

## Overcoming Barriers to Improve HIV Education and Public Health Outcomes in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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**Abstract :** Approximately 37 million people worldwide are infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), with the majority located in sub-Saharan Africa. The relationship existing between HIV incidence and socioeconomic inequity confirms the critical need for programs promoting HIV education, prevention and treatment access. This literature review analyzed 36 sources with a specific focus on the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose critically low socioeconomic status and education rate have resulted in a drastically high HIV rates. Relationships between HIV testing and treatment and barriers to care were explored. Cultural and religious considerations were found to be vital when creating and implementing HIV education and testing programs. Partnerships encouraging active support from community-based spiritual leaders to implement HIV educational programs were also key mechanisms to reach communities and individuals. Gender roles were highlighted as a key component for implementation of effective community trust-building and successful HIV education programs. The efficacy of added support by hospitals and clinics in rural areas to facilitate access to HIV testing and care for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) was discussed. This review highlighted the need for healthcare providers to provide a network of continued education for PLWHA in clinical settings during disclosure and throughout the course of treatment to increase retention in care and promote medication adherence for viral load suppression. Implementation of culturally sensitive models that rely on community familiarity with HIV educators such as 'train-the-trainer' were also proposed as efficacious tools for educating rural communities about HIV. Further research is needed to promote community partnerships for HIV education, understand the cultural context of gender roles as barriers to care, and empower local health care providers to be successful within the HIV Continuum of Care.

**Keywords :** cultural sensitivity, Democratic Republic of the Congo, education, HIV

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