

LoveYourself: a safe environment for testing and treatment



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Low condom use in the Philippines has been identified as the primary reason for the dramatic increase in HIV infections. Although condoms are widely available, from health-care centres to gas stations and supermarkets, stigma and discrimination among the key affected populations—men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender women—is a major barrier to their uptake. Moreover, the conservative Catholic country is bound by laws that prohibit health-care workers from providing those younger than 18 years with protection. Now, in a country with the fastest growing HIV epidemic in the Asia Pacific, where new infections increased by 140% over 6 years from 2010, activists and experts are turning to innovative ways to promote safe sex.

Inspired by the popular mobile game Pokémon Go, campaigners in the Philippines are using a smartphone app to send users to locations with condom dispensers in a bid to break stigma and increase uptake. Led by LoveYourself, a Manila-based organisation that promotes HIV awareness, and Save the Children, the Safe Spaces project has set up 30 so-called condom stations around Metro Manila, one of the three defined metropolitan areas of the Philippines, comprising 16 cities.

“It’s a Google maps for condoms inspired by Pokémon Go”, LoveYourself founder and executive director, Ronivin Pagtakhan, told *The Lancet HIV*. “When a person is nearby, they just need to access the app and it will show where the nearest condom station is where people can access condoms for free.”

Following 3500 people downloading the app within the first month of the project launching in January, LoveYourself is in the process of setting up an additional 30 condom dispensers across Metro Manila. The aim is to have 150 up and running across the country later this year.

The dispensers are located in various locations from lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) friendly spaces, to cafés, universities and bathhouses. The safe spaces are non-discriminatory and the app ensures that the dispensers have enough condoms at all times by enabling users to report how much stock is left.

The condom dispensers are just the beginning of what LoveYourself wants the mobile app to become: a one-stop place for sexual health promotion. “It could be a sex diary [and] it could be used to remind people to go for HIV testing. The primary goal is to prevent HIV infection”, Pagtakhan said.

Pagtakhan, a registered nurse, HIV counsellor, and peer educator, was inspired to found the non-profit in 2011 not only to prevent HIV among youth and key populations but also to build an empowered, vibrant LGBT community.

The organisation also runs two HIV testing and counselling community centres in Metro Manila, made

possible by its wide volunteer network. It was the first organisation in the country to offer free HIV testing and immediate test and treat, as recommended by WHO, which is not government protocol.

The Philippine Department of Health estimates about 28 new cases of HIV are diagnosed every day. LoveYourself, with its two HIV testing centres, diagnoses 46% of cases in Metro Manila.

The organisation prides itself in offering HIV testing and treatment in a stigma-free zone. “There’s a lot of red tape in the government and we’re trying to cut it by going around it,” Pagtakhan said. “Just because you can’t do testing on those younger than 18 [without parental consent], doesn’t mean you can’t do screening or allow [doctors] to give implied consent.”

The primary barrier he’s referring to is the current law which mandates that HIV testing on those younger than 18 must have parental consent. However, the Philippine Senate recently passed a bill to amend the country’s 20-year-old AIDS law that lowers the age young people can be tested for HIV without parental consent to 15 years.

Carlos Conde, a Philippines researcher from Human Rights Watch, said the government had failed to advocate condom use and provide adequate sex education. “Condoms are the most reliable and easily available way to prevent the spread of HIV. Unfortunately, the government has its head in the sand or is just deferring too much to conservatives”, he told *The Lancet HIV*.

LoveYourself’s testing centres are run by volunteers who are trained HIV and HIV testing counsellors and life coaches. The organisation also has a biomedical team for the treatment side of its work. “The heart and soul of LoveYourself are the volunteers”, Pagtakhan said, adding that the organisation has 900 volunteers.

LoveYourself is also providing pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) alongside the WHO and UNAIDS to 250 HIV-negative MSM and transgender women as part of a 2 year pilot project that began last year. Pagtakhan hopes more people can be enrolled in the future. “All the clients are adhering to PrEP but we only have 250 enrolled. There’s 5000 people interested in taking PrEP but in order for us to roll out a bigger project, we have to start here.”

As the epidemic shows no sign of slowing down Pagtakhan and his team know they have their work cut out for them. “We believe HIV is more than a health issue. It affects all aspects of the person, from mental health to security to self-esteem”, he said. “It’s always our dream to reach more people. Sex is taboo, but in order for us to do big things, we need to continue to with partner media organisations to create buzz.”

Sophie Cousins