

Beenish ASIF

Using Art to Encourage Faith-based Discussions about HIV and AIDS

“Some pastors talked about HIV/AIDS, or at least about the global poster competition from the pulpit, which is a step forward in a hitherto ‘silent’ Church.” These words from a Christian in India could have come from many other countries in the world. People find it difficult to begin discussing HIV and AIDS — especially, it seems, in the faith community, where talk of sex and drugs carries immediate social judgment. Yet the silence, and the stigma and discrimination such silence allows to flourish, hinders people with HIV from seeking the help and support they need, and crushes efforts to educate communities to prevent the spread of the disease.

Stigma and Discrimination

Pakistan is a country rich in tradition, culture and taboos. The rich can afford to shop at some of the world’s most expensive stores in London and Paris while the poor are so poor that they often go to bed on a hungry stomach. Regardless of the fact whether they are rich or poor, people are mostly very rigid towards their traditions and hold strong and staunch opinions about certain taboo topics. Their opinions are so deeply rooted that it is almost impossible to break through them. One such topic is HIV and AIDS.

Seeking a way through the fear and silence at the grassroots level, the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA), a global network of eighty-six churches and church-related organisations, designed a global poster competition against HIV- and AIDS-related stigma and discrimination. The posters were displayed nationally, and national judging panels selected winning posters to be displayed at an exhibition opened at the United Nations (UN) on World AIDS Day 2003.

Through the competition, local groups were encouraged to discuss basic facts and attitudes towards HIV and AIDS and then create posters with messages of

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hope and compassion. The Church World Service (CWS) in Pakistan and Afghanistan actively participated in this competition and represented Pakistan on the global forum.

Means of Transmission

But in Pakistan, before we talk about “stigma and discrimination,” we have to work hard to provide basic knowledge about HIV and AIDS. Nobody wants to hear about it. No one wants to talk about it. Somehow we think if we ignore the issue for long, it will disappear. However, ignorance is hardly a solution to a problem of such global magnitude.

One truth we want to ignore is that the sex industry is a thriving business. Each year many young girls and boys enter it, some because they have financial hardships and others because they need extra money. It is easy money to make. Yet they have no idea what they expose themselves to, nor are they aware of the consequences they might have to face.

In thinking about HIV and AIDS, we tend to focus all our energies towards this one mode of transmission. We hardly ever focus on other ways this disease is spread. Even our health practitioners are not aware of all the means of transmission. A study in Pakistan showed that 63% of health practitioners and 35% of hospital doctors were not aware that the virus can be transmitted from a mother to her unborn child. Estimates also show that 40% of the one and a half million annual blood transfusions are not screened for HIV.

Lack of Awareness

We also have about five million drug addicts. Pakistan has one of the highest annual ratios of injection per capita in the world and studies indicate that 94% of the administered injections are via re-used injection equipment. Then there are also a large number of men who live abroad for their employment. While living abroad they are prone to visit sex workers and are at a risk of getting the infection. Subsequently, they expose their wives back home on their trips to visit their families.

With such risky behaviour and general lack of awareness amongst all segments of the society, how can we choose not to talk and discuss about the issue openly? Some people might argue that the government is talking about the issue and that the National AIDS Control Program is doing a good job. And certainly now all people know about a disease called HIV and AIDS. But about how it is spread, whether or not there is a cure, and how to prevent it — people do not have the slightest clue.

Somehow, whenever the words HIV and AIDS pop up, it is always associated with sex and only with sex. In our society, where sex is a major taboo issue, people choose to stay away from the topic of HIV and AIDS, too. The biggest myth is that if someone has HIV or AIDS it is because of her or his own wrongdoings. People are completely ignorant of the fact that a person can contract this disease out of no fault of her or his own.

Silence Is Not a Solution

Silence is not a solution; it allows the disease to spread and cause more suffering to individuals, families and communities. Other countries have accepted that HIV and AIDS are not moral diseases, but in reality major health issues. People and governments in other countries are aware that this disease is staring them hard in the face and immediate steps need to be taken to combat its spread.

