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Discrimination and misinformation impede fight against HIV/Aids

Fighting discrimination, stigma and human rights abuses, and providing accurate information are critical components of an effective response to HIV and AIDS, Amnesty International said today ahead of World AIDS Day on 1 December. "The commitments made at the UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS in 2001 remain unfulfilled," it added, "and some countries have impeded effective prevention. Action is needed to protect lives."

Amnesty International criticized conflicting messages from influential leaders that will make it harder for people to get the full and accurate information necessary to prevent the spread of HIV infection and mitigate its impact. The organization cited the comment in October 2003 of a senior cardinal from the Vatican, that HIV can pass through condoms.

"Medical scientists and public health professionals overwhelmingly state that condoms are an effective and necessary method of preventing HIV transmission. Nevertheless the cardinal's statement reflects the Vatican's policy against condom use in all circumstances, a policy which conflicts with scientific knowledge and which places lives at risk," said Amnesty International.

Impartial, full and accurate information, in appropriate languages and dialects, on HIV and AIDS is vital - both to ensure that individuals can take steps to protect themselves and to overcome the climate of fear and exclusion. This is particularly important, because many of those at risk of HIV infection and in need of care come from already marginalised sectors of society. Women are particularly vulnerable to HIV because of the difficulties they face in obtaining accurate information, in negotiating safe sex and because of the high levels of violence to which they are often subjected.

"We are very concerned by government policies which jeopardize or damage women's health," said Amnesty International.

A policy reintroduced in 2001 by the US government, the Mexico City policy (known unofficially as the "global gag rule"), bars government funding to groups which practice, advocate or just mention abortion, even if this is a small part of their overall message and work.

"This policy effectively silences foreign non-governmental health and advocacy organizations. The prohibition of funding for organizations working in women's reproductive health can have a serious impact on work against HIV/AIDS," said Amnesty International.

In some cases, governments actively try to stop the free dissemination of life-saving information on HIV/AIDS. Health workers working on HIV/AIDS have been harassed, as in India, or even detained as in China.

In April 2003 Ma Shiwen, from the health department in Henan province in China, was arrested on suspicion of "leaking state secrets". The "secrets" turned out to be details of the high levels of HIV infection in Henan province caused by contaminated blood supplies arising from poor blood collection practices. Ma Shiwen was released on 16 October 2003 without being tried but his current situation remains unclear.

"The prosecution of health workers for revealing information about HIV is a violation of freedom of expression and incompatible with the right to health," said Amnesty International. "It reveals the pressure to which health workers are exposed in doing their job, trying to save lives."

Discrimination, stigma and human rights abuses are intertwined and impact on effective action against the virus, the organization continued. "Individuals who fear stigma or the threat of discrimination are less likely to seek testing or health care."

"Uganda and Brazil have shown that, even in resource-poor countries, by showing political will, by speaking clearly and accurately on AIDS and by taking prompt action on medication, it is possible to limit the expansion of the pandemic," said the organization.

The right of people to life-saving treatment remains a battle to be fought and won in the face of competing economic priorities and negotiations with international financial institutions and pharmaceutical companies.

Amnesty International is calling on governments to take prompt action to ensure that law and policy counter discrimination, stigma and the neglect of human rights in the context of HIV/AIDS. "This is a battle to which governments must contribute commitment as well as money," said Amnesty International. "Stigma and discrimination must be tackled by implementing and enforcing effective laws. The cost of not doing so will be measured in human lives, millions are at risk."

Today we publish a feature on HIV/Aids on news.amnesty.org - with reports, interviews and statistics.

Background

International human rights norms prohibit discrimination and guarantee the right to information and health among other rights. Governments have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil these rights.

Uganda has one of the lowest HIV growth rates in sub-Saharan Africa. This is a result of government policy to encourage the distribution and promotion of condoms, counselling, advice on safer sex, delayed first intercourse, and fewer sex partners. Young people were encouraged to use condoms as a preventive measure.

Brazil has one of the highest rates for the delivery of free anti-retroviral medication in the world, dramatically reducing hospitalisation rates and raising the level of health of people living with HIV. One effect of this has been to reduce the stigma of living with the virus.

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