

A gateway for early diagnosis and linkage to care and treatment for the key populations in Bhutan

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Background: Bhutan is a low-level HIV prevalence country. A total of 835 HIV cases were diagnosed since 1993. Based on the current estimates, the case detection gap is about 36%. HIV Self-testing (HIVST) is considered an effective approach with the potential to enhance case detection among key populations. This study aimed to assess the acceptability of oral HIVST among key populations and the feasibility of introducing HIVST in Bhutan.

Methods: A mixed-methods cross-sectional study was conducted from August 2021 to January 2022 in seven districts. The purposive peer-driven recruitment sampling technique was used to recruit study respondents. Trained peer outreach workers from the key populations distributed oral HIVST and collected data. Structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews were used to collect data. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used to analyze the data.

Results: Of the 436 participants, a majority (53.4%) were men who have sex with men followed by female sex workers (32.8%) and transgender persons (13.8%). About 77.3% of the participants were between the ages of 18-30 years and 19.5% were between 31-43 and the remaining between 44-56 years old. Most (93.3%) of the respondents accepted the HIVST. Around 70% preferred assisted self-testing and 22.7% opted for unassisted self-testing and the remaining 6.7% chose blood-based testing. Most participants had positive views about HIVST. They liked the ease, convenience, and privacy of the test, and shared they would be comfortable doing the test on their own in the future.

Conclusion: The results showed an overwhelming acceptance of the oral HIVST indicating that HIVST could be one of the important testing strategies to reach key populations and can be potentially introduced in the country. Bhutan may consider expanding HIVST as a part of community-based testing services for key populations.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there are no potential competing interests. The funding for this study was supported by the Global Fund-funded Sustainability of HIV Services for Key Populations in Asia Program. The Australian Federation of AIDS Organizations is the principal recipient and Save the Children as the sub-recipient is delivering the program in Bhutan.