

Voices from China



“Without my involvement in the project, it would have been very difficult for me to cope. It is good to know I am not alone. I lead a much happier life now.”
Beneficiary

China Family Planning Association: Promoting sexual health among men who have sex with men

This case study is one of a series of qualitative reviews called “IPPF Changing lives” which capture the stories of IPPF’s beneficiaries and clients from around the world. A rapid PEER (participatory ethnographic evaluation and research) approach was used to train project beneficiaries to interview people in their social network. These voices provide us with powerful testimonies on lives changed - in some cases, lives saved - and illustrate how IPPF is making a difference.

Men who have sex with men (MSM) in China are benefitting from the unique work of China Family Planning Association (CFPA). CFPA is promoting sexual health among MSM in three cities of Gansu Province, including Lanzhou. The project has focused on creating a more supportive environment for MSM and improving their sexual health practices and behaviour. CFPA has also worked with other MSM organizations and local health departments to increase their capacity to provide MSM-friendly sexual health services.

One of the primary components of this project is peer education. CFPA recruited MSM from construction sites, migrant worker dormitories and entertainment establishments and trained them on how to be peer educators in male sexual health. These peer educators conduct small group sessions as well as outreach work, and they hand out sexual health information and condoms on site. CFPA has worked with the owners of these sites to ensure their support.

CFPA’s project has changed the lives of many men. The beneficiaries have learned about sexual health and many have improved their sexual health practices and behaviour. CFPA has created a space for them to have open discussions, which has contributed to a sense of belonging for many of these marginalized men.

¹ www.options.co.uk/peer

“We feel comfortable talking to the project staff. They respect us. They are not judgemental.”
Project beneficiary



“As a male sex worker, I would not use a condom if my clients agreed to pay more. I got involved in the project and tested positive for HIV. If I had only known the information earlier and the dangers of my behaviour, I would not have caught HIV just to earn a little more money.”
Project beneficiary

Achievements

A major achievement of this project has been improved safer sex practices following the training; including increased condom use and, for some, a new willingness to use condoms. Men have learned that condoms should be used to prevent HIV and sexually transmitted infections, whether in a steady relationship or with multiple partners. Male sex workers, for example, value their new sexual health knowledge and feel that they can now protect themselves. The beneficiaries also share their new-found knowledge with others.

The project staff have trained a range of stakeholders including doctors, policemen and other service providers on stigma and discrimination. According to some beneficiaries, this has helped improve the legal environment for them. For example, there has been a perceived decrease in the number of police raids on ‘entertainment places’.

Another achievement from the participants’ perspective is that the project has been ‘choice-focused’ rather than ‘disease-focused’. This project does not push beneficiaries into testing for HIV and sexually transmitted infections but supports them to make informed decisions about when, whether and where to have a test. Previous projects targeting MSM groups in Gansu province were aimed at the reduction of new HIV infections and focused primarily on getting target groups tested for HIV and sexually transmitted infections, even when this meant forced testing. The beneficiaries felt that this approach undermined people’s feelings and their right to choose. CFPA’s project, on the other hand, emphasized informed choice and enabled the men to have a broader understanding of sexual health issues.

Through this project, CFPA trained a number of their own volunteers and staff, including service providers, on issues related to homosexuality. Surveys of CFPA staff before and after the training show that staff perceptions on homosexuality have changed and that misconceptions and myths have been clarified. For example, before the training, among the survey respondents,

a high proportion of staff said that MSM have psychological problems or that they are ‘immoral’; these proportions decreased significantly in the post-training survey. This change has been witnessed and appreciated by both the project staff and beneficiaries.

The change in staff and provider attitudes has had a positive impact on their work, and beneficiaries recognize the quality of support they receive from the project staff. Involving the beneficiaries from a very early stage of planning has also helped to build a relationship of trust and mutual dependence. One beneficiary explained: “The project staff make us feel that we are not isolated in society – there is someone to care.”

