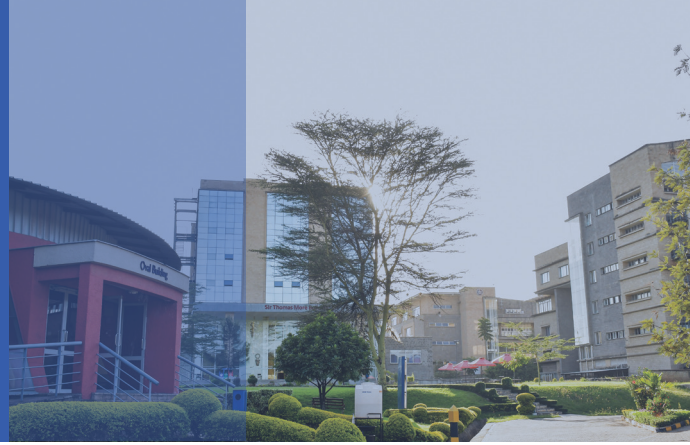




POLICY BRIEF

POLICY BRIEF NO. 05 (2025)



MITIGATING HIV RISK LINKED TO DISCO FUNERALS IN WESTERN KENYA

Samuel Mwalili, Duncan Gathungu

Executive Summary

Disco funerals (“disco matanga”) are culturally significant events in western Kenya but create high-risk settings for HIV transmission through factors such as overnight travel, alcohol use, and transactional or coerced sex. A mathematical modelling study using EMOD-HIV estimated that disco funerals contributed 7.8% of HIV infections between 1980 and 2024, peaking at 9.9% in 2004. Future projections (2025–2050) show that biomedical prevention (PrEP), biobehavioural interventions (condom use, reduced partners), and structural approaches (female empowerment) could avert 9.7%, 2.9%, and 1.2% of new HIV infections, respectively. This policy brief highlights urgent policy options to integrate culturally tailored HIV interventions within funeral practices in Kenya to reduce HIV transmission.

Keywords: Disco funerals, HIV transmission, biomedical prevention, behavioural intervention, structural approaches



Background

Disco funerals blend mourning with celebrations and are widely practised in western Kenya’s Nyanza region, where HIV prevalence is among the highest in the country (up to 25–30% in some communities). These events attract large numbers of young people, especially unmarried women, for overnight vigils, dancing, and fundraising. Practices such as transactional and coerced sex, alcohol and drug use, and multiple sexual partnerships create an elevated risk environment for HIV transmission. Given Kenya’s commitment to ending HIV/AIDS as a public health threat by 2030, disco funerals represent a unique but under-addressed context for targeted HIV prevention.

Problem Statement

Despite widespread HIV prevention efforts, funeral practices like disco matanga are overlooked in policy and programming. Modelling shows disco funerals contributed nearly 8% of HIV infections over four decades, with future risk persisting. Young women are disproportionately affected due to gender norms and limited agency. Current regulatory efforts, such as restricting children or banning nighttime activities, have been inconsistent and hard to enforce. Without targeted interventions, disco funerals could continue fuelling HIV transmission in high-prevalence settings.



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Policy Options

Biomedical Prevention at Disco Funerals

Providing oral or injectable HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to attendees at high-risk funeral events offers a highly effective prevention strategy, reducing HIV acquisition risk by up to 95% per act when adherence is maintained and potentially averting nearly 9.7% of adult infections. However, successful implementation requires robust logistics, reliable supply chains, and strong adherence support, while also addressing potential stigma and acceptability challenges within the community.

Biobehavioural Risk Reduction

Promoting condom use, reducing alcohol and drug consumption, and limiting multiple sexual partnerships at disco funerals through targeted outreach provides a low-cost, community-based, and culturally adaptable approach that could prevent up to 2.9% of new HIV infections. However, its effectiveness relies heavily on participant uptake and sustained behaviour change, making it challenging to monitor and maintain over time.

Structural Interventions and Female Empowerment

Empowering women and girls to avoid unwanted sexual encounters at funerals through economic support, community sensitisation, and provision of safe spaces tackles the root causes of vulnerability and gender inequities while delivering long-term benefits beyond HIV prevention. However, its immediate impact is modest—potentially averting up to 1.2% of infections—and successful implementation requires substantial multi-sectoral collaboration and sustained funding.

