

Reaching the Unreached: SBG's Strategy for Equitable Access to Healthcare Services.

Addressing Cultural, Linguistic, and Economic Barriers to HIV Prevention in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Despite ongoing global efforts, the HIV pandemic has continued to ravage communities — particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. Being home to 69% of global HIV cases and 73% of AIDS-related deaths, the region has faced persistent barriers, such as stigma and socioeconomic inequalities, that have hindered the effective deployment and utilisation of HIV prevention tools. While significant progress has been made in the region, with new HIV infections declining by 40% since their peak in 1997 — adolescent women in these communities continue to be disproportionately affected, with rates up to three times higher than their male counterparts.

The rates of new infections have plateaued due to the failure of current prevention strategies to meet the specific needs of these vulnerable populations. Southward BioForge Group (SBG) is committed to countering these barriers and working toward equitable access to innovative HIV prevention technologies. Our strategy is grounded in reaching typically underserved communities, particularly adolescent women, who simultaneously have the most to gain or lose depending on prevention uptake.

In the past, lack of cultural specificity and inspection on the part of prevention efforts have proven to have detrimental consequences for the individuals who are most at risk of infection. Communities across sub-Saharan Africa, which bear the highest burden of HIV—accounting for 61% of new infections worldwide—have often lacked access to prevention tools and information in languages they understand. This disconnect has been exacerbated by continued failure to integrate and account for cultural norms and complexities, leading to widespread mistrust and low uptake of preventative measures. The disparities in the uptake of oral PrEP in Kenya and South Africa's 2015/16 rollouts illustrate this. Despite similar political support in both countries, Kenya's culturally informed approach, which actively engaged local communities, resulted in significantly higher adoption rates and greater protection against HIV. Conversely, in South Africa, where the rollout was less attuned to cultural and social dynamics, the adoption rates lagged, leaving many individuals victim to stigma and without the protection they desperately needed.

This stark contrast in uptake underscores the critical importance of tailoring HIV prevention strategies to the specific cultural and linguistic contexts of the communities they aim to serve. Ignoring these factors not only alienates those at risk but also continues the cycle of infection and mortality. To counter these challenges, Southward BioForge Group (SBG) is committed to breaking down these barriers through the translation of HIV prevention materials into local languages at various educational levels. Additionally, SBG will work to construct region-specific distribution strategies that are culturally sensitive and tailored to the unique stigmas, complexities, and societal conditions of each community.

Another formidable obstacle in the struggle for accessible HIV prevention, particularly in the regional South, has been the long-existing socioeconomic barrier. In many of these countries, economic and gender inequalities have intertwined to undermine the autonomy of young women over their health and lives. The dynamics of "love and money" in these relationships further worsen this issue, as love is intertwined with material support, and older men who can provide for their younger partners are seen as desirable. This economic dependence diminishes the bargaining power of young women, making it difficult for them to refuse unsafe sexual practices. Research highlights that young women in such relationships are less likely to maintain autonomy over their health choices, perpetuating their vulnerability to HIV infection.

Recognizing this intersection of economic and gender inequality, Southward BioForge is committed to enhancing the sexual agency of adolescent women through financial empowerment. SBG's strategy includes not only the development of region-specific distribution strategies that account for these socioeconomic challenges but also the future introduction of a micro-financing scheme aimed at supporting young women in underserved communities. This approach is largely inspired by research in Malawi, where providing pocket money to girls who maintained school attendance resulted in lower HIV rates, as it reduced their dependence on older male partners. By offering sustainable financial and logistical support, SBG seeks to build agency in adolescent women, enabling them to make informed health decisions independently of their partners.

It is evident that the struggle to eradicate HIV will demand more than just innovative tools. A deep and sincere understanding of the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic barriers that hinder their use will be necessary. Southward BioForge is primarily committed to countering these barriers and ensuring that prevention tools are accessible and effectively empowering vulnerable populations.