

# The promise of PrEP in Bhutan's response to HIV

SKPA-2 Learning Brief



## THIMPHU, BHUTAN

As dusk falls over Thimphu, Bhutan's capital city, the majestic Tashichhodzong stands illuminated, evoking the country's spiritual and cultural ethos. Behind its crimson glow, a quiet revolution is unfolding, especially among those who are often stigmatized and excluded from society. The pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) program is transforming Bhutan's response to the HIV epidemic and the lives of men who have sex with men, transgender women, and sex workers.

To achieve the goal of ending HIV by 2030, the world has set its sights on ambitious targets where 95% of people living with HIV know their status, 95% of those diagnosed are on treatment, and 95% of those on treatment are virally suppressed. These targets are reflected in Bhutan's National HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis and STIs Strategic Plan.

Key population size estimates (2019) indicated that there were 1,726 men who have sex with men and 378 transgender individuals in Bhutan. The study also identified 1,221 high risk women.

While Bhutan has a relatively low number of reported HIV cases (estimated total in 2024: 1,300 – with 1,020 detected), about one in five people living with HIV is undiagnosed (Ministry of Health). In addition, there are concerns about the high levels of sexual transmission among key populations, and the risk of ongoing transmission of HIV to the general population. Complex and overlapping sexual networks increase the risk of transmission. Clients are often shared. A man who has sexual contact with a transgender woman one night may visit a female sex worker next or meet a gay partner the following week.

Consequently, the success of Bhutan's HIV response will hinge on how effectively the NACP reduces transmission among key populations, particularly men who have sex with men, transgender individuals and sex workers. This has prompted the NACP to increase its focus on key populations, and to carry out an extensive review of the existing HIV service package, resulting in the introduction of PrEP. In the context of complex sexual networks where individuals have no control over others' sexual risk behavior, PrEP provides critical protection.





## The PrEP promise

PrEP is a preventative medication for people at risk of HIV infection that involves taking a daily pill of ART drugs. In 2015, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended offering oral PrEP as part of a comprehensive preventive strategy for people at substantial risk of acquiring HIV. With its ability to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus by over 90% when taken consistently, PrEP offers a hope for those who are most at risk of HIV infection.

Since 2015, 152 countries have adopted WHO recommendations on PrEP. Globally, the number of people accessing PrEP has increased from just 200,000 in 2017 to 3.5 million in 2023.<sup>2</sup>

The PrEP program was initiated in Bhutan on World AIDS Day in 2024. The program is a declaration that prevention is as vital as treatment and PrEP is now at the frontline of Bhutan's HIV response, reaching those who are most at risk.

Before the first dose of PrEP was delivered, Bhutan developed clinical guidelines and standard operating procedures tailored to the country's healthcare system, to ensure that providers knew what to do, including how to screen and follow up with clients. As Deki Phuntsho, chief of the NACP said, "This was done to deliver PrEP safely, equitably and effectively". Technical support was provided by global partners such as the World Health Organization. Community organizations such as Pride Bhutan were also involved to ensure the standard operating procedures reflected the realities on the ground.

PrEP is provided free of charge, as is counselling, testing and follow-up care, in line with Bhutan's Constitutional mandate to universal health care, and to free provision of basic health services. One of the essential requirements for starting PrEP is confirming that an individual is HIV-negative. This need has catalyzed increased HIV testing among key populations and opened the door to early diagnosis, counseling and linkage to care. In addition, although the immediate goal is to prevent new HIV infections, the program provides the foundation for broader sexual health improvements. The SOPs integrate case management of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and links to Hepatitis screening, liver and kidney function tests. According to Deki Phuntsho, the comprehensive service package for PrEP could help to improve how Bhutan manages other STIs, including Hepatitis.





## A phased approach to PrEP rollout



*We are introducing PrEP as a service that will allow us to test and strengthen each part of the system"*

**Deki Phuntsho explains.** Therefore, it is being rolled out in a phased approach.

The first phase, focusing on men who have sex with men, transgender individuals and female sex workers, places peer outreach workers and community-based organizations at the core of PrEP delivery to engage and encourage uptake. PrEP provision was introduced into Health Information and Service Centres (HISCs) and Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) centres in urban areas such as Thimphu, as key populations in Bhutan are most likely to use these healthcare facilities. HISCs are often a trusted source of healthcare and a "safe space" for key populations. Staffed by peer outreach workers and trained health professionals, they provide non-judgmental support and services, confidentiality and empathy, in contrast to other mainstream health facilities where key populations have reported a "perceived risk of discrimination".

HISCs in Thimphu's main thoroughfare, Norzin Lam, is tucked away among the vibrant restaurants and shops. It plays a significant role in providing preventive and voluntary counseling and testing services related to HIV and STIs. PrEP was also made available at the Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital in Thimphu and Paro District Hospital. Service providers and peer outreach workers have been trained in PrEP counselling, testing and follow-up care.

