

Young People Living with HIV facing challenges to ending AIDS

By Joseph Ganthu



Young people locked in a focus group discussion at Mnyanja Health Centre in Kasungu

Focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted by young recipients of Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) at Kaluluma, Mnyanja and Chamwabvi health centres in Kasungu district revealed some of the factors contributing to low viral load suppression rates among youths aged between 15 and 24 years; a situation that can hinder Malawi from ending AIDS by 2030.

The Malawi Network of Religious Leaders Living with or personally affected by HIV and AIDS (MANERELA+) in partnership with the Network Of Journalists Living with HIV (JONEHA) under a project called Citizen Science in Community Led Monitoring and Advocacy (CS-CLMA) with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation through the International Treatment Preparedness Coalition (ITPC) on 12th and 13th July 2022 facilitated focus group discussions for young people living with HIV (YPLHIV) to capture data related to HIV service access amid COVID 19.

MPHIA 2020-2021 study reveals that viral load suppression (VLS) rates among those aged 15 years and older living with HIV varied by age but not by sex. The study indicates that while the young women and men had respectively a viral suppression (VLS) of 73.2% and 75.0% the older women and men aged between 45 and 54 years reached 95.9% and 91.7% respectively. It clearly shows that VLS rates for young people is lower than the older ones.

Among several factors affecting the uptake of HIV services the young people cited long waiting time, health talk that is too brief due to understaffing, prioritizing COVID 19 to HIV, economic hardships created by COVID 19 and that HIV testing services (HTS) no longer attract young people as they fear being diagnosed with the corona virus.

"We really appreciate that there is a problem of understaffing at our facility however we feel neglected when we take too long to get an ART refill; a situation that constrain some of us who don't like taking too long at one place for one thing," said a young man at Chamwabi Health Centre. The FDGs observed that the long waiting time has led the impatient young people to defaulting ART treatment.

The young recipients of care also complained that health talks are always so brief that they go back home without comprehending the right information on HIV management. Most of the young people look at COVID 19 as more deadly than AIDS. This is so as they notice that health workers have shifted to giving more attention to COVID 19.

Since COVID 19 started claiming lives of Malawians the young people notice that as dependents they have heavily suffered socially and economically. They point out that sometimes they are stopped from attending classes and that for those travelling long distances for a refill of ART; cannot afford transport costs because fares have almost doubled or trebled. In such a scenario for a young recipient of ART care it means disrupting treatment until his or her parents or guardians have sourced adequate transport money.

The CS-CLMA project is in 8 selected health facilities namely Kasungu District Hospital, Kaluluma, Mnyanja, Bua, Chamwabi, FPAM, K2-TASO and Kasalika in Kasungu district. The project has two goals. The first is to assess and generate evidence on the access gaps and HIV service barriers for people living with HIV/key populations in the context of COVID 19. The second goal is to improve HIV service delivery and service uptake by the target population amidst the COVID 19 pandemic.