

## First Transgender-friendly Health Clinics Open in Burma

Global data indicate that transgender women are 34 times more likely to be living with HIV than adults in the general population, and transgender sex workers in multiple settings have a higher HIV prevalence than their cisgender counterparts. While data on transgender people in Burma are limited, any effective HIV response there—where the epidemic is concentrated among key populations (KP)—must be inclusive of trans people.

Recognizing the elevated HIV infection risks that trans people face, designing and delivering trans-competent and stigma-free services differentiated to meet the needs of trans people has been a priority of the PEPFAR/USAID-supported Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project in Burma since its inception in 2020. In a span of two years, the project has established three clinics to serve trans people in Burma, the first of their kind in the country. The first clinic, Ma Baydar<sup>1</sup>, was established in Yangon in January 2021 through a partnership with Lan Pya Kyel (LPK), a local nongovernmental organization in Burma with significant KP leadership. Building on this experience, EpiC opened the second Ma Bayar clinic (also run by LPK) in Mandalay in January 2022. Daisy, the third clinic, opened in a peri-urban area of Yangon in February 2022. Daisy is operated by Medical Action Myanmar (MAM), which has extensive experience in service provision to KPs.



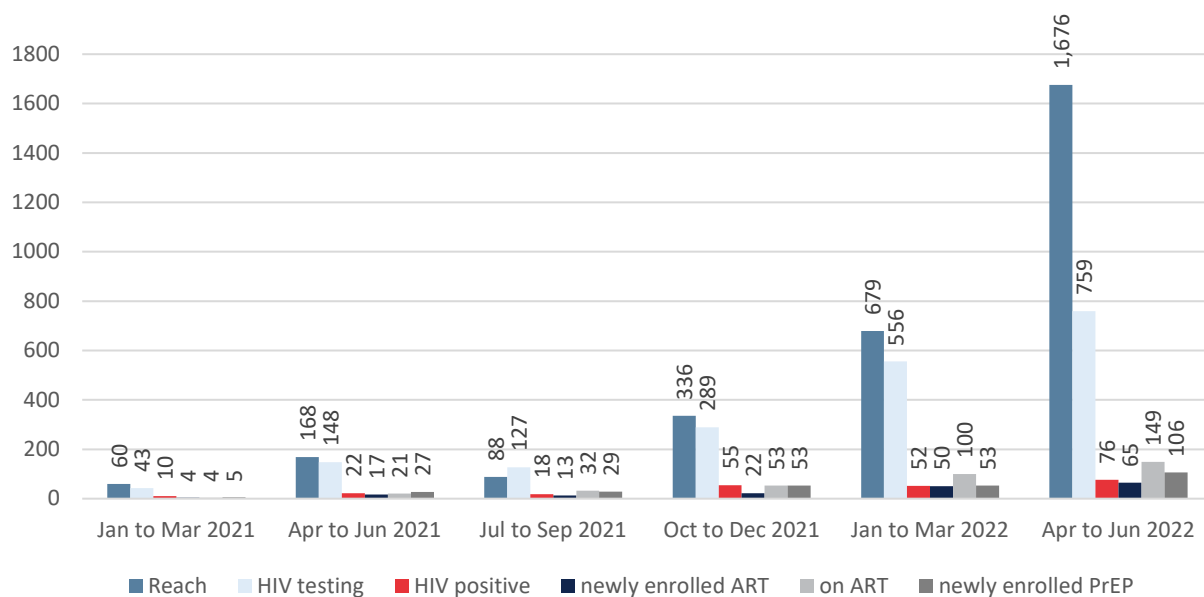
Photo Credit: EpiC Burma

As part of the process of establishing the three clinics, EpiC engaged the Institute of HIV Research and Innovation (IHRI) based in Thailand as a regional technical assistance provider. IHRI is respected throughout the region for innovations in KP programming and the transgender-focused Tangerine Clinic. They brought this expertise to Burma by training staff

<sup>1</sup> Ma Baydar is the name identified by the transgender community in consultations. In English, it literally means water hyacinth. The trans community derived the name from an iconic Burmese poem “Hyacinth’s Way” depicting the endurance of the flower unfazed by encounters in its way along the river.

affiliated with the three clinics to provide trans-competent care, including building staff’s skills in motivational counseling, gender affirming hormone therapy (GAHT), and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) service delivery. In all of Burma, these clinics are now the only places offering professional GAHT consultation and hormone monitoring services.

As illustrated in *Figure 1*, the launch of the three clinics led to steady increases in the number of trans people reached, tested for HIV, newly diagnosed and initiated on treatment, and initiated on PrEP. This progress was made despite the multiple crises the country faced in 2021 and 2022, including a military coup, the peak of COVID-19 third wave, and sudden changes in social networks among target populations (due to increased migration during the crises). Mitigation measures, taken at variable degrees depending on the changing situation, included reduction of in-person outreach, switching to online outreach activities, and adjustment of clinic service hours.



**Figure 1.** Key achievements of the three clinics by quarter

According to the clinics’ providers, the clinics have helped them reach trans individuals who were previously unreached. By referring friends and peers, trans clients have helped the organizations expand their existing peer-led service networks. These referrals most benefited the Daisy Clinic which is newer and has less experience with transgender outreach programs compared to LPK.

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*“The clinic helped us find new transgender clients who were otherwise hidden and unwilling to come forward to receive service. We are now reaching new transgender individuals through their peer referrals and recommendations... Many (more than half) of our transgender clients said they had never received service from any other clinic (due to stigma).”*

—Dr Tint Naing Linn, Deputy Project Coordinator, Medical Action Myanmar

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The integration of GAHT consultation services into the clinics has also been an essential element of their success. Clients report they like the fact that they can safely disclose their hormone consumption without needing to worry about discrimination and embarrassment. The GAHT services have not only improved the health status of trans clients with renal problems, hypertension, obesity or diabetes as a result of chronic improper hormone intake, but also attracted more clients to the clinics. Several trans clients reported that GAHT consultation was their first entry point into the clinics, leading them to also access the HIV/STI services at the clinics.

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*“When I visited another clinic for my hypertension, I did not feel comfortable enough to disclose that I was taking hormones. So, the doctor could not identify the real problem.”*

—Transgender client at Ma Baydar Clinic

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The clinic staff have also received positive feedback from clients on the quality of services and the transgender-friendly atmosphere where clients are treated with respect and sensitivity.

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*“At regular clinics, it is very usual (for us) to get discriminated or humiliated in one way or another. And this could prevent many trans people from seeking services... And the main difference (between these clinics and regular ones) is that the staff at these clinics are mostly trans people or people who are specially trained to work with and are sensitive to trans people.”*

—Transgender client at Ma Baydar Clinic

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