



Africa Men's Health
Nairobi, Kenya
Hybrid full day event
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Session 1 report Preventive and Promotive Strategies for Advancing Men's Health in Africa



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Background

According to a World Health Organization (WHO) report published in 2019, Africa loses approximately USD 2.4 trillion per year and 630 million years of healthy life per year due to ill health. In the same year, five African countries namely Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Africa accounted for approximately 50% of the total years lost in healthy life.¹

Surprisingly, a significant number of diseases and deaths in Africa are preventable. A glance at the status of men's health in Africa shows that they bear a huge disease burden throughout their lives, but this burden is not

adequately understood. Men's contribution in society is immense, including but is not limited to social, economic, and psychological hence the need for immediate action to advance their health. In this light, Africa Health Business convened a session titled *Preventive and Promotive Strategies to Advance Men's Health in Africa* during the seventh edition of Africa Health Business Symposium (AHBS VII) in November 2022 in Nairobi.

This report highlights health challenges that boys and men in Africa face, their health seeking behavior and barriers affecting how they seek medical services, and potential solutions to the challenges.

¹ <https://www.afro.who.int/news/diseases-cost-african-region-24-trillion-year-says-who>

Some Health Challenges that Men in Africa Face

Some research findings are as follows:

- **Delayed breastfeeding:** A study conducted in 24 African countries discovered gender inequality in early initiation of breast feeding. Male children are breastfed later, more than one hour after birth, compared to females. This increases their likelihood of contracting illnesses and neonatal deaths.²
- **Stunted growth:** In 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, male children below five years of age are more likely to become stunted compared to females.³
- **Drug and substance abuse:** In East African countries, the prevalence of substance abuse was higher amongst men than women. The prevalence of drug and substance abuse increases more amongst men than women as they grow older, and this has been attributed to factors such as but not limited to social isolation, bereavement, financial difficulties and lack of social support.
- **Cancer:** The prevalence of cancers amongst men in Africa is not only high in men's cancers such as prostate cancer, but also higher in some non-gender specific cancers. Men are three to four times more likely to develop lung cancer, two times more likely to develop colorectal cancer, 1.5 times more likely to develop liver cancer and twice as likely to develop stomach cancer compared to women.
- **Injuries:** men tend to suffer more injuries from machinery and road accidents than women.
- **Mental health:** mental health is termed a silent pandemic and masculinity perceptions limit men's chances of seeking medical care.

Men's Health Seeking Behavior and Barriers Against Seeking Medical Care

Health-seeking behavior is influenced by a range of factors such as but not limited to knowledge about diseases, age, gender,

financial capabilities, societal beliefs about gender and health conditions, accessibility of health facilities, attitude towards medical professionals, among other factors.

It is a known fact that although men frequent medical centers while escorting their spouses or children for medical care, they themselves delay seeking services for themselves, whether they be for screening or treatment. The majority tend to ignore signs and symptoms and seek care at advanced stages of a health condition when they can no longer bear their condition or after being pushed by their loved ones to do so. Men are also more likely to drop out of care than women. Some of the reasons behind these behaviors are as follows:

- **Societal perceptions and expectations:** There are firm perceptions on who a man is and should be, and what they should do and not do. Men are told to be "strong" and "bear the pain" and acceptable behavior is described using terminologies such as "superhuman". They are informed, either directly or indirectly that health facilities are for women and children and health promotion and prevention are presented as unacceptable masculine behaviors.
- **Limited attention to men's health:** Most African countries do not have national health plans for the advancement of men's health. Only South Africa has policies for men's health. As a result, minimal efforts and investments are made to advance men's health both by the country and the individual.
- **Education levels:** Men who are unaware of how some conditions manifest or the effects of the conditions are more likely to not seek medical services than those who are more health aware.
- **Limited attention to preventive and promotive care:** For a very long time, resources have been pooled in curative care where nations and individuals aim to get state-of-the-art machinery for the provision of quality medical services and specialists for different health conditions. While curative services are essential, preventive care is equally, if not more, important.
- **Unfavorable working durations of health facilities:** A significant number of health

² <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0267703>

³ <https://bmcpediatr.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2431-7-17>

facilities are operational during the day when majority of men are at work and close early in the night. In many cases, the health facilities that are open 24/7 are specialized care hospitals, which implies that men who would like to visit for primary healthcare services are excluded.

Recommendations for the Advancement of Men's Health in Africa

- Change perceptions towards masculinity: Societal perceptions and expectations of a man are probably the greatest barriers against men seeking care and if revised, they could make the greatest impact.
- Empower men to take care of their own health – men should be educated about their health throughout their life course. This can be done by using technology or through healthcare workers. Health professionals should be also encouraged to dedicate ample time to educating men about their health whenever they go to seek medical care.
- Make the environment conducive for men to get medical services: Public and private sector can establish multi-disciplinary care centers to reduce men's movements from one facility to another to reduce the chances of losing them within the chain of care. Health facilities can also extend their working hours, take the services closer to men, offer men medical services whenever they accompany other family members to hospitals, among other interventions.
- Include men in decision-making processes for their health and wellbeing
- Put more emphasis on men's health: There are many strategies that can be implemented to increase the prominence of health agenda amongst men. For starters, WHO Africa Region and other continental institutions should take a lead in the advancement of men's health in the continent through actions such as research and support to other institutions. Secondly, African nations and regional bodies should put great emphasis on men's health days and weeks and encourage action after the events. Thirdly, African nations should develop national plans, policies, and strategies for men's health and invest in people, processes, and organizations that can help achieve these goals. For example, governments can leverage the existing pool of Community Health Workers (CHWs) to educate men regarding their health and take some primary care services to them.
- Establish partnerships and leverage their potential - The need for partnerships is clear and some have already been established, but partnerships are and should not be the end goal. Partners should harness the potential they hold. Organizations that partner to advance men's health should have similar goals, establish sustainable plans for action, and follow-through to make sure they are doing what they agreed to do.

Snapshots

We need to revise our understanding and standards of masculinity. Men, it is important for you to know that there is nothing wrong with being vulnerable, seeking help or being sensitive.



Michael Mugo
Business Advisor for Tunza Family Health
Network Population Services-Kenya

We need to start asking ourselves what it really means to be a man and redefine it. We need to embrace the concept of multiple masculinities because there are many definitions of a man



Dr. Brian Lishenga
Chairperson
Rural Private Hospitals Association (RUPHA)

There is a lot more than we can do in preventive care. The need for partnerships is clear; we don't need to reinvent the wheel. We should now try to make sure that we are leveraging the strengths of the partnerships.



Dr. Vishal Patel
Medical Director
MP-Shah Hospital

Some strategies that can be implemented in Africa to advance men's health is holding more forums to discuss health agenda and using sports stadia to reach more men.



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