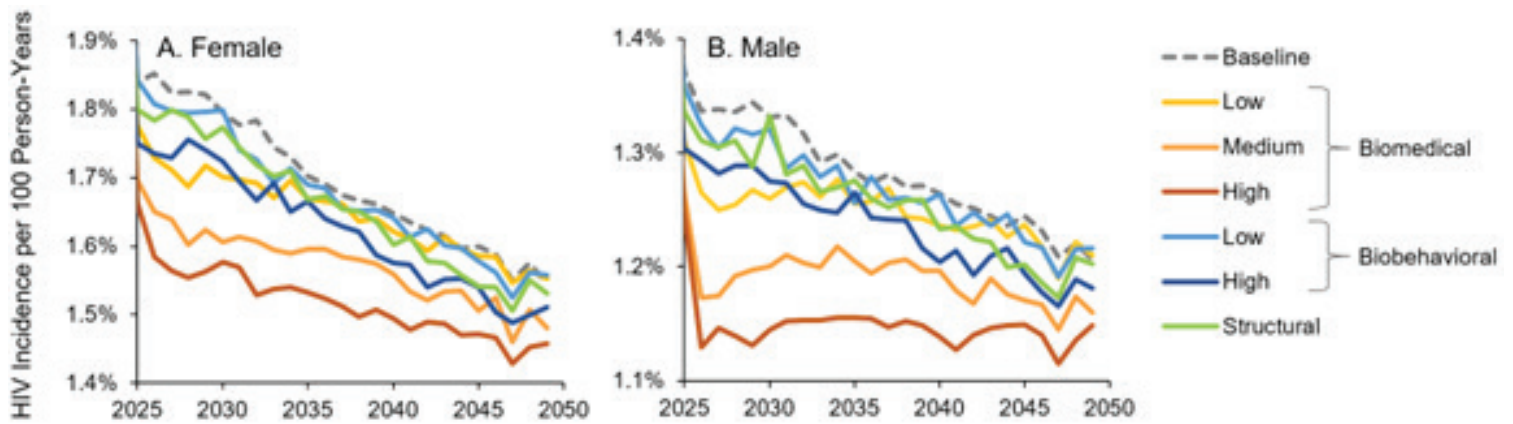


Figure 1: Effect of biomedical, biobehavioural, and structural interventions on HIV incidence in western Kenya. HIV incidence per 100 person-years in women (A) and men (B) ages 15+ is shown for a baseline intervention with disco matanga and no interventions (gray dashed line) and for biomedical, biobehavioural, and structural interventions designed to reduce HIV incidences.

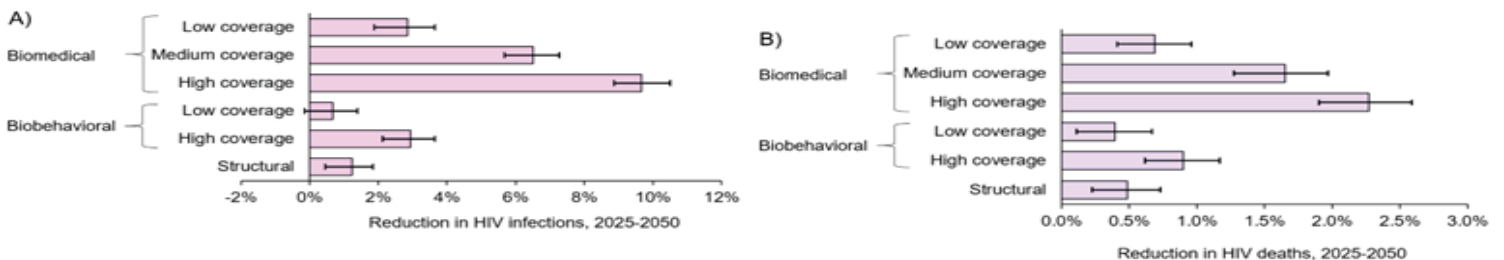


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Recommendations

Building on the study's evidence, an integrated and multi-layered response is essential to mitigate HIV risks associated with disco funerals. These responses should align with Kenya's broader HIV prevention goals while remaining sensitive to the social and cultural significance of these events. The recommendations below outline feasible interventions that combine biomedical, behavioural, and structural strategies, emphasizing collaboration among government agencies, community leaders, and health partners to ensure sustainability and local ownership.

- Integrate PrEP distribution and HIV testing services into funeral-related community outreach programmes in high-prevalence counties.
- Collaborate with local leaders to implement culturally appropriate behaviour-change interventions (condom distribution, alcohol risk education).
- Launch women-centered empowerment initiatives linked to funerals (micro-grants, mentorship, safe transport) to reduce vulnerability.
- Conduct implementation research to assess feasibility, acceptability, and cost-effectiveness of funeral-focused HIV interventions.
- Align interventions with Kenya's national HIV strategy and SDG targets to ensure sustainability.

Conclusion

Disco funerals represent a complex intersection of culture, youth engagement, and public health risk in western Kenya. While they serve vital social and economic functions, the evidence underscores their significant role in sustaining HIV transmission over four decades. Mathematical modelling demonstrates that without targeted interventions, disco funerals will continue to undermine Kenya's progress toward ending HIV/AIDS by 2030.

This study highlights that a combination of biomedical, behavioural, and structural strategies can substantially reduce new HIV infections linked to these events. Integrating PrEP and HIV testing into funeral-related outreach provides the most immediate and measurable impact. Complementary approaches—such as condom promotion, alcohol risk reduction, and community-driven awareness campaigns—can reinforce protective behaviours, while investments in female empowerment address deeper structural vulnerabilities that heighten young women's exposure.

For policy, the priority is not to ban disco funerals but to reshape them into safer spaces through culturally sensitive, community-owned interventions. Coordinated action between government, civil society, and local leaders is essential to normalize HIV prevention within funeral practices. By recognising disco funerals as both cultural assets and public health opportunities, Kenya can safeguard tradition while accelerating progress toward an HIV-free generation.

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High-Risk Factors at Disco Funerals

- Overnight vigils and long-distance travel
- Alcohol and drug consumption
- Transactional and coerced sex
- Multiple sexual partnerships
- Limited supervision of young attendees

Impact of Prevention Strategies (2025-2050)

- Biomedical (PrEP): Could avert 9.7% of projected infections
- Biobehavioural (condoms, reduced partners): Could avert 2.9%
- Structural (female empowerment): Could avert 1.2%

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