

TACKLING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN LESOTHO THROUGH CHANGING COMMUNITY NORMS

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A Lesotho proverb says, “A man is like a pumpkin vine, he spreads all over. A woman is like a cabbage, she stays in one place.” This cultural image of the wandering man and the stalwart woman helps explain the country’s gender inequalities. Here, pronounced patriarchal structures have contributed to the world’s second-highest rate of HIV and pervasive gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual violence against men and boys.

Since 2016, the Strengthening High Impact Interventions for an AIDS-free Generation (AIDSFree) Project has worked at the community level with local partners and the government of Lesotho to prevent HIV through GBV interventions. Various types of GBV contribute to the spread of HIV; a woman subject to economic abuse may turn to transactional sex to support her children, or HIV infection may occur through sexual assault. AIDSFree’s interventions in Lesotho focus on combating attitudes and norms that enable GBV and establishing referral pathways so survivors can access post-GBV care.



Photo: Alicia Carter

In the Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho, the prevalence of HIV among adults is the second-highest in the world.

In Berea, a rural district in northwestern Lesotho, AIDSFree works with local leaders to create awareness of GBV. In October 2018, AIDSFree addressed the issue with a men’s forum, attended by 48 participants, that covered physical, psychological, economic, and sexual violence, as well as human trafficking. Attendees described their hesitancy to seek services such as HIV testing and counseling, post-GBV care (physical and psychological), and legal support because of social norms and fear of stigma if they reported the abuse. With this in mind, the forum aimed to create awareness that men and boys who experience violence are not alone, and that GBV resources and services are available for their specific needs.

In a separate event commemorating the International Day of Eliminating Violence against Women, 72 community members attended a dramatization of the story of a 12-year-old girl whose parents negotiated and forced her to marry a much older man. In the dramatization, the man abuses the girl and transmits HIV to her. The drama spurred lively discussion, as it echoed events in the area that the police were investigating.



Local police, AIDSFree staff, community leaders, and partner organizations were present at both events to share their knowledge and facilitate discussion. It was clear from these sessions that a lack of information about sexual health, health services, and legal protections for survivors of GBV contributes to high GBV and HIV rates.

Community members agreed that they did not know how to identify, prevent, or report instances of violence, and AIDSFree's GBV specialist provided them with detailed and relevant information for tackling the problem of violence in their communities. At the end of these sessions, attendees agreed on the need to change social norms such as child marriage and to introduce in-school education on GBV and HIV prevention, among other interventions.

Resources for Gender-Based Violence

AIDSFree's community activities complement ongoing work by the government of Lesotho to strengthen referral pathways for GBV and strengthen capacity of service providers. AIDSFree in Lesotho is funded by the United States Agency for International Development under its Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored and Safe (DREAMS) initiative.

The collaboration's resources are available on the AIDSFree site:

- **GBV Referral Pathway:** <https://aidsfree.usaid.gov/resources/gender-based-violence-referral-pathway>
- **Lapeng Care Centre for GBV Survivors:** <https://aidsfree.usaid.gov/resources/lapeng-care-centre>
- **Guiding Principles for Working with GBV Survivors:** <https://aidsfree.usaid.gov/resources/guiding-principles-working-gender-based-violence-survivors>
- **2018 Lesotho Gender Summit (video):** <https://aidsfree.usaid.gov/resources/lesotho-gender-360-summit-video>



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HIV-positive persons, especially girls and young women, are at increased risk for gender-based violence. At the same time, gender-based violence increases the risk of HIV.

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