In addition to making the men feel less isolated, this relationship of trust has also helped many beneficiaries overcome the psychological pressure they have to endure from their immediate family members, as well as tragic events in their past, as described by one beneficiary below:

“I am Muslim. I met my first partner when I was 16 – we were together for 3 years – then his family took him back with them and after a while he committed suicide. It was due to too much family pressure to stay away from me. They could not accept his sexuality. I never recovered from that shock. I did not care much about anything since then. He was my true love. I still grieve for my partner. Being involved with the project, doing outreach work and networking with others gives me a meaning to life.”

Another major achievement has been that the project has provided a platform for men to share common issues, difficulties, heartbreaks and happiness. For many of the beneficiaries, this has been the first time they have had ‘friends’ who understand them, feel their pain and who they can be frank and open with. A 41-year old beneficiary said, “It is different from the past. I never thought the situation would be like now – that we will be able to sit together and discuss these issues.”

Challenges

There is a high level of stigma attached to homosexuality in Chinese society, which means that many men do not disclose their status and some are even thrown out of their homes. Therefore, most homosexual men keep their sexuality 'hidden' due to the stigma they might otherwise face. This means that it is particularly challenging to reach them with information and support, and CFPA is therefore only able to work with a small proportion of all MSM. One project beneficiary explained:

"I came to know I was gay when I was 12. To this date, my parents do not know. My friends do not know either. It is important for my living that no one knows as I am a teacher. In China you can have gay policemen and businessmen living openly - but not teachers. We are the holders of morality."

Even those who are part of the project activities admitted that it is often difficult to convince their regular partners to join in.

Another challenge is that there are no known addresses for many beneficiaries, particularly the migratory workers. The project staff mentioned that these men move from city to city for work, making it difficult to meet the same set of people every time they visit.

The lack of sex education in schools is limiting the acceptance of project activities. There is no provision of sex education in most schools in the area where the review was conducted beyond basic reproductive health education. Most parents are not comfortable discussing sexuality issues with their children and would not know what to do if and when they found out their child was homosexual. This also contributes to men hiding their homosexuality from their families and friends.

Lessons

Changing attitudes does not happen overnight, especially when it relates to sensitive issues. Homosexuality is still taboo in Lanzhou. The strategy of involving MSM groups from the very beginning worked well for this project and its acceptance among beneficiaries. Also, the emphasis on 'choice' rather than 'testing' was successful.

There is a strong community mobilization component and representatives from different government departments and organizations from different social sectors joined forces on the project coordination committee. The dialogue between health authorities, police and the beneficiary community has proved to be critical in improving the environment for MSM.

The importance of more training for beneficiaries as well as service providers should be investigated as those who received training valued it highly. Many expressed a need for more training for parents, the older population and service providers.

This project is unique in that it not only works with young men but also those over 60 years old. It is important to reach these older populations both in terms of meeting their sexual and reproductive health needs and creating a supportive environment for all vulnerable populations. This is perhaps even more important in cultures where elders are respected and are opinion leaders in their communities.

This project has been able to achieve a positive change in staff and beneficiaries within a small time period. The level of engagement of the staff and beneficiaries has been impressive and the plans to roll it out to a larger section of the MSM population in the province will be a valuable next step.

"I took a picture of all these empty packets of condoms when the cleaner came yesterday morning. A few years ago I would not see these many. This is because of the free supply and also because people who come here are more informed now." Beneficiary who runs a shower centre (where men have sex with men)



changing lives ...

“CFPA’s project is good. I want more like this. It helps us to come out and reveal our status. We lived under water for so long. It is very painful. We want to feel safe – we do not want to live in the dark anymore.”
Project beneficiary



China	
Country context¹	
Population (millions), 2010	1,354
Gross enrolment ratio (% of school-age males and females), 2010	68.7
Prevalence of undernourishment in total population (% of total population), 2006	10.0
Life expectancy at birth (years), 2010	73.5
Context for HIV²	
Estimated number of people living with HIV, 2009	740,000
Adults aged 15 to 49 prevalence rate (% of total population)	0.1

¹ UNDP, Human Development Report 2010. Available at <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/CHN.html>. Accessed on 13th January 2011.

² UNAIDS China. Available at <http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/china/>. Accessed on 13th January 2011.



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The International Planned Parenthood Federation is global service provider and a leading advocate of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. We are a worldwide movement of national organizations working with and for communities and individuals.

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