



Advancing Equitable STI Prevention, Diagnostics, and Treatment in South Africa

April 2026

Executive Summary

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) remain a major but under-prioritized public health challenge in South Africa. Despite a strong HIV response and progressive sexual and reproductive health policies, gaps persist in STI information, access, diagnostic scale-up, community engagement, provider training, and commodity security. South Africa continues to rely largely on syndromic management, which misses many asymptomatic infections and limits pathogen-specific treatment and antimicrobial resistance surveillance.

This advocacy agenda advances coordinated action to improve access to credible STI information, strengthen community and provider advocacy capacity, promote positive sexual health and wellbeing, and support more equitable access to diagnostics, treatment, and essential STI commodities through the following goals:

1

Increase access to credible STI information, including public-facing materials, provider education, and dissemination of national guidelines and training tools.


2

Strengthen STI advocacy capacity across stakeholders, including civil society, clinic committees, healthcare workers, and policymakers.

3

Promote positive sexual health and wellbeing through rights-based, stigma-reducing, and inclusive STI communication and service approaches.

STIWatch

An initiative of  AVAC
Advocacy Access Equity

Vision

A South Africa where all people have equitable access to credible STI information, quality diagnostics and treatment services, and supportive systems that promote sexual health, dignity, and wellbeing.

The Case for Action

STIs remain highly prevalent in South Africa, with significant burden among women, adolescents and young women, key populations, and people living with HIV. Syndromic Management, while long established as the national standard of care, misses the majority of asymptomatic infections and contributes to antibiotic misuse because treatment is not pathogen-specific. This limits the ability to accurately diagnose infections, provide optimal treatment, and monitor antimicrobial resistance.

Recent aetiological surveillance across sentinel clinics in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Western Cape has shown high prevalence of chlamydia, gonorrhoea, *Mycoplasma genitalium*, and trichomoniasis, with persistent burden among young adults. South Africa cohort data also show very high STI prevalence and incidence among adolescent girls and young women, underscoring the urgent need for improved diagnostics and more accessible services.

At the same time, gonorrhoea antimicrobial resistance is a growing threat, and sustained commodity security remains essential, particularly for benzathine penicillin G (BPG), the recommended treatment for syphilis in pregnancy and a key medicine for syphilis control. Together, these challenges highlight the need for improved diagnostics, stronger surveillance, better access to quality STI information, and more robust community-centered systems to support equitable STI prevention and care.

Key Priorities for Strengthening South Africa's STI Response

1

Expand Access to Credible, High-Quality STI Information

South Africa needs stronger dissemination of clear accurate, and accessible STI information for communities, healthcare providers, and decisionmakers. Improving access to national guidelines, policy briefs, training tools, and public-facing communication materials will help counter misinformation, reduce stigma, and strengthen prevention and care-seeking behaviors. Strengthening provider education platforms, including the South African HIV Clinicians Society STI Management Course, can support more consistent and evidence-based STI care.

2

Strengthen Community and Stakeholder Advocacy Capacity

Sustainable progress requires coordinated advocacy across communities, healthcare facilities, civil society, and government. Supporting clinic committees and community-based partners to engage more effectively with facilities and health authorities can strengthen accountability, improve service responsiveness, and ensure that lived experiences inform STI prevention and awareness strategies. Clear engagement structures will help translate community priorities into practical system improvements.

3

Promote Positive Sexual Health and Wellbeing

STI responses should be grounded in a broader sexual health and rights framework rather than fear, silence, or stigma. Advancing rights-affirming, gender-inclusive, and stigma-reducing narratives can help normalize conversations about sexual health and encourage earlier care-seeking. Integrating STI messaging into broader sexual and reproductive health platforms, including family planning, PrEP counseling, men's health, and gender-based violence services, can expand reach and strengthen person-centered care.

4

Strengthen Commodity Security and System Readiness

Reliable access to essential STI medicines and supplies remains critical to an effective national response. Continued monitoring of BPG supply chains and advocacy for sustainable procurement, stock visibility, and rapid response to disruptions are necessary to protect maternal and newborn health and prevent avoidable congenital syphilis. System readiness must also include provider tools, communication material, and practical implementation support.

Strategic Approach

This advocacy agenda advances a coordinated approach that links policy engagement, provider education, community leadership, and practical systems strengthening.

Policy Engagement and Government Alignment

Advocacy efforts will support engagement with the National Department of Health, provincial health departments, and relevant technical and regulatory stakeholders to strengthen STI policy implementation, guidelines dissemination, and commodity security. This includes working with government partners to improve uptake of updated STI tools, integrate STI priorities into broader sexual and reproductive health platforms, and strengthen provincial implementation of national priorities.

Community Awareness and Public Engagement

Community-based engagement will strengthen access to accurate STI information, reduce stigma, and support more open dialogue about sexual health. Clinic committees, youth-led organizations, and civil society partners will play a central role in delivering community-responsive messaging, improving accountability, and bridging communication between communities and health facilities.

Healthcare Workforce Capacity Strengthening

Strengthening provider knowledge and confidence is essential to improving STI care. Collaboration with clinical and technical partners will help expand provider access to training, practical guideline tools, and rights-affirming approaches to service delivery. Building provider capacity will improve consistency, responsiveness, and quality across STI prevention, diagnosis, and treatment services.

Equity and Community Engagement

This advocacy agenda centers communities most affected by STIs, including women, adolescents and young people, key populations, LGBTQIA+ communities, migrants, and people living with HIV. These groups often face overlapping barriers, including stigma, discrimination, limited information, and poor service responsiveness, that reduce access to timely and appropriate care.

Community leadership is central to this agenda. Clinic committees, youth-led groups, community healthcare workers, and civil society organizations can help ensure that advocacy priorities reflect lived realities and that services respond to local needs. Strengthening these community structures will improve communication, accountability, and trust between communities and the health system.

The agenda also emphasizes shared decision-making and practical accountability mechanisms. Structured feedback loops between clinic committees and facilities, community-informed messaging, and stronger representation of marginalized groups in advocacy activities will help ensure that STI policies and services are more inclusive, rights-based, and responsive.



Conclusion

South Africa has an opportunity to strengthen its STI response by improving access to credible information, building stronger community and provider advocacy platforms, promoting positive sexual health, and reinforcing system readiness for quality STI prevention and treatment. This advocacy agenda is intended to be a living document that evolves alongside changing policy, community, and health system realities.



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About This Work

This advocacy agenda is part of STIWatch, an initiative of AVAC, a global advocacy organization working to advance equitable access to HIV prevention. This agenda was co-created with STI experts, advocates, researchers, healthcare providers, and community leaders in Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, ensuring they reflect national priorities and local realities. AVAC's role is to support, convene, and amplify, working alongside in-country partners to advance advocacy that is locally driven, context-specific, and grounded in existing health systems and community leadership. This work is made possible by the support of the Gates Foundation.

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