



South African Health Review 2018 Series

Chapter 8: Transgender women outreach workers and their role in South Africa's HIV response

Andrew Scheibe, L. Leigh-Ann van der Merwe, Allanise Cloete, Michael A Grasso

- 'Transgender' is an umbrella term that refers to people whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex. Transgender women (TGW) (male to female) were assigned male sex at birth but identify socially as women. They include people along the continuum of hormone therapy and gender-affirming surgery.
- Transgender outreach is a new, small and unique element in South Africa's health system and HIV response. The National Department of Health (NDoH) High Transmission Area Guidelines (2014) define outreach workers, or peer educators, as people with similar socio-demographic characteristics, experiences or beliefs as the intended service beneficiaries. They may also have first-hand understanding of the issues and HIV risk factors in the community that could influence health outcomes.
- There are few transgender population size estimates, partly due to the varying definitions used. In 2016, Winter and colleagues used estimates from four countries where population-level proportions were available, and extrapolated a worldwide estimate of 25 million transgender persons. A systematic review done in 2012 estimated that one in five TGW are living with HIV. However, data on TGW in Africa are limited.
- There are numerous underlying drivers of HIV among TGW. The UNAIDS Gap Report describes these factors and how they may manifest through gender identity and/or expression. Social rejection by family, friends and society, together with harassment, stigma and violence may lead to anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts, affecting self-perception and self-worth and limiting engagement in society. These factors may act as deterrents to access, uptake and retention in HIV and other services. Lack of engagement with the healthcare system potentially exacerbates the HIV epidemic among TGW and broader society.
- Three illustrative case studies identify key issues affecting TGW and increase understanding of the role, process and influence that TGW outreach workers have within South Africa's HIV response. These issues include: stigma and discrimination; the consequences of non-conforming gender expression; scarce employment opportunities; the inadequacies of biomedically focused HIV services; and limited resource allocation for TGW programming.
- Stigma and discrimination make it difficult for TGW to trust other people. Frequently there are also community perceptions of TGW as carriers of HIV. Stigmatising attitudes towards TGW are often also held by healthcare workers. Health facilities and providers that lack the knowledge, experience or desire to care for the unique clinical and social needs of TGW often contribute to stigmatising TGW. The result is differential access to healthcare services, which creates a barrier to the achievement of health. Transgender outreach workers bridge these gaps and foster social connections within the transgender, health care and broader communities.

- The gender expression of TGW challenges cultural expectations and results in a disruption of home and family, with cascading effects that impact mental health, as well as the educational and employment opportunities of TGW.
- The lack of education and employment opportunities for TGW leads to some TGW entering the sex industry, some to survive and others to be affirmed as women.
- There is limited allocation of resources to programmes intending to improve the health and wellbeing of TGW holistically. The NDoH has the policies in place to implement a gender-affirming approach, but infrastructure and implementation are limited.
- TGW outreach workers are reaching their peers and providing essential services in an array of contexts. Champions of TGW have emerged and established TGW-led organisations that create spaces for TGW to be visible and to network.
- Programmes on HIV for TGW should have consistent and meaningful community engagement and include healthcare worker sensitisation as recommended in normative guidance.
- The NDoH should allocate funding for and ensure the implementation of clinics specialised in TGW health, and increase the number of centres providing gender-affirming surgery and the number of TGW benefiting from this. The NDoH should work towards enabling access to hormone therapy at the primary level of care, obviating the need for a psychologist's recommendation.
- In addition to existing services, government, funders and development partners should support the capacitation of TGW outreach workers to counsel their peers on hormone therapy (and the risks of self-medication); gender-affirming surgery; violence mitigation strategies and harm-reduction using motivational interviewing and goal-setting.
- Programmes for TGW should adopt evidence-based interventions that outreach workers can deliver to empower TGW, and work towards improved socio-economic conditions.

SOURCE: Scheibe A, van der Merwe LL, Cloete A, Grasso M. Transgender women outreach workers and their role in South Africa's HIV response. In: Rispel LC and Padarath A, editors. South African Health Review 2018. Durban: Health Systems Trust; 2018.

URL:
<http://www.hst.org.za/publications/South%20African%20Health%20Reviews/Chan%208%20Transgender%20SAHR2018.pdf>