

UN REPORT: STIGMATIZATION CRIMPING EFFECTIVENESS OF HIV/AIDS PROGRAMS

KUALA LUMPUR, March 19: A maiden study on the impact of Malaysians infected with HIV/AIDS revealed that stigmatization and discrimination is hampering the effectiveness of the country's response to the disease.

The United Nations (UN) study, titled *'Impact of HIV on People Living with HIV (PLHIV), their Families and Community in Malaysia'*, was commissioned to construct a policy-relevant information base and identify factors that can strengthen primary and secondary prevention efforts.

The study takes a look at some of the social processes that influence the spread of HIV/AIDS and represents the first of its kind to document the economic, psychological and social consequences of living with HIV in Malaysia.

The study revealed that:

- PLHIV experienced persistent prejudice and judgmental attitudes at various levels when seeking healthcare, work, aid or emotional support at home that discourages them from accessing treatment, counseling and employment.
- Although moral judgment or societal norms may play a part, the stigma of HIV remains rooted in the fear of contagion among the general public
- Despite various public health campaigns, condom use is poor among men, even among clients of sex workers who may be exposed to high risk of HIV and STIs (Sexually Transmitted Infections).

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- PLHIV with lower socioeconomic resources suffer disproportionately from the impact of HIV compared with those with better resources
- Women with HIV are more likely to lose their jobs compared to men
- There is insufficient attention paid to the psychological effects and trauma of PLHIV, especially for the newly diagnosed, as well as in areas vital to support PLHIV to prevent transmission and enable positive living such as intensive counseling, outreach, after care or follow up and peer support.

According to Dr. Richard Leete, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative for Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, the study's findings support the consensus for a multi-sectoral and coordinated approach to halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS.

"This study sheds light on how far we still have to go to get a grip on the problem. Stigma and discrimination are the major obstacles to effective HIV/AIDS prevention and care.

"Because the impact of living with HIV/AIDS is multidimensional, we have to look at systemic protection programs that will allow PLHIV to come forward to get tested early and to seek treatment, while realizing their rights to employment and to live with dignity.

"There is still much confusion and misconceptions about the disease since the first HIV cases were reported in Malaysia 20 years ago. Many people still fear that they may get infected by sharing utensils or by casual contact with someone who is HIV positive.

The report also pointed to the changing profile of HIV/AIDS in the country, where the proportion of women reported with HIV has increased dramatically in the last decade from 4% of new cases in 1995 to 15% of new cases in 2006.

Surveys show that in 2006, more housewives tested HIV-positive than sex workers. At the same time, the percentage of babies born with HIV has also increased from 0.2% in 1991 to 1.4% in 2006.

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Dr. Leete also said that the changing profile signals the need for a change in the national response.

“Efforts to foster an environment that is inclusive and non-discriminatory must be complemented by programs and policies to promote male responsibility when engaging in sexual activity and other continuous HIV/AIDS education initiatives.

There is a need to scale up resources for community based organizations in order for them to expand their reach to vulnerable groups in society.

“Grassroots initiatives that bring PLHIV and those who are in high risk situations into the fold of their programmes suggest that a bottom-up strategy can be critical in advocating for behaviour change and preventing primary and secondary infection,” he said.

Dr. Leete added that if discrimination and stigmatization persists, PLHIV and vulnerable groups will not disclose their status and participate in programs which can hamper prevention efforts.

According to the report, Malaysia is one of the fastest growing AIDS epidemics in the East Asia and Pacific region with its current rate of HIV infections detected doubling every three years.

As an effort to address stigmatization and heighten public awareness, the UN in partnership with PT Foundation will roll out a two month intensive grassroots and public education campaign themed “Never Give Up, Never Forget”.

The campaign also represents a two pronged strategy to provide a lifeline for people living with HIV (PLHIV) and advocate for behaviour change and safe sex.

To generate public support and urge families to take pro-active action to educate their loved ones about the disease, the campaign will initiate a petition for anti-discrimination against PLHIV, distribute car stickers and reach out to communities with high prevalence and risk of infection.

At the same time, Lite FM will be airing community service messages throughout the campaign while the Body Shop will help to raise funds for PT's programmes via donation boxes at their outlets.

The campaign will culminate with the commemoration of International AIDS Memorial Day on 18 May, observed annually around the world to honour the memory of those lost to the disease.

Note to Editor:

About UNCT: The United Nations (UN) family in Malaysia is represented by the Resident Coordinator (RC) system. The United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in Malaysia is represented by five main UN agencies: UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF and WHO. The UNCT in Malaysia aligns its work to specific objectives in the following areas;

- Support to the national development process: Achieving the MDGs
- National capacity for development effectiveness
- Strengthened efforts on initiatives related to HIV/AIDS, gender equality and human rights
- Strengthened coordination capacity of the UNCT to support the UN reforms

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About PT Foundation: Founded in 1987, PT Foundation is a community-based, voluntary non-profit making organization providing HIV/AIDS education, prevention, care and support programmes for more than 20 years from five marginalized communities such as [drug users](#), [sex workers](#), [maknyah](#), [men who have sex with men \(MSM\)](#) and PLHIV.

In 2006, the organization was a finalist for the International Red Ribbon Award by the Joint United Nations Programme for HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

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