Who We Are

The Trans Men & HIV Working Group is a global network, currently consisting of 20 trans masculine and non-binary activists, researchers, and public health experts from 17 different countries from all continents.

Trans people assigned female at birth (AFAB) have been, and continue to be, broadly excluded from the global HIV response. The formation of this project began at the 22nd International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2018) in Amsterdam, during which a group of trans men and AFAB non-binary people working in the areas of sexual health, HIV research and service delivery, and HIV activism met to discuss their frustrations at the persistent exclusion of AFAB trans people from the global HIV response.

This led to a silent protest during the Closing Plenary of AIDS 2018, and an announcement, by GATE’s Director of Programs, of our intention to form a working group on trans men and HIV. We are pleased to introduce this project to you now!

Why We Do What We Do

This project is focused on generating and strengthening knowledge about the specific and diverse needs and vulnerabilities of AFAB trans people. Currently, there is very little awareness or inclusion of trans men in HIV platforms and this community is mostly ignored in HIV research, all of which GATE intends to address with this new project.

- Gaps in Scientific Knowledge -

The lack of inclusion of trans men and AFAB non-binary people in HIV research is due to heterosexist assumptions that we are at low risk of HIV. In fact, many trans men and AFAB non-binary people have sex with men and/or transgender women and we also may inject drugs or experience sexual violence. Very little research explicitly addresses our HIV prevention, treatment, and care needs. Trans men who have sex with men are often explicitly excluded from research focused on men who have sex with men (MSM) and trans women that require participants to be assigned male at birth. Even when we are allowed to participate, few projects include questions about both gender identity and sex assigned at birth, so our data cannot be disaggregated. Further, studies often rely on normative ideas of practices, risks, and vulnerabilities (e.g., focusing on anal sex in MSM studies) and do not fully capture data on our bodies and sexual practices.
Clinical Perspective –

Up to this point, the effectiveness of PrEP in trans masculine people on testosterone has not been researched in depth. Trans men have broadly been excluded from PrEP trials. Not all trans men undergo or plan to undergo so-called “bottom surgery” (the reconstruction of the genitals) and use different body parts when engaging in sexual activity. As research has shown, vaginal or “front-hole” tissue changes with the intake of testosterone, and can become more fragile or brittle over time, meaning it is more likely to experience micro-tears during penetration. These changes might interfere with the effectiveness of PrEP and more research is needed.

Socio-Behavioral Perspective –

Little is known also with regard to socio-behavioral aspects related to the HIV vulnerability of trans men and AFAB trans persons. However, research suggests that substance use, difficulty navigating safer sex negotiations, and risky sexual behavior can be found in this group. Trans men also engage in sex work, which possess additional risks in relation to transmission of STIs. Research also indicates that AFAB trans people experience significant amounts of sexual violence, coercion and rape. Studies indicate that more than half of AFAB trans people have been victims of or survived sexual violence in their lifetimes.¹

The Way Forward

We exist! The Trans Men & HIV Working Group aims to produce critical knowledge on trans men and HIV and to develop strategies to increase the meaningful inclusion of trans men in health discussions. Meaningful and inclusive research, which will lead to appropriate (sexual) health services, needs to start by including us from the very beginning of each project. We are not simply vulnerable patients, but rather community organizers and experts, public health researchers, and medically trained specialists.

Our work seeks to make positive changes in awareness among donors, global health organizations and policy makers on the realities of trans men and AFAB non-binary people regarding HIV, including challenges, gaps, and best practices going forward.

Find out more about this project

GATE.ngo/projects/trans-men-hiv

Further Resources