**As outreach worker Ugyen Dorji said**



*I understood that PrEP is not just about giving a pill. It's about regular follow-up, ongoing counseling, and making sure clients feel supported".*

In March 2025, the service was extended to Gelephu and Phuentsholing, the commercial hubs in the south – bordering India. High mobility and porous borders expose these regions to increased HIV risk.

In the second phase, the NACP plans to expand the program to central and eastern Bhutan, and PrEP services will also be expanded to district-level hospitals and satellite clinics. This is expected to happen by January 2026.





## PrEP is a lifeline but there are challenges

While there is growing optimism that PrEP could play a transformative role in preventing HIV transmission and is already proving to be transformative for some key populations, there are challenges to uptake. Bhutan's constitution prohibits all forms of discrimination. Yet in practice, stigma and discrimination against men who have sex with men, transgender individuals, and sex workers remain widespread, limiting their access to education and employment, affecting their mental health, and increasing their vulnerability to substance use and risky sexual behavior.

Sex work in Bhutan is criminalized, and sex workers are stigmatized and misunderstood. Women are judged by high moral standards and sex work is often viewed as a moral failure rather than an economic necessity.

The 30-year-old Yangki was forced to quit school because of bullying, harassment, verbal abuse and name-calling because she was different. Without qualifications, she was left with no other choice but to work in an entertainment tavern to earn a living. Even there, she still experienced stigma and discrimination; and it is through the support of community groups such as Pride Bhutan that she has been able to cope and to learn how to protect her sexual health, including PrEP use.

Even the choice of PrEP came with judgment.



*There is a misconception that PrEP is for people living with HIV, or that you are promiscuous and irresponsible,”*

**she says.** However, with advocacy and awareness, people who matter to them are beginning to understand what PrEP is.

Ugyen, a 26-year-old transgender woman also described stigma and self-stigma. She explained that many transgender women work in Karaoke lounges and bars in urban centres as “it is only the work available to most of us”. In those places, alcohol flows freely and “when you are drunk, you don’t have control over yourself and can end up engaging in unprotected sex.” For her, PrEP is a safety net and a way to reclaim control.



A 25-year-old sex worker who did not want to be named was forced into sex work after her early marriage failed and she was left alone to care for her child. With limited qualifications and no job opportunities, sex work “became a means of survival to raise my child”. However, sex work is shaped by power imbalances.

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*Many of us live in constant fear. As sex work is criminalized, clients resort to blackmail and threaten to expose us on social media,”*

**she said.** Some sex workers are beaten up by their clients, and they are unable to report this because sex work is criminal offense. Amid all these challenges, the availability of PrEP has given the 25-year-old and her peers a lifeline; and she was one of the first to use PrEP.

“PrEP is here to protect us,” she said. Sex workers are among the highest users of PrEP in Bhutan because it offers protection and peace of mind in situations where negotiating for condom use isn’t always an option. She is now a strong advocate for PrEP uptake, including among the general population, adding that many married men visit sex workers and there is a high risk of transmission of STIs and HIV to their spouses and other partners.

Stigma and fear of being judged are key factors that deter key populations from seeking PrEP and other services. Some members of the key population reported instances of health workers making abusive remarks to sex workers about making frequent visits to hospitals for STI treatment. Thus, many end up living with untreated infections. “Some people think taking PrEP means you already have HIV, fueling misconceptions,” an outreach worker with Pride Bhutan said.

According to the National PrEP Coordinator, Jigme Kuenga, addressing these challenges requires strategic communication and advocacy; and advocacy efforts are being initiated by community groups in collaboration with the Ministry of Health. Community organizations are also playing a pivotal role in support for and empowerment of key populations. For example, Pride Bhutan and NGOs such as Save the Children are creating safe spaces where sex workers can openly discuss their sexual health and psychological wellbeing. They are also collaborating with the Royal Bhutan Police to ensure that sex workers can safely report incidents of violence.







## Community advocacy for and sharing experience with PrEP

Tenzin Gyeltshen is the Executive Director of Pride Bhutan, a vocal LGBTQ+ advocate and, in recent months, he has taken on the role of PrEP advocate. Pride Bhutan has been lobbying for PrEP since 2017, and it finally happened. He took part in the training, and that's how he became a user and an advocate.

Living in Thimphu while in a long-distance relationship, Tenzin began using PrEP as a way to normalize conversations around sexual health in a country where silence often overshadows the subject. "if i dont take PrEP myself, how can I convince others?" he said during a community forum in Thimphu. At community forums and in private peer sessions, he often shares his own experience with PrEP to dispel myths and counter stigma. "Some people think taking PrEP means you're reckless. But it's just being proactive and responsible," he added.

Among those listening was Karma, a 23-year-old gay man who admits he's hesitant about PrEP. "I haven't been sexually active for very long and I feel it's not for me," he says quietly. But others such as Dorji, a 30-year-old transgender man, see it differently.



