Objective
Funded by USAID, the Caribbean HIV/AIDS Alliance (CHAA) and the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) conducted a qualitative study in 2009 to:
• Describe the characteristics of men who self-identify as gay in Barbados;
• Examine the factors that influence their HIV risk;
• Assess the feasibility of implementing Mpowerment (MP).

MP is a community-level evidence-based HIV prevention intervention (EBI) proved effective for gay men in the US and recommended by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. MP core elements include mobilizing men to deliver HIV prevention messages to peers, outreach, community events, and creating safe spaces for personal and community empowerment and development.

Background
Barbados is an island nation in the Caribbean (population of 294,000 as of 2007). MSM are considered at risk for HIV and a priority in the response to HIV/AIDS (Barbados National Strategic Plan for HIV Prevention and Control 2008–2013).

Limited data exist on MSM in the Caribbean and the barriers and facilitators to their adoption of HIV risk reduction behaviors. Homophobia and discrimination towards sexual minorities and MSM are widespread in many areas of the Caribbean. Buggery laws are in place in most of the English-speaking Caribbean, including Barbados, and make sodomy a crime. Buggery laws violate human rights, contribute to stigmatization, and negatively impact HIV prevention programs and access to care and treatment (UNAIDS, 2009).

Caribbean countries are divided on the need to overturn buggery laws. Buggery laws are an enforcement of the colonial era buggery laws and limit the needs of the entire nation to deal with the growing MSM community which has an increased demand for legal protections.

Identified Needs of Gay Men

Societal Level:
• Respect, tolerance, fair treatment, legal protection and the recognition of their rights equal to any other citizen of Barbados.

Individual Level:
• Personal and job-related skills, and self-esteem.

Community Level:
• Further cohesion and more meaningful connections among men.

Gay Life:
An incipient but divided gay community exists in Barbados. Two main groups of self-identified gay men are defined by social class and level of “outness”:
1) “Discreet” “buggies” of higher socio-economic background are mostly closeted because of stigma.
2) “Flamboyant” “ghetto gays” of lower socio-economic background are “out” and, because of their public presentation, exposed to societal homophobia and discrimination.

Few public venues exist for men to socialize as openly gay. Limited data exist on MSM in the Caribbean and the barriers and facilitators to their adoption of HIV risk reduction behaviors. Homophobia and discrimination towards sexual minorities and MSM are widespread in many areas of the Caribbean. Buggery laws are in place in most of the English-speaking Caribbean, including Barbados, and make sodomy a crime. Buggery laws violate human rights, contribute to stigmatization, and negatively impact HIV prevention programs and access to care and treatment (UNAIDS, 2009).

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Methods
Data Collection: A multi-disciplinary team conducted 2 focus groups with 12 gay men and semi-structured interviews with 6 gay men and 9 service providers (N=27). Observations at venues frequented by MSM helped to better understand the environment where gay men socialize.

Data Analysis: Data were audio-recorded and summarized to identify salient themes and to develop preliminary recommendations for adapting and implementing MP.

Results

Gay Life: An incipient but divided gay community exists in Barbados. Two main groups of self-identified gay men are defined by social class and level of “outness”:
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Few public venues exist for men to socialize as openly gay. Large and privately organized parties attract a diversity of gay men, frequented by MSM. Observations at venues frequented by MSM helped to better understand the environment where gay men socialize.

Programmatic Level:
• Develop a pool of gay-friendly health care professionals.

Gay Men have relatively high HIV knowledge. Their HIV risk factors include low self-esteem and lack of condom negotiation skills. Poor health-seeking behaviors, stigma, and mistrust of the health system increase their HIV vulnerability.

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NGOs, including CHAA, conduct prevention activities such as condom distribution, testing promotion, and educational sessions. HIV prevention mainly has targeted the visible “ghetto gays.”

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Society:
• Safe spaces where gay men can express themselves in a different socio-economic levels, such as among professionals.

Programmatic Level:
• Further inclusion and engagement of community representatives for programs and policies to respond to the needs of gay men, PLWH and PLWA.

Programs for the larger society to dispel stigma associated with MSM: No Political Agenda-MSMNPA

Feasibility and Acceptability of MP
MP could expand the reach of current HIV prevention efforts. Gay men found MP acceptable. With appropriate planning, adaptation, recruitment strategies (particularly for the “bougies”), and consultations with gay men and other stakeholders, implementation of MP is feasible. MP could capitalize on gay social networks and existing social activities to create opportunities and spaces for men to talk about HIV prevention, empower them to protect themselves, and shift the cultural and social norms within the gay community regarding safer sex.

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Considering societal homophobia, MP activities need to be developed in the context of social justice and human rights. MP could help create further awareness among gay men regarding their rights and how to better confront instances of stigma.

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Participation of gay men from other Caribbean islands visiting Barbados in MP may influence MSM’s HIV risk behaviors in other Caribbean countries.

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MP will need to consider confidentiality issues for men to feel free to participate and attend spaces they find safe and private.

Conclusions
MP could help men realize their strengths and self-worth and protect themselves from HIV. Implementation of MP in Barbados holds promise for HIV prevention and community mobilization among gay men and MSM. With tailoring, MP may serve as a model for replication in other Caribbean countries.