HIV prevalence 21% among homosexuals

A study by John Hopkins School of Public Health has estimated that HIV prevalence among men who have sex with men (MSM) in Malawi could be as high as 21.4 percent.

This is because acts of homosexuality are a criminal offence and attract a maximum jail sentence of 14 years, according to one of the researchers, Stefan Baral.

The aim of the study was to find out HIV prevalence among MSM, risks for infection and human rights them in Malawi, Namibia and Botswana.

The objective of the study was also to demonstrate need for targeted HIV prevention expenditures from regional, national and international funding agencies.

In his research presentation at the International Conference on Aids and STIs in Africa (Icas) in Senegal recently, Baral said due to stigma related to MSM, homosexual men had sex with women and men on the other side.

Baral said many cases of MSM in Africa were occurring in hidden contexts of discrimination, stigma, criminalisation and limited HIV surveillance.

The Namibia, Malawi and Botswana study identified individual risk factors such as unprotected anal sex, lack of circumcision, high frequency of male partners and high number of male partners.

The study recruited a sample of 201 men who have had sex with men in Lilongwe with a snowball sampling with assistance from Centre for Development of People, a local organisation fighting for rights of sexual minorities.

The mean age for those sampled was 25.6, 25.5 percent of those who had concurrent male and female regular sexual partners while 28.6 percent only had male regular sexual partners.

When asked what kind of partner they had had in the last six months before the study, 63.4 percent of the sampled group had both male and female sexual partners.

However, only 4.7 percent were aware of their HIV status but after conducting a rapid oral HIV test among those who were willing, the prevalence of those aged 30 and above was at 35.3 percent.

Baral said since about 17 percent and 8.9 percent had disclosed their status to a family member and health worker respectively, some had been denied housing or were afraid to seek medical services as a result.

About 18 percent had been blackmailed because of their sexuality, according to the study.

This study concludes that gay men and other MSM exist and that they are at high risk of HIV and human rights abuses.

"There have been no significant government expenditure funding evidence based and targeted HIV prevention programmes for MSM," Baral said.

He said to comprehensively address the HIV pandemic, national AIDS strategies should allocate funds ensuring that right to health care is respected for all.

Locally, Cedep, the organisation through which the study was conducted, was given the platform to highlight their activities at Nac best practices conference held mid this year.

For the first time, Ica identified MSM as contributing factor to the spread of HIV in Africa and have wide coverage to show some studies done in various African countries to describe MS population characteristics.

Similar studies have been done in South Africa, Cameroon and Nigeria in the past few years.