

# Reducing stigma and empowering the community through Community Systems Strengthening (CSS): An initiative to ensure minimizing stigma and discrimination in India.

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**Category:** 36

**Country of research:** India

**Please use the drop down list to indicate if your abstract relates to any of the below**Gay and other men who have sex with men, People who use drugs, Sex workers

**Background:** HIV stigma and discrimination significantly impacts the health, quality of life, and well-being of PLHIV and key populations. HIV-related stigma negatively affects people in different settings, including healthcare, presenting as a barrier to people accessing prevention, testing, treatment, and care services under NACP. NACO has been undertaking proactive measures to address HIV-related stigma including community system strengthening with a specific objective of creating an enabling environment.

**Description:** Under the CSS, one of the core components is to increase capacities of community, community group and community based organisations on priority areas ranging from mobilization, linkages, advocacy including stigma and discrimination. The capacity building modules that have been developed under CSS based on the feedback of the communities have also focused on what is stigma, how to identify and methods to address the same. Community led monitoring has also been highlighted as an essential activity with objective to strengthen community led response and to understand the needs and challenges including incidences of stigma and discrimination faced in availing the existing services by the key beneficiaries. The community master trainers and community champions identified and selected from within the community are undergoing a series of capacity building training programs to better equip the community to identity and meaningfully participate in redressal of issues including stigma.

**Lessons learned:** In the capacity building trainings, community, community networks, and community-based organizations are being provided information on the constitutional provisions and safeguards in the Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (Prevention and Control) Act, 2017. It was also observed that the community demanded information and knowledge sessions on other aspects related to stigma and discrimination associated with their behaviour and gender identity.

**Conclusions/Next steps:** Moving forward, information and knowledge sessions will be incorporated into existing modules under CSS on topics relevant to KPs and PLHIVs. The topics identified are Article 377 on the decriminalization of homosexuality, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, NDPS Act, 1985 and Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956. It is envisaged that these trainings will empower and increase ownership of the communities for reduction of stigma and discrimination in India.

**Ethical research declaration:** Yes

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