Human rights violations against key populations in South Africa Public health facilities: Findings from the Ritshidze Community-led Monitoring Programme

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Members of key populations (KPs) have increased vulnerability to HIV and experience legal and social barriers to healthcare. The HIV response is dependent on the healthcare system’s ability to serve these populations, yet they are often the most excluded from care. Through the Ritshidze Community-led Monitoring Programme we track the quality of healthcare for KPs in South Africa with implications for improving services and rectifying abuses.

Objectives

Examine KP service refusal and human rights violations at public health facilities in South Africa through a community-led monitoring mechanism

Methods

Key populations (n=5,979) were recruited for a cross-sectional survey via community-based snowball sampling in 18 PEPFAR-supported districts across seven provinces from August to October 2021.

Survey data on KP healthcare experiences were collected electronically by trained KP data collectors. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics for key service quality and human rights indicators by population and province.

Results: Privacy concerns

Respondents who think privacy is not well respected at facilities, % (n) | Most common privacy violations, % (n)
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Sex Workers | 28% (232) | Disclosure of HIV status | 45% (105) | Disclosure of KP status | 44% (102)
PWUD | 26% (357) | 46% (164) | 66% (234)
Trans* people | 21% (93) | 46% (43) | 55% (51)
MSM | 19% (167) | 55% (92) | 52% (87)

"I was embarrassed the last time I went to the clinic. The nurse who was supposed to consult me told me in front of other patients that I should retire as a sex worker. They do not respect our privacy. I practically stopped to go to the facility when I was exposed in front of other patients who did not know that am a sex worker. Talking about my profession and sexual partners, it made my life a living hell at the facility, and they said "shut up, who are you and who to tell us what to do and who to see first". I stopped using this facility."

– Sex worker, Phola Park Clinic, Gauteng, July 2021

Key Takeaways

- Human rights violations and unfriendly services at public health facilities were frequently reported by KP members in South Africa.
- There is wide provincial variation in reported violations against KPs requiring a geographically-specific response.
- Community-led monitoring can effectively capture human rights violations against key populations and feed information to decision makers.

Limitations:

- The sample is non-random, secured through community-based snowball sampling, which may limit generalizability. Monitoring did not include all provinces.

Conclusions:

- Denial of health services based on key population status is a serious human rights violation and requires immediate attention by the National Department of Health.
- In addition to breaching the South African constitutional right to access health services, these violations are a likely detriment to the health of key population members as well as to broader HIV and public health outcomes in South Africa.

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