

Transforming How Health Care Workers and Law Enforcement Serve Men Who Have Sex with Men in Meru County, Kenya

SUCCESS STORY | MARCH 2022

EMAC and MIASM worked directly with key population community members, law enforcement, and health care providers to create a safer, more enabling environment for MSM to exercise their rights and access care.

In Kenya, men who have sex with men (MSM) are often confronted with violence, stigma, and discrimination in the communities where they live, including from health care providers and law enforcement officers. This is especially true in Meru County—a rural community with conservative views of homosexuality. The lack of trust and fear of mistreatment from providers and the police mean many MSM in Meru County have nowhere to turn when they need care. They are reluctant to seek health care services and afraid to report incidents of violence and other human rights abuses.

Through the Key Population Investment Fund (KPIF), the FHI 360-led Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project worked to strengthen the capacity of local key-population-led organizations to provide community-focused HIV prevention and treatment services, while addressing structural barriers that hinder key populations' (KP) access to services. Empowering Marginalized Communities (EMAC) was one of EpiC's KPIF grantees in Kenya. With KPIF support, EMAC worked with another local organization, Men in Action Supporting Men (MIASM) between June 2020 and March 2021 to expand service offerings and advance human rights protections for MSM in Meru County.

About Empowering Marginalized Communities and Men in Action Supporting Men

EMAC is a KP-led nongovernmental organization established in 2016 to empower KPs through grassroots community organization and economic equality. EMAC is dedicated to promoting health and human rights, access to justice, economic empowerment, and good governance for marginalized communities in Kenya. It works in nine counties across Kenya, conducting advocacy and providing mental health and HIV prevention services to MSM.

MIASM is a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+)-led community-based organization in Meru County. Established in 2017 to economically and socially empower MSM, MIASM promotes health and human rights, access to justice, economic empowerment, and good governance for marginalized communities throughout Meru County. As an affiliate member of EMAC, MIASM works in 11 of Meru's sub-counties, advocating for MSM and providing mental health and HIV prevention services.

Key Activities and Achievements

EMAC and MIASM worked directly with KP community members, law enforcement, and health care providers to create a safer, more enabling environment for MSM to exercise their rights and access care. Activities focused on enhancing the capacity of MSM to understand and advocate for their rights, improving violence prevention and response services (including legal support), and expanding access to mental health services.



Improved violence reporting and response

Through the KPIF grant, EMAC and MIASM hosted 20 “Know Your Rights” sensitization forums in Meru County. In these targeted forums, 300 MSM received information on human rights, violence, stigma, and discrimination, as well as the importance of reporting incidents of violence and other rights abuses, and collection and storage of gender-based violence evidence for litigation. EMAC and MIASM trained 10 MSM paralegals to educate their peers to identify, prevent, report, respond to, and redress cases of violence. Paralegals were part of a larger violence response team comprised of an advocacy officer, an assistant advocacy officer, and a pro bono advocate. In cases where violence occurred, paralegals would report it to the assistant advocacy officer for follow-up. The pro bono advocate provided legal advice to peers and represented them in court cases. As part of these efforts, Kenya’s National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission offered relocation to three MSM and four women who were part of the LGBTQ+ community and whose lives were in danger.

In September 2020, EMAC and MIASM convened a regional dialogue session with cadres of law enforcement from eight counties in the eastern region of Kenya. The session helped increase law enforcement’s awareness of HIV services for KPs and the effect violence has on their uptake of services. Twenty law enforcement officers participated: 16 sub-county police commanders, a regional commander, and junior officers. These officers responded to 34 cases of violence from October 2020 to March 2021. Most cases were addressed through local alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, while seven cases escalated to criminal courts, one to the local rent tribunal, and two to the police for investigation.



Eastern regional National Police Service dialogue on key populations

Photo credit: Victor Kailemia, Men in Action Supporting Men

Establishment of a safe space

Through KPIF, EMAC and MIASM established the first drop-in center for MSM in Meru County, giving MSM peers a safe space to socialize and access services without fear of stigmatization. The drop-in center (DIC) is in MIASM offices in Meru and offers mental health support, health education, and prevention services. It also provides prevention commodities such as condoms and lubricants. Assistant advocacy officers and paralegals are the main providers of health education at the safe space. On average, paralegals administer 15 to 20 daily health education sessions.

Mental health and psychosocial services

Through the KPIF grant, EMAC and MIASM contracted two mental health counselors to provide routine mental health screening and counseling services to MSM. During the grant’s implementation period, counselors screened 230 MSM peers for depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders. Among those screened, 166 MSM were diagnosed as depressed, 15 had severe post-traumatic stress disorder, 11 had anxiety disorders, and six had thoughts of suicide that were addressed. As a result of counseling services, peers gained confidence and reported less self-stigma. Others had an opportunity to address psychological trauma from their past.

Transforming Provider Attitudes Toward MSM



A client at the drop-in center

Photo credit: Victor Kailemia, Men in Action Supporting Men

A CLIENT PERSPECTIVE

As a man who has sex with men, living with HIV, I was initially taken aback by the attitude of health care workers at a health facility I visited in Meru County. I vividly recall an incident where a health care worker confronted me with demeaning questions and statements. In a shrill voice, she asked, “How do men have sex with men?” I knew her question was intended to expose my sexual orientation to everyone at the health center. I was even more offended when she justified my HIV status with my sexual behavior and preferences. She said,

“You see, your sexual behavior made you contract HIV; you should stop practicing same sex because it is wrong, culturally and biblically.” This incident was extremely insensitive and ruined my day. However, today I tell a different story. When I go to the Meru DIC, I receive wonderful services. I do not face discrimination from health care workers because of the safe space that EMAC and MIASM developed at the facility. The program helped educate me in how to prevent abuse and better understand my rights so that I can report violations and advocate for myself.



Benjamin Muriki, a health care provider trained by EpiC/KPIF

Photo credit: Victor Kailemia, Men in Action Supporting Men

A PROVIDER PERSPECTIVE

My name is Benjamin Muriki, and I am a nurse and sub-county AIDS coordinator at Igembe South Sub-County. I attended a health care worker sensitization training organized by EMAC and MIASM in October 2020. During the training, I learned valuable information about MSM, health rights, stigma, and discrimination. I also gained a better understanding that everyone is entitled to rights, regardless of their sexual orientation. Since undergoing the training, I view MSM like any other citizen and client at the facility. After the training, I sensitized

other health care providers at various facilities in Meru County. The changes in attitude of providers toward MSM have made facilities friendlier and more inviting. The providers now interact with MSM by asking questions to expand their understanding on how to offer better services. This approach led to increased uptake in the number of MSM accessing health services from the public health facilities. I am thankful for EMAC, MIASM, and EpiC/KPIF for their work in Meru County. The trainings are helping health care providers like me move forward and take steps to improve the services we provide.

For inquiries, please contact  Hally Mahler, EpiC Project Director: hmahler@fhi360.org

This work was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The contents are the responsibility of the EpiC project and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, PEPFAR, or the United States Government. EpiC is a global cooperative agreement (7200AA19CA00002) led by FHI 360 with core partners Right to Care, Palladium International, Population Services International (PSI), and Gobe Group.