*You never really know what will happen. It's always better to be safe and that's what PrEP is about"*

Through Pride Bhutan, Tenzin is working with the Ministry of Health and local partners to create community-led campaigns, ensuring that key populations have access not only to the pills but also to the facts about PrEP.

At an open community forum on PrEP on 24 May 2025 organized by the Ministry of Health, a diverse mix of participants, including LGBTQ+ community members, outreach workers, and officials from the Ministry, shared experience, progress and challenges. The mood was respectful yet relaxed, the air filled with both curiosity and optimism.

Leading the forum, Deki Phuntsho shared Bhutan's journey and national strategy on HIV. He moved easily between humor and Buddhist values, creating a space where people felt both safe and seen.

The National PrEP Coordinator, Jigme Kuenga, reported that, despite efforts to increase awareness, misconceptions persist. These include the belief that PrEP is unnecessary because of the availability of condoms. However, he pointed out that condom use is far from consistent, particularly among key populations who face barriers in negotiating safer sex. That is where PrEP becomes a vital option.

Among the speakers was Tshokey, a charismatic transgender woman in a vibrant kira in her 30s. She spoke with confidence, genuineness and honesty. PrEP, she said, is a way to protect herself and take control over her sexual health. As a transgender woman, she is aware of the risk of sexual transmission of HIV – "everybody makes mistakes" – and PrEP has made her feel safe and protected. She has been on daily oral PrEP for a few months and said that taking it is "part of my morning ritual". She has even set reminders on her phone to make sure she never forgets.



*It took time, but I found out that PrEP is an expression of self-love. Using PrEP is my way of saying that I value myself and my health matters,"*

**she said with conviction.**



Early on, Tenzin was also worried about forgetting to take his daily dose. However, he came up with a clever solution. “I keep the pills in the shoe rack,” he said with a laugh. “That way, every morning when I reach for my shoes, I see them. No excuses.” It shows that taking control of his health doesn’t have to be complicated.

Dechen, another transgender woman, spoke with quiet clarity.

**“** *There’s no harm in using an extra layer of protection. Taking PrEP is not a moral failure,*”

**she said.** What’s risky, she added, is pretending it’s not needed and, if PrEP is ignored, a huge catastrophe awaits, burdening the country.

As of May 2025, 93 members of key populations were on PrEP (53 female sex workers, 28 men who have sex with men and 12 transgender individuals). Almost 70% of those on PrEP availed the service from HISCs in Thimphu, Gelephu and Phuentsholing.

To monitor uptake and track progress, the Ministry of Health has deployed a dedicated web application called DrukPrEP. The platform allows healthcare providers to register clients, schedule follow ups, log test results, and monitor adherence in real time at the same time as maintaining client confidentiality. For the National PrEP Coordinator and health care providers, it has become a vital tool to make evidence-based, data-driven decisions. As the coordinator noted, “We can spot who’s at risk of dropping out and reach them early”.

Some clients have found the PrEP screening process tedious and lengthy. Yangki, for example, said she had been called twice to give blood samples, and the long set of questionnaires was unnecessary formalities. However, the coordinator, as well as service providers and outreach workers, feel that the procedures are necessary to ensure a comprehensive service package. For example, as part of screening for PrEP, clients get tested for HIV, renal function, hepatitis and other diseases and side effects of PrEP are also recorded.







## Access is just the beginning

As Bhutan takes steps to expand access to PrEP, community voices, health workers and policymakers must acknowledge that PrEP is about health and HIV prevention, not sexuality or sexual risk behavior. In addition, a key priority is education and awareness led by the community for the community. Peer educators and advocates such as Tenzin, Ugyen and Tshokey have shown the way by talking about PrEP openly and helping to destigmatize PrEP use. However, sex workers are not being reached, and sex worker networks seldom participate in community forums due to fear of being criminalized, so more needs to be done to increase awareness of PrEP among this key population.

Health officials are also working to embed PrEP into everyday care, by linking it with STI testing, family planning, and routine health check-ups. To support this, Deki Phuntsho reports that the NACP has started to sensitize healthcare workers on sexuality, the needs of key populations, HIV services and PrEP. In addition, topics including sexual orientation and gender identity have been included in the curriculum of Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan, where healthcare providers are trained and educated.



*This effort to sensitize health workers will ensure key population-friendly health services across all healthcare settings, ”*

**he added.** In addition, as some clients find it difficult to collect monthly refills, particularly those who fear being seen at health centers, Bhutan has adopted a multi-month prescription of up to three months after the first month of doses are finished.

For Bhutan, where Gross National Happiness remains a guiding philosophy, the path to effective HIV prevention is about more than medicine. It's about trust, equity, and a shared vision. Everyone, regardless of identity or circumstance, has the power to protect their health with dignity. PrEP symbolizes social harmony and inclusion of marginalized populations with an acknowledgement of diverse sexualities and identities, and their right to health services without prejudice. Making PrEP more widely available and taking steps to increase uptake are therefore aligned with the societal values of Bhutan and the nation's pursuit of collective happiness and inclusive progress.

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