

## Background

In India, the HIV epidemic is heterogeneous, with the Key Population Groups being the most vulnerable. Maharashtra is one of the top ten states with the highest HIV prevalence (0.36%), the highest estimated number of PLHIV (3.96 lakh), and the new infections in 2019 is 8.54 thousand. With a prevalence of 3.14 percent, transgender individuals are one of the most vulnerable groups to HIV. A study undertaken by the National AIDS Control Organization indicates that 70% of Transgender people primarily engage in sex work and 71% face stigma in healthcare settings.

The movement of transgender persons from various regions to Pune and Mumbai is significant, as Maharashtra is a prominent center for them to earn a living. Transwomen Population in Pune, Maharashtra forms various cultural groups including Hijra, Jogti-Jogappa and Aradhi. All these cultural groups celebrate certain tailor-made festivals including *Kojagiri Punam*, *Randki Poornima (Keech)*, *Haldi-Kunku*, *Bhochara Mata Thada Pooja*, *Yellama* and *Kalubai Mela* etc.

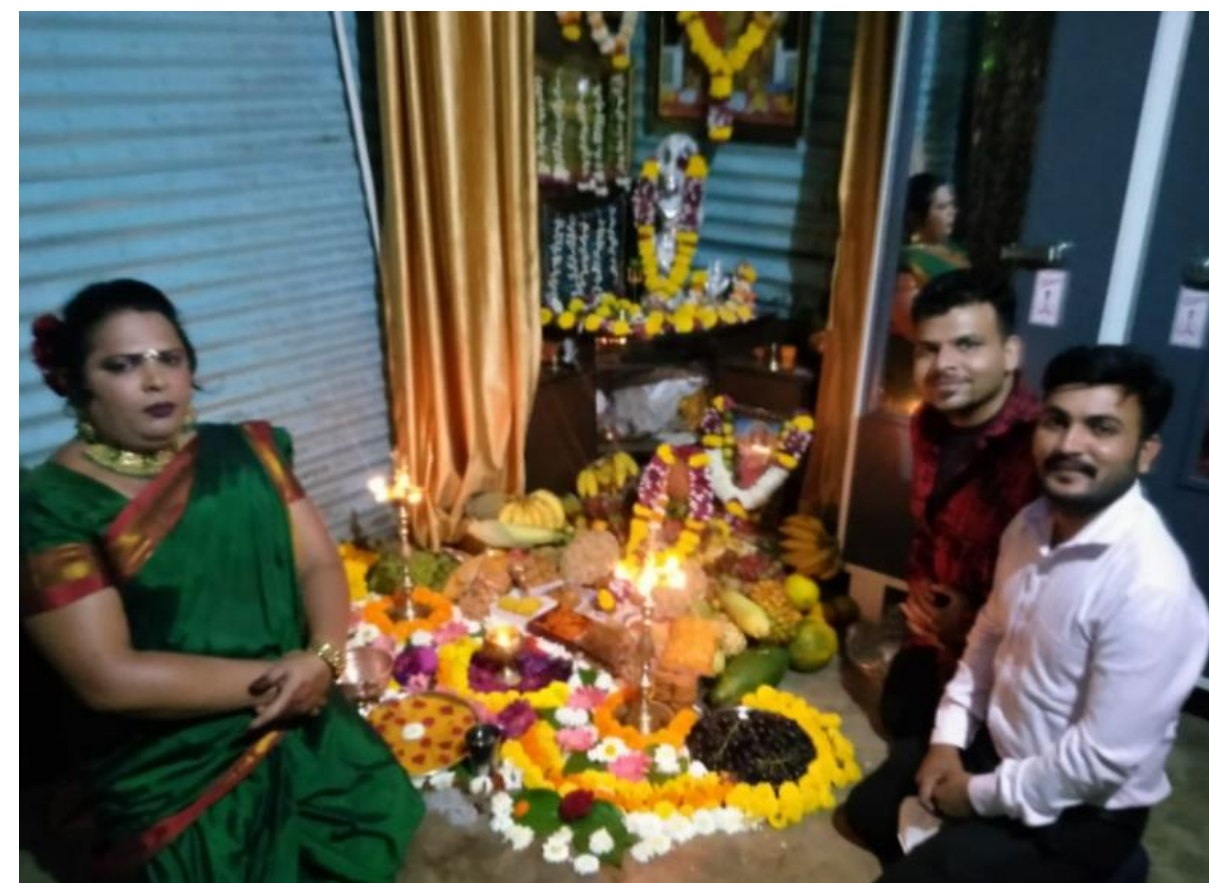


Fig 1: Bhochara Mata Thada Pooja – This is a festival of celebrating the gender affirmation of an individual after Gender Affirmative Surgery. Many chelas (disciples) collect to celebrate nirvani jalsa (affirmation festival) after this auspicious ritual.



Fig 2: Randki Poornima (Keech)- This is a famous Festival among Jogti Transwomen of Maharashtra. The merciful Goddess statues are carried by major Gurus on their heads along with a mesmerizing cultural dance. Taking these statues on head Jogtis visit various temples in the district and impart their Visibility to general population. The festival is often attended by around 25-50 transwomen in different clusters in different parts of the district.

Yellama and Kalubai are the two major Goddess and apart from Keech festival, Transwomen of Jogti culture also organize mela (fair) along the key temples after this festival.

A separate mela (fair) is also observed in Shriptshungi of Nashik, Maharashtra where many transwomen from all over the state and few prominent locations in the country emigrate to celebrate their cultural diversity on the occasion of Kojagiri Punam.

## Methods

This exploratory assessment aimed to explore the ways to enhance HIV screening through transwomen cultural festivals. Transwomen of varied cultural groups were approached through purposeful sampling after developing rapport at festivals in Pune. The 10 focused group discussions were conducted between August 2021 and December 2021 with transgender people aged between 22- 52 years and were translated and transcribed. Thematic analysis was done after developing codebook inductively. The key themes emerged were preference for non-HIV services and low-cost Gender Affirmative Services.



Fig 3: Focused Group Discussion with Indian Transwomen

## Results

Most of the participants were disheartened about discussion around HIV and emphasized on their non-HIV needs and underserved status. Based on the findings, a model was framed through linkage networks for subsidized/insured Gender Affirmative Services and festivals acted as the mobilization point. Transwomen cultural festivals in India are not much explored, yet an easy point to reach the underserved individuals who are in dire need of low-cost gender affirmation. HIV testing as a mandate for any surgical intervention enhanced the HIV screening in this community.



Fig 4: Transwomen Navratri Festival



Mapping of month-wise and area-wise festivals celebrated by different cultural groups.



Opportunistic Screening for HIV by healthcare professional during Gender Affirmative Services



Fig 5: Picture of different deities worshiped by various Transwomen cultural groups in India. Numerous festivals are celebrated every month with a gathering of huge crowd from different locations. All these festivals are celebrated among transwomen irrespective of caste and religion. These gathering can be a significant mobilization point for HIV prevention And testing services.

## Proposed Implementation Model



## Conclusions

The policymakers and implementing agencies need to be accountable at systemic level for better enforcement of Transgender Protection Act, 2019 and ratified human rights treaties through provision of subsidized or insurance-covered Gender Affirmative Services which can be integrated with HIV screening in unreached high-risk people.