

SUCCESS STORY

From Enemies to Allies: Royal Swaziland Police Services (RSPS) Responds to Gender-based Violence Toward Key Populations in Swaziland

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RSPS Assistant Deputy Commissioner Polycarp Ngubane opens the training on behalf of the National Commissioner. Photo credit: RSPS media team

Violence, Police, and Key Populations

In Swaziland, there has historically been no love lost between the Royal Swaziland Police Services (RSPS) and key populations (KPs), such as female sex workers (FSWs) and men who have sex with men (MSM). KPs experience multiple kinds of violence, as in many places worldwide, but they often have no recourse. The police have not been allies, instead frequently arresting KP individuals and inflicting physical and sexual violence. According to a 2011 biobehavioral surveillance survey, 44 percent of FSWs in Swaziland reported having been raped, including by police.

Such violence toward KPs is linked with HIV on many counts. KP members who experience violence are less likely to negotiate safe sex and use condoms consistently, and they are at greater risk of acquiring HIV. They may also refrain from seeking out sexual health services, such as getting tested for HIV and sexually transmitted infections and, if test results are positive, they may have difficulty initiating and continuing treatment. Indeed, in Swaziland, FSWs have indicated to program staff that they do not want to access services during evening mobile clinics because they fear repercussions with police.

In addition to police involvement in physical and sexual violence, Swazi police have offered little protection to KPs. Sex work and male homosexuality are illegal in Swaziland and often deemed indefensible; meanwhile, KP members themselves are frequent victims of assault and rape crimes that are never prosecuted. Both MSM (18 percent) and FSWs (53 percent) have reported feeling unable to file police reports of violence or rape because of fear of police recrimination, embarrassment, legal discrimination, and the likelihood of being refused police protection.¹ According to programmatic reports, police frequently confiscate condoms as evidence that women are engaging in sex work and then arrest or harass them based on that evidence.

LINKAGES Swaziland at Work

That police are among the perpetrators and perpetuators of violence against KPs is a point not lost on LINKAGES Swaziland and the Swaziland National AIDS Programme (SNAP). LINKAGES Swaziland is part of a global USAID- and PEPFAR-funded project intended to increase testing for HIV and sexually transmitted infections among KPs, as well as linkage to and retention in care and treatment. Violence prevention and response efforts are an integral part of LINKAGES' programming. This programming goes beyond provision of HIV-related health and social care services to address the structural barriers — in this case, the behaviors and practices of police — to KPs' ability to access them. In turn, this improves the enabling environment for KPs' uptake of services. LINKAGES Swaziland's work with SNAP and the RSPS is critical to effective HIV programming in the country.

From Perpetration to Protection

From May 30 to June 1, 2017, the cross-organizational team from SNAP, RSPS, and LINKAGES Swaziland conducted a three-day training with 41 police station commanders to sensitize them on KP-related issues. Topics included why members of KPs are at such high risk of HIV infection and why their human rights must be upheld. Partnership programs between police and KPs in

¹ Population Services International. MARPS bio-behavioral surveillance survey (BSS) results: men who have sex with men (MSM) and sex workers (SW) [Internet]. 2012 [cited 2018 Jan 22]. Available from: <https://www.k4health.org/toolkits/swaziland-hiv-prevention/marps-bio-behavioral-surveillance-survey-bss-results-men-who-have>



RSPS station commanders listening during training presentations. Photo credit: RSPS media team



RSPS station commanders with MOH and LINKAGES staff at the official opening of the training. Photo credit: RSPS media team

other sub-Saharan African countries, including Ghana and Kenya, were presented as models for positive relationships between police and KPs. Importantly, representatives of KPs in Swaziland were in attendance to personalize the issues to the participants.

Initially, the training was met with mixed reactions. Some station commanders felt that members of KPs are immoral and that conservative religious views should drive the police response, even when KPs are victims of violence. Others wondered why police should even be involved in the problems of KPs when police have a moral duty to enforce the law, especially with regard to the illegal and so-called “immoral” practices of KPs. However, through lectures, group discussion between police and KP representatives, and educational videos, police’s understanding of the need to support KPs underwent a transformation.

A station commander from Malkerns police station who attended the training describes his reaction: “This was my first time to be in a forum to discuss such issues. At the beginning, I thought it was a moral crime issue. I didn’t see why we should be involved as police. But three days after the training I requested the support of SNAP and LINKAGES to conduct a sensitization in my station within one week.” He added that he had felt an urgency to communicate what he had learned to all of his staff as soon as possible, so that going forward he could ensure that they would protect and give relevant services to all KPs.

SNAP and LINKAGES Swaziland have also conducted joint trainings with other cadres of the police force as part of the RSPS program on KP issues. This training has included officers from the Domestic Violence and Child Protection (DCS) unit, which normally deals with incidents of violence. The results are palpable. For example, a SNAP officer recounts, “Very recently, one young gay man told me that

his partner had been heavily assaulting him for a long time. He had never reported it because he was afraid to go to the police. We [LINKAGES staff and I] arranged for the couple to meet with the DCS officer of the Hlatikulu police station nearby, even though they were afraid. The DCS officer assured them that she understood these issues and only wanted to speak to them. She established a relationship with this couple and agreed to provide services whenever they need to resolve issues.” Case by case, SNAP and LINKAGES are striving to earn KP members’ trust in the police force through positive interactions.

In Store for the Future

With such encouraging results, this collaboration between RSPS and LINKAGES to support SNAP will continue. Plans for the future include having a feedback meeting with RSPS executives to inform them of what is being done on the ground and to garner their continued support and guidance. LINKAGES and SNAP will also continue to support the station commanders in sensitizing their staff. In addition, with LINKAGES’ support, the RSPS plans to conduct a knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) assessment within their organization on HIV and KP issues. Finally, a long-term goal is for LINKAGES to work with the RSPS to develop a module to be included in the police academy for training recruits. LINKAGES Swaziland is also working with the Ministry of Health, KP-led community-based organizations, and KP individuals who access both LINKAGES and Global Fund programs to develop a violence prevention response system that will track and document instances of violence, discrimination, and abuse.