

Advocating for Cervical Cancer Testing in Women Living With HIV

Background

After almost two years of rigorous work, Alliance India's EU-supported Koshish project—named for the Hindi word for 'effort'—has emerged as a strong initiative supporting advocacy for policies and strategies on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) for people living with HIV in India. Over this short period, Koshish has been successful in highlighting challenges that people living with HIV face in fulfilling their SRH. In the four implementation states (Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu), the project has created an opportunity to raise awareness and advocate for action to address key challenges facing people living with HIV, including social stigma and discrimination, limited accessibility to and availability of essential SRH services, and the lack of a comprehensive approach to the SRH needs of people living with HIV, particularly of women living with HIV.

Identifying Advocacy Priorities

Koshish has been effective in advancing community-led advocacy initiatives. Koshish teams have conducted a total of 142 community consultations with people living with HIV across the four programme states to identify priority advocacy issues. During community consultations, the Koshish teams noticed that women living with HIV have low awareness of cervical cancer and seldom go for testing. Analysis of data from the project's baseline study shows that only 37.1% of women living with HIV across the four states are aware of Pap smear testing, but only 6.4% have availed the test. As women living with HIV are more vulnerable to cervical cancer and as early detection can lead to improved survival, it is even more imperative to address cervical cancer risk as an advocacy priority, particularly through the promotion of Pap smear tests.

While the response to this challenge is straightforward, the ground realities were quite different. Early detection of cervical cancer is inexpensive and feasible in government clinics, yet it remains unavailable at primary health centres. The gynaecological departments at district hospitals are generally the only place to get these tests, but access has been quite limited due to non-availability of kits or lack of trained lab technicians. Though a Pap smear is one of the "good to have" tests according to the guidelines for regular check-up of women living with HIV, they are typically referred for the test only if doctors think the woman is vulnerable, basing their decision on certain symptoms.

Building on these insights, Koshish's four state advocacy coalitions have prioritised prevention and early diagnosis of cervical cancer among women living with HIV as a key advocacy agenda at state and district levels.

The Maharashtra Experience

Koshish's state-level advocacy coalition in Maharashtra—Parivartaan—started by focussing on the availability and accessibility of cervical cancer testing for women living with HIV in the public health system as a key advocacy priority in the state. The coalition decided to collect evidence from the field to influence decision-makers. Using data from Pap smear testing camps, a small data factsheet was prepared and shared with authorities. The coalition used different occasions such as Doctor's Day, World Health Day, and World AIDS Day to raise this issue among a range of stakeholders, including service providers, health system administrators, elected officials, and community members. IEC materials on cervical cancer were also developed and shared with district health authorities. These concerted efforts and intense campaigning started yielding results.

Key Accomplishments in Maharashtra

- In Ahmed Nagar, a team constituted by the civil surgeon now conducts a health camp on the first and third Saturday of every month. In these camps, 25 women on average have been screened for cervical cancer.
- Similarly, in Thane, the civil surgeon has agreed to arrange for monthly camps for up to 30 women.
- The camps in Kolhapur have begun and are being organised on Tuesday and Saturday, while in Nagpur the camps are being successfully held with support from the Indian Cancer Society.
- In Amravati district, the civil surgeon has issued a circular instructing routine Pap smear testing in the district hospital for women living with HIV.
- Of the women tested, a total of 74 women living with HIV have had Pap smear testing. So far, seven women living with HIV (nearly 10%) have had abnormal results.

Our Commitment

Even though this effort is still new, it is important for women living with HIV and all women. The risk of cervical cancer remains high in developing countries due to a lack of prevention and screening programmes. Under Koshish, the partners have shown a strong commitment to upholding the rights of people living with HIV by initiating advocacy efforts to make Pap smear testing a mandatory part of the care for every women living with HIV and, in doing so, expand its availability to all women.

Based on these experiences from programme states, it is clear that advocacy on Pap smear testing should be a key priority in Koshish's national advocacy plan. To take this forward, the state partners are gathering data from the Pap smear testing camps they have organized that can serve to strengthen advocacy at state and national levels. These efforts are expected to contribute to advocacy strategies and actions and will contribute to the national-level stakeholder consultation on the issue planned for the third year of project implementation.

For more information, visit: <http://www.allianceindia.org/programmes/SRH-HIV.php>

With funding support from the **European Union**, the Koshish project is implemented by **India HIV/AIDS Alliance** in partnership with **Telegu Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (TNP+)**, **Vasavya Mahila Mandali (VMM)**, **Gujarat State Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GSNP+)**, **Centre for Health Education Training and Nutrition Awareness (CHETNA)**, **Network of Maharashtra People with HIV**, **MAMTA Health Institute for Mother and Child**, **Tamil Nadu Positive Women Network (TPWN+)**, and **Palmyrah Workers Development Society (PWDS)** across four states: **Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu**. Koshish also collaborates with State Health Departments, State AIDS Control Societies, and district-level government entities in each implementation state, as well as with the Indian Cancer Society in Maharashtra.



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This project is funded by the European Union.

