

# MAKING ACCESS REAL

Claiming our rights to bodily  
autonomy

Community of Women Living with HIV  
[CW Lesotho]





**Title: Claiming our rights to bodily autonomy**  
**Name of Organisation: Community of Women Living with HIV [CW Lesotho]**

**Country: Lesotho**

**Date: December 2016**

### Who are we?

CW Lesotho is a network of women living with HIV in Lesotho, established in 2004 and active in all ten regions of Lesotho. We advocate for the rights of women living with HIV and ensure that women understand their rights and can demand access to all sexual and reproductive rights including health, treatment and an end to violence.

### What was the issue?

In Lesotho HIV prevalence is estimated at 25% among the general population aged 15-49: 60% of people living with HIV are women and girls, with an even higher prevalence noted among younger women between the ages of 20 and 29 years.

In Lesotho, as in all patriarchal societies, women's bodies are controlled. Health care providers and society in general believe that women living with HIV should not have the same reproductive rights as other women – that because we are living with HIV we should not want to become pregnant and should not want to keep any pregnancies we have.

Two stories of forced and coerced sterilization emerged from CW Lesotho members, echoing the experiences of women living with HIV elsewhere in the region.

Forced and coerced sterilization of women living with HIV is the one of the most extreme forms of control over women's bodies resulting in the denial of the right to bear children, psychological trauma, and further violence from partners, family and from community. Often the procedure is done so brutally and violently that it causes irreparable physical damage that could result in further complications such as continuous bleeding over years.

### What was the change we wanted to see?

- Our broader demand is for access to sexual and reproductive health services that are based on the needs and desires of women living with HIV and that enhance the right of women to decide if, when and how we have children. Access to these health services are essential to the overall health and wellbeing of all women living with HIV.

- We wanted an immediate end to forced and coerced sterilisation through protective legislation.
- We wanted to ensure that women living with HIV are conscious of our rights to bodily autonomy, demand these rights and question health care providers when these rights are violated.

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- We wanted an immediate end to forced and coerced sterilisation through protective legislation.
- We wanted to ensure that women living with HIV are conscious of our rights to bodily autonomy, demand these rights and question health care providers when these rights are violated.
- We demanded acceptance of the right of women living with HIV to access the full range of sexual and reproductive rights including choosing if and when we want to have children.

### What did we do?

- We approached the hospitals where the forced and/or coerced sterilisations were performed, requesting information on the two cases.
- We developed a partnership with Women and Law in Southern Africa to litigate cases, with funding and support from Southern African Litigation Centre (SALC).
- We carried out research in 2014 with CW Lesotho members, collecting accounts of coerced and/or forced sterilisations.
- We facilitated a validation meeting with CW Lesotho members, the Lesotho Medical Council, National University of Lesotho (NUL) and the Lesotho Council of NGOs (LCN). Our research was not seen as valid as there had been a lack of medical involvement and no ethical clearance from a research institution.
- We then re-conceptualised and conducted follow up research, with ethical clearance from NUL and funding from OSISA. h

- We facilitated a stakeholder meeting to report on the issues and our work on them, including lawyers, medical professionals and the media.
- We wrote to the Ministry of Health seeking answers on the procedures for sterilisation based on the cases of the two women who presented their experiences.
- We held a workshop on sexual and reproductive health and rights in partnership with the Ministry of Gender.

We conducted a campaign under the theme “Forced and Coerced Sterilisation is a Violation of Rights”. The campaign included consciousness raising with women living with HIV on SRHR and informing health care workers that CW Lesotho is aware of practices of forced and coerced sterilisation and is taking action.

#### NOTE

The campaign is ongoing and strategic litigation is moving ahead. The next step is a presentation of our research findings to the National Assembly when Parliament opens in 2017.

#### **What did we achieve?**

Women living with HIV better understand their rights and are able to demand information from health care workers on any and all procedures done to/on their bodies.

The issue of forced and coerced sterilisation of women living with HIV has been framed as a rights violation and discussed as such in communities.

Health care workers are now aware that their negative actions and treatment are a rights violation of women living with HIV and that women living with HIV understand this fact.

We have evidence of the violations and we produced a valid, credible report that highlights the issues of forced and coerced sterilisation in Lesotho.

There is growing commitment from the National Assembly which is now waiting for a presentation on the research findings.

#### **What were the key lessons learned?**

##### **Research**

It important to follow formal procedures and guidelines to ensure that research is recognised and will be taken seriously and acted upon. Even personal accounts that we may want to use later as evidence for litigation or other advocacy action should be recorded within these recognised procedures.

##### **Solidarity**

Building a broad partnership base increases **Advocacy**

The process of advocacy is a long one – it is critical to see each step and component as building blocks to achieve the overall goal and keep building on what work has already been done.

##### **Ownership**

The involvement of women living with HIV at all levels of the advocacy is critical. It was important to raise consciousness, build skills and ensure that women’s voices and realities are at the forefront of all action.

This Case Study was prepared by Community of Women Living with HIV [CW Lesotho] as part of the CAL Conversations Series: Co-creating Conscious Learning Cultures. This set of Conversations are a part of the KP REACH Project, funded by the Global Fund through Hivos.

#### **For more information on Community of Women Living with HIV**

#### **and the rights of women living with HIV**

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