



First Transgender Wellness Centre in North East India

In India, transgender men and women are marginalized and often face acute stigma discrimination due to the transphobia. Access to health is also a big challenge for them, due to the structural barriers such as discrimination by healthcare providers, gender-based violence (GBV), socio-economic marginalization, and lack of family support. Social marginalization and exclusion push transgender community to engage in high-risk sexual activities, increase vulnerabilities towards HIV/AIDS and create huge gaps for services related to HIV prevention & care needs. A 'Holistic Comprehensive Health Response' is essential to reduce such gaps and work towards better health outcomes such as increase health seeking behaviour, reduction in structural barriers to access health and community leadership towards human rights.

Manipur State AIDS Control Society (MACS), National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) and I-TECH India with support from PEPFAR came together to demonstrate one of the successful trans health intervention through 'holistic healthcare' for improving HIV & health service access among transgender (TG) men and women in India. With the vision to create a 'Sustainable Comprehensive Health Service Model' for Transgender Communities, a functional "**Transgender Health and Wellness Centre**" was inaugurated in Imphal, Manipur on 25th March 2021 at Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences (JNIMS), Imphal. The Transgender Health and Wellness Centre, a public-private partnership between India and the United States, and first of its kind in the North East India consists of two units – a *help desk* which inside the JNIMS and a *wellness centre* which is located across the JNIMS building. The centre was inaugurated and graced by the Hon'ble MLA and Advisor of Health to Hon'ble Chief Minister, Manipur along with the Principal Secretary (Health & FW), Government of Manipur and President, Manipur State AIDS Control Society and the Consul General, US Consulate General, Kolkata. The guests of honour included Joint Secretary, NACO, MoHFW, Government of India, Director-DGHT, CDC India and Country Director, UNAIDS and Project Director, Manipur State AIDS Control Society.

The **Overall Vision** ("Dream") of the Manipur Transgender Health and Wellness Centre is to be a '**Sustainable Comprehensive Health Service Model**' for Transgender Communities in Manipur covering North East INDIA which can be replicated partially or fully in other parts of South ASIAN Sub-Continent. The **Overall Mission** ("Direction") of the Manipur Transgender Health and Wellness Centre is to provide overall Health, Wellness, Gender affirmation support and Welfare Services along with Capacity Building and Skills Building for Empowerment of the Transgender Communities through Public Private Partnership.

The Transgender Health and Wellness Centre is functionally managed by I-TECH India and Maruploi Foundation (a community-based organisation of Nupi Manbi/transgender) and is expected to cater to specific needs of transgender population.



First Transgender Clinic in Manipur, India



Currently the clinic provides primary clinical services to the transgender community including Syphilis, HIV, HBV, and HCV Screening. The other clinical services include testing for Haemoglobin, Blood Group and RH Type, and Random Blood Sugar. The clinic also provides services like mental health support counselling, HIV prevention services, partner testing, ARV linkages, TB screening, linkages for the gender change transition support, welfare support and gender base violence support, Beauty treatment services (through the community beauty parlour), Support group services, COVID-19 awareness and vaccination support, General health support, and Free mask and sanitizers distribution.

The unique feature of this initiative is the 'Public – Private Partnership approach' which has linked JNIM (Public Health Care Hospital) and Shija (Private Hospital offering gender change services) under one roof of wellness centre through community led referrals. The Wellness centre is also looking in the age wise & identity specific vulnerabilities around substance abuse, marital status and SHRH needs and specific needs around hormone changes during adolescence.

Though the centre has been inaugurated recently, we are already receiving several human stories from the transgender clients who are benefiting from the wellness centre. Some personal stories are mentioned below:

One Trans-Women Sur (name changed) had stopped taking medicines for more than ten years due to myths and misconceptions and stigma surrounding people who are living with HIV. She was highly motivated after visiting the TG Clinic, where she saw many Transgender community persons working along with a TG PLHIV. She found new hope and new inspiration. She also came to know about Viral Load "Target Not Detected (TND)" and "Undetectable=Untransmittable (U=U)" and initiated her treatment along with peer counselling.

One Trans-Women Pom (name changed) was disturbed and panicked due to unprotected sexual interaction and was critically down due to shame, guilt, and anxiety. She was provided with Mindfulness, Cognitive Therapy and Meditation Exercise. After undergoing few Mental Health Professional Counselling Sessions at the TG Clinic, her condition improved drastically. It was a new area of services being provided to the marginalized transgender communities, who do not have access to professional mental health services.

One Trans-Woman Thoi (name changed) literally broke-down and attempted suicide due to the interference of her boyfriend's family members. Thoi, a beautician, along with her boyfriend, Ham (name changed), were running a beauty-parlor for their livelihood. She was having a live-in relationship for the last eight years. When Ham's parents came to know about their live-in relationship, then they put him into a closed/protected boarding for completing his higher secondary and graduation for better and stable career options. Thoi came and met him every Sunday at the boarding in the disguise of his sister when one fine day the hostel warden came to know they are not siblings but are into a romantic relationship. Since then, they were not allowed to meet each other. Thoi contacted the TWHC Coordinator and the THWC connected them with Legal Advisor (Advocate/Lawyer) from HRLN (Human Rights Law Network) Manipur during the Holi (Color) Festival where Ham was able to come out of the boarding and visit the Legal Advisor. They discussed and decided and finally signed a "Live-in Agreement" where both parties settled to maintain and continue the association and relationship in future and any of the party, without mutual consent, would like to dissolve the "Live-In Agreement" then s/he has to pay a fine of Rupees Five Lakhs Only (Rupees Five Hundred Thousand Only). Thoi felt secured and confident with the "Live-In Agreement" and she is also planning go for Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) in the future.