

SANI partners in Malawi work to tackle HIV-related stigma and discrimination

By Shayna Buhler, Senior Program Officer, Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development

HIV-related discrimination and its close partner stigma continue to exacerbate the vulnerability of people living with HIV in Malawi, leading to poor nutrition and poor health outcomes. This problem can be particularly challenging for women and girls, as gender inequality remains a key driver of the HIV epidemic and is a leading factor contributing to food insecurity due to power imbalances and poverty.



We know that lack of food security has direct implications for HIV prevention and treatment efforts by constraining individual choices, which can negatively affect treatment adherence and individual health outcomes. That is why the Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development (ICAD) is leading a capacity-building initiative through the Southern African Nutrition Initiative (SANI) to improve the health outcomes of women living with HIV and children living with and/or affected by HIV in targeted regions of Malawi and Zambia. The aim is to contribute to the reduction of maternal and child mortality in targeted regions.

Specifically, the project is using “twinning partnerships” between organizations/groups in Canada and those in Southern Africa, and providing small grants to implement 18-24-month community projects that focus on gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), HIV and nutrition/food security. In Malawi, these organizations are: Coalition of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (COWLHA), Coalition for the Empowerment of Women and Girls (CEWAG), Passion for Women and Children (PAWOC) and National Association of People Living with HIV and AIDS in Malawi (NAPHAM).

Working closely with people living with HIV, COWLHA, CEWAG, PAWOC and NAPHAM are all too familiar with the barriers that discrimination poses. For instance:

- Pregnant women may resist accessing health facilities for fear of discrimination;
- Men may refuse testing or inflict violence on their wives due to their positive HIV status;
- Communities and community leaders may turn their backs on people living with HIV; and
- Community programs intended to boost nutrition may fail to serve people living with HIV.

To tackle stigma and discrimination, both directly and indirectly, these projects use a range of approaches depending on the community in which they are operating. For example, PAWOC brings together people living with HIV as well as HIV-negative parents and caregivers of children living with HIV in shared support groups to try to dismantle the myths of living with HIV by hearing the experience of others. While there was resistance to this model at first, participants now see the value in coming together.

NAPHAM, meanwhile, is empowering its support groups through Village Savings and Loans (VSL) groups, which bring people living with HIV together to regularly contribute a small amount of savings to the group so that members can access loans from the group when they need it. Among many other benefits, the strengthened economic position of the VSL group members has helped other community members to see that people living with HIV are strong and contributing members of society, who will thrive if provided with the tools and opportunities.



COWLHA's experience with backyard gardens and cooking demonstrations is not only providing people living with HIV increased access to nutritious foods, as well as knowledge of how to prepare and preserve these foods, they are also creating a community asset. In fact, neighbors have come by to learn from those living with HIV, and the perception of HIV as a burden on their community has shifted.

CEWAG works to build linkages between support groups for people living with HIV and local health facilities. These connections ensure that women feel safe going for testing and antenatal care and that health providers have the knowledge to properly address the needs of people living with HIV. These health facilities are critical in the response to HIV and to poor nutrition. Once they build the relationships, the health centers can help link newly diagnosed people to community support groups.

Importantly, each of these projects engages local leaders, and helps them to become advocates for shifting local perceptions of HIV and improving access to services for those living with HIV. In fact, we have already had feedback from community members that they now have access to government services they did not have before. Similarly, community members also report being able to participate in activities such as building roads, whereas previously they were considered "too weak" to take part.

Finally, it is important to highlight the role the projects have played in addressing self-stigma amongst people living with HIV. The projects enable people to come together, and meet other community members who are living with HIV – this alleviates shame. They also have important opportunities to become community leaders such as "mentor mothers" (counselling other women to prevent antenatal HIV transmission), "lead farmers" (sharing knowledge about gardening and farming), and "male champions" (challenging the beliefs and practices of their peers around HIV and gender roles).

Overall, the projects enable those living with HIV to be empowered economically, and to gain the knowledge, skills and tools to care for themselves and their families. Through this, they are able to move past their own self-stigma and begin to claim their rights and assert their power in their families and communities.

Just the other day, PAWOC hosted an event with over 100 support group members and community leaders, who came together to display the foods they had learned to prepare, to dance, to put on performances about the lessons they had learned, and to share food together. Drawn in by the loud speaker and the size of the gathering, a crowd of people, mostly school children, quickly gathered round. They witnessed a community of people – most living with HIV – sharing knowledge, caring for one another, talking openly about HIV, and celebrating together. From this place of strength and power, communities can help to move the dial towards Zero Discrimination.

About ICAD: For more information about the work ICAD is doing, see: <http://www.icad-cisd.com/our-work/projects/southern-african-nutrition-initiative-sani-project/>

About "Feed Her Future": Feed Her Future (www.feedherfuture.ca) is a campaign dedicated to building awareness about the importance of giving women and girls access to proper nutrition, through the lens and learning of CARE's Southern African Nutrition Initiative (SANI). SANI is a 4-year project launched in March 2016, and is being delivered in partnership between CARE Canada, Cuso International, the Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development (ICAD), McGill University, and the governments of implementing countries. SANI is a \$24.6 million CAD project funded by the Government of Canada, CARE and the Canadian public.

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