover, without appropriate health messages and support, many MSM in such countries unknowingly engage in behavior that increases their risk of HIV infection. In some regions, up to half of all men report never having used a condom during male-male sex.

Seeds of Change

Discrimination has driven the HIV epidemic among MSM underground, but that is starting to change. Grassroots movements are forming in Africa, India, Southeast Asia, and other developing regions where discrimination is commonplace and the epidemic has reached crisis proportions. Recent reports by UNAIDS, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, amfAR, and others are drawing attention to this growing problem. The Global Forum on MSM & HIV, an international collaboration among MSM groups and individuals in several countries, was established to coordinate and focus advocacy efforts. But effectively curtailing the spread of HIV infection among MSM will require heightened awareness, forceful leadership, and increased funding in all countries.

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MSM from low- and middle-income countries are in urgent need of prevention and care, and appear to be both understudied and underserved.

The MSM Initiative

In an effort to significantly reduce HIV infection and transmission among MSM in resource-limited countries, amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research, has launched the MSM Initiative. The Initiative will:

- **Support and empower grassroots MSM organizations**—Through small community awards, provide MSM groups with access to HIV information, education, and prevention services; conduct outreach and advocacy; and help create and sustain safe spaces.

- **Build understanding and awareness of HIV epidemics among MSM**—Identify and fill knowledge gaps about MSM and HIV; share best practices; and use research findings to build community and political support.

- **Advocate for effective policies and increased funding**—Assist local, regional, and international efforts to combat discrimination and criminalization; increase access to healthcare; and make HIV among MSM a global public health and funding priority.

The two major components of the initiative are:

**Community Awards Program**

The MSM Initiative provides small, targeted awards to grassroots groups in resource-limited countries to provide prevention, treatment, care, and support services to MSM. The first round of awards was announced in early 2008 for groups in Africa, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia. Community awards are used to foster increased collaboration among organizations by supporting efforts to share information, address new challenges, and work collectively to design and deliver innovative and more effective HIV/AIDS services for MSM. These awards have an immediate and significant impact on poorer communities with limited resources for MSM. Furthermore, awards such as these can have a “multiplier effect,” helping to attract funding from additional donors.

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**Approximate HIV Prevalence Rates among MSM in Select Countries**

- **Africa**
  - Kenya: 40%
  - Senegal: 22%

- **Asia**
  - Bangkok: 28%
  - Maharashtra, India: 17%

- **Latin America**
  - Uruguay: 21%
  - Mexico: 15%

- **Eastern Europe**
  - Ukraine: 27%

- **United States**
  - Study of MSM: 25%

Fewer than one in 20 men who have sex with men have access to the HIV prevention, treatment and care services they need.

Advocacy Program

The MSM Initiative promotes and supports global advocacy efforts aimed at increasing funding from international agencies, national and local governments, and nongovernmental organizations for HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, and support services for MSM. The advocacy program also advances domestic and international policy efforts aimed at ending the stigma, discrimination, and violence that threaten the lives of MSM and fuel the spread of HIV/AIDS.

amfAR in Southeast Asia: Already Making a Difference for MSM

amfAR’s 2006 report, *MSM and HIV/AIDS Risk in Asia: What Is Fueling the Epidemic Among MSM and How Can It Be Stopped?*, helped draw attention to the growing epidemic of HIV/AIDS among MSM in Asia. amfAR’s TREAT Asia program has been working with MSM organizations in the region since 2005 and currently serves as the regional secretariat for the Purple Sky Network, a program supported by the U.S. CDC and USAID. Purple Sky is a collaboration of grassroots organizations and in-country government representatives working on HIV interventions for MSM in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. When the network was formed, only one of the six countries in the region identified MSM as a vulnerable population in need of specific programs and services in its national AIDS plan. Today, all six countries recognize the importance of addressing HIV among MSM.

An Opportunity to Save Lives

The world’s inability to prevent widespread HIV infection among MSM is one of the greatest public health failures in the fight against AIDS. Denial, discrimination, and criminalization lie at the root of this failure.

Yet there is reason to be hopeful. Grassroots organizations have been on the front lines since the beginning of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, delivering services to vulnerable populations and demanding—and getting—greater action from governments. With sufficient funding and support, these organizations can transform community attitudes, drive policy change, and mobilize the necessary funding to reverse the alarming spread of HIV among MSM around the world.

The MSM Initiative is providing the leadership and resources that are vital to the success of this grassroots movement.

**HIV prevention programs for MSM are hindered by:**

- Denial that sexual behavior between men takes place
- Stigmatization or criminalization of male-male sex
- Inadequate or unreliable epidemiological information
- The difficulty of reaching many MSM
- Inadequate or inappropriate health facilities
- Lack of interest among donor agencies in prevention programs for MSM
- Little or no attention to MSM within national HIV/AIDS programs.

*AmfAR in Men Who Have Sex With Men, UNAIDS technical update, 2000.*

**DATA SOURCES**


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