In an evaluation workshop with some of the poster winners and representatives of national organising committees, Albert MOMOH, from Sierra Leone, told us that when the poster competition was brought to his country, he approached the government. The government was thrilled at this idea of creating a poster campaign against stigma and discrimination and gave its full support to the project.

It turned into a national event that was welcome by the people, too. Albert said that Africa is the worst hit from this disease, but people are now united in their fight against this disease and are taking all steps to prevent its spread any further.

A Need for Acceptance

Kari TUHKANEN, an HIV-positive person himself, came from Finland. In a population of five million, there are “only” about 1200 HIV-infected people, but the government is all too aware of how easy it is for this disease to spread and is fast gearing its national campaign to combat the issue.

Kari showed us a postcard with himself and the president of Finland, along with other people, all raising their voice for awareness of this disease. He reported that posters are pasted in all the major public areas across Finland so people understand that the more we learn and speak about this issue, the better.

People are awakening to realise that HIV- and AIDS-infected patients need not only money and medicine, but also acceptance. They need to be accepted as part of society and need care, love, support and compassion. It is wrong to label them as immoral people and discriminate against them on the basis of their health condition.

I strongly believe that we do not need campaigns that just mention the word HIV and AIDS and simply fly through the whole issue, skipping it as if only the word was important and not the actual issue. We need to address and confront the issue boldly and openly. Our cultural and societal norms make this a challenge. But what option do we have? In too many countries, silence lets the disease creep up and become a major killer. We cannot allow this to happen in Pakistan, or anywhere else in the world.

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Utiliser l'art pour encourager des discussions basées sur la foi, à propos du VIH/SIDA

Les gens trouvent difficile d'engager une discussion sur le VIH/SIDA – spécialement, cela se vit dans la communauté de foi où parler de sexe et des drogues, s'accompagne d'immédiat jugement social. Encore le silence, la stigmatisation et la discrimination se développent et entravent les personnes vivant avec le VIH dans la recherche de l'aide et du soutien dont elles ont besoin, et compromettent les efforts d'éduquer des communautés pour prévenir l'expansion de la maladie. Dans un effort de briser la peur et le silence, l'*Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance* (EAA), un réseau global de quatre vingt-six Eglises et organisations d'églises a élaboré un poster géant de lutte globale contre le VIH et la discrimination et stigmatisation liées au SIDA. A travers la lutte, des groupes locaux étaient encouragés de discuter sur les faits concrets et les attitudes envers le VIH et le SIDA pas superficiellement, mais intensément et ouvertement, pour avertir que le silence n'est pas une solution et qu'ignorer la question seulement, perpétue cela.

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Usando el arte para promover debates desde la fe sobre el VIH y el SIDA

A las personas les cuesta trabajo comenzar a hablar sobre el VIH y el SIDA – especialmente en la comunidad de fe, donde hablar de sexo o drogas conlleva una inmediata condena social. Sin embargo el silencio, y el estigma y la discriminación que tal silencio permite que afloren, impiden que las personas con VIH busquen la ayuda y el apoyo que necesitan, y aplasta los esfuerzos para educar comunidades en la prevención de la propagación de la enfermedad. En un esfuerzo por romper el miedo y el silencio, la Alianza Ecuémica de Apoyo (EAA en inglés), una red mundial de ochenta y seis iglesias y organizaciones eclesiales, idearon una competencia global para la creación de un afiche contra el estigma y la discriminación del VIH y el SIDA. A través de la competencia los grupos locales se vieron estimulados a discutir sobre simples hechos y actitudes hacia el VIH y el SIDA, para luego crear los afiches con mensajes de compasión y esperanza. De esta forma, los pueblos y los gobiernos alrededor de todo el mundo, fueron forzados a enfrentar el problema del VIH y el SIDA no ya de manera superficial, sino abierta y valientemente, reconociendo que el silencio no es una solución, y que ignorar el asunto sólo sirve para perpetuarlo.