SUCCESS STORY
New Ceremony Stops One Avenue of HIV Transmission

A community is able to observe local tradition while keeping the risk of HIV infection at bay

In sub-Saharan Africa, addressing gender issues is essential to reducing the vulnerability of women and men to HIV infection. This is true in the nation of Mozambique, where national HIV prevalence is now 16 percent.

The U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), is working with local communities to address cultural norms and behaviors that can lead to greater risk of HIV transmission.

For instance, in Mozambique's Zambezia Province, tradition dictated that widowed women must cleanse themselves of their deceased husbands, a long-standing belief of the community. In order to accomplish this symbolic goal, the widow had to engage in sexual relations with another man – either a relative of her husband or, if no relative were available, a man in the local community. In exchange for his participation, the man would receive payment.

USAID/Mozambique

In a new version of a long-standing cultural practice, a woman symbolically cleanses herself in the wake of her husband's death by eating a meal of traditional foods.

In Mozambique, USAID is addressing cultural norms and behaviors that may lead to a greater risk of HIV transmission.

With support from USAID, the community brought together local leaders, elders, and pastors to address the need for a new and safer tradition, one that could lessen the risk of HIV transmission. Their deliberations led to a creative solution, one they believed would not be perceived as an assault on their customs.

In the new practice, a widow still engages in a cleansing ceremony, but the nature of the custom is much different. Now, a widow consumes traditional foods, relying on certain locally-derived vegetables, fruits, and plants. In this way, the ceremony recognizes the husband's death as a turning point for the woman – and does so without posing an unnecessary risk of HIV transmission.