

NAMIO VIS-À-VIS RELIGIOUS LEADERS DIALOGUE ON HIV/AIDS STIGMA, TABOO AND DISCRIMINATION

Date: 27th February, 2010

Venue: Juliana Kerk, Den Haag

An important consideration in the effective HIV/AIDS response is fighting stigma, taboo and discrimination against People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). It is widely known and argued that the fear of being discriminated after disclosure of one's positive HIV/AIDS status is strongly associated with the silence and denial attitude which has stifled voluntary testing and early treatment, thereby compromising the HIV/AIDS prevention effort. It is for this reason that the National Association of Migrant Organizations against HIV/AIDS/STIs in the Netherlands (NAMIO) initiated in collaboration with the Europe Harvest Mission (EHM) Church and Stichting GobeZ, both in Den Haag, to jointly organize a one day awareness and information sharing event on the 27th February, 2010 to address the issues.

Among the over 30 participants that attended the conference was the Counselor (Wethouder) for Health and Sport for the Den Haag municipality, Mr. Bert van Alphen who expressed his delight for such a laudable initiative and pledged his total support. The conference which was aimed at assessing the position of the migrant churches regarding the issues of sexual health as well as draw the attention of religious leaders to the urgent need to open up to their congregants about the situation of HIV/AIDS within the migrant communities in the Netherlands has as theme "***The role of the Church in the fight against HIV/AIDS, stigma and taboo within the migrant communities in the Netherlands.***" It is worth while noting that some church leaders still openly declare that HIV/AIDS is God's punishment to sinners who have not lived up to God's behavioural norms as prescribed in the Bible. Statements like these have forced even the most faithful HIV positive Christians and their families to go underground for fear of discrimination and isolation. Such inflammatory statements also scared many people from seeking voluntary counseling and testing for HIV for fear of being labelled as 'sinner' and discriminated against by other church members.

More importantly, the church is supposed to be a psycho-social safety net for many people escaping societal pressure and seeking faith and consolation. Such help seeking people in the church do not deserve to be isolated by unfriendly words from church leaders. That is why this dialogue with the church leaders is considered of crucial importance, especially in the wake of rising HIV crisis among Christian faithful.

Opening the meeting, the Chairlady of NAMIO Mrs. Jenny van Eijma, the Chairlady of Stichting Gobeze Mrs. Haimanot Belay and the representative of the Europe Harvest Mission Church Mrs. Sandra Shuchez, each took turns to welcome the participants and thanks the religious leaders present for accepting the invitation to discuss the sensitive issues of HIV/AIDS which is still considered by some church leaders ‘*a no go area*’. The conference intended to achieve the following objectives:

- To stimulate an effective discussion and debate regarding the churches’ role in redressing stigma and discrimination against PLWHA
- To find common grounds between health professionals and religious leaders in handling HIV/AIDS matters and sexual health of young migrants in the Netherlands
- To facilitate the exchange of knowledge and expertise and stimulating network formation between religious leaders and health experts.

Key questions to be addressed by the religious leaders were:

- How does the church see/understand the problem of stigma and discrimination against PLWHA and what are they doing about it?
- What is the church doing to comfort and care for victims of discrimination for their HIV/AIDS status in order to break taboo and limit discrimination?
- What other option(s) has the church got to limit the spread of HIV and STIs within the migrant community, given that condoms use is out of question for the church and the message of abstinence much applauded by the church is far from being effective.

These questions were supposed to be posed directly to the key church leaders, some of whom unfortunately were unable to attend the event due to different obligations.

Panel discussions

Facilitating the discussions, the Chairlady of NAMIO introduced a panellist of three personalities composed of religious and health experts to answer questions from the participants and also state their position regarding the role the church can play in tackling stigma and discrimination against PLWHA as well as discuss realistic and feasible prevention measures. Sitting on the panel were: a religious leader who is also involved in HIV/AIDS care work Dhr. Herman Van Dorp of stichting Mara, a Religious elder who is a mother and a former health worker in Nigeria Mrs. Ngozi Nwosu and a health expert Nurse on HIV/AIDS at the GGD Den Haag Dhr. Sieds Wildenbeest.

Discrimination against People Living with HIV/AIDS

On the question on whether is it right to discriminate against PLWHA, every one disagree, but maintained that the discrimination is often spontaneous and is driven by fear which is due to ignorant about HIV transmission, prevention and treatment. Many people, especially within the migrant community and of course some religious leaders still do not know how HIV is transmitted and are quick to assume that by associating with PLWHA, one can also get it. The discrimination has prevented PLWHA from opening up about their HIV status for fear of being isolated by family members, friends and the community. Because people are not talking about it, prevention efforts have been stifled leading to increasing new HIV infections, especially among the young people of sexually active age group.

Condom use as a prevention method

The debate on using condoms as the prevention method among young people of migrant origin was intense as views were diverse regarding the moral context of it. While some claimed that distributing condoms to 13, 14, 15 and 16 years old children is explicitly promoting sexual promiscuity, others believed that it serves the child in times of need to protect him/herself from contracting a sexually transmitted disease (STI) including HIV. While opponents of the condoms use among the youth are of the opinion that abstinence and parental counseling is key in reducing the spread of STIs including HIV, proponents of the condoms use among youths think that it is a necessary 'evil' in the face of temptation to have sex considering the high level of exposure of today's young people to the media which carries explicit sexual adverts that could easily stimulate the young people into try out.

During the discussions, the issue of abstinence until marriage was raised by one of the panelists as the most effective ways of preventing HIV infections. But how realistic this method really is became a sticking point as most of the participants question if this method is actually the answer. *Sex, as some participants emphasized, is as important as food and to assume that abstinence is the solution is not realistic.* When asked what will be the need of abstaining and just to later realize that the very first person you fall in love with was never abstaining and has infected you with HIV, the responses were mixed and complicated. It became even more complicated when it was argued that, even in marriages and stable relationships, unfaithful partners can still bring home STP's or HIV. These complications further re-emphasize the need to break the silence about HIV/AIDS at all levels by effectively tackling stigma and discrimination.

During the course of the dialogue a young girl (Hewot) originally from Ethiopia presented a heart breaking charity song which was sang by a group of Ethiopian artists at the OAU in Addis Abeba:

Song title: Melabelu (look for a means please!)

Song texts:

People, why the silence,...look for a wisdom (a means)!
Against HIV/AIDS!

It has crossed the boarder;
It has entered our villages;
We are silent when it entered into our homes/lives.

Why should we die due to our love affairs?
It is devastating mankind ...
Shielding its armament around our hearts.

Rise up and let us find a wisdom/a means;
Why are we careless?
Let us be wise and careful for our lives (for humanity).

People of the world, stop the silence!
Find out a means to stop this problem.

Heroism is not only by military fight;
Let us be equipped with the weapons against HIV/AIDS
To sustain our lives;

Let us reverse the devastation due to HIV/AIDS;
To be safe today and remain free/alive afterwards.

In conclusion, while everyone was unanimous in agreeing that discriminating against PLWHA, especially if it is promoted by the church is wrong, the views regarding the distribution and use of condoms by young people were diverse. But they all agree on one thing which is that of encouraging responsible sexual behavior among young migrants in the Netherlands, be it with or without condoms. The role of parents was particularly emphasized as crucial in educating their children on best sexual and reproductive health and rights practices, especially in the age of media influence on the youth lifestyle.

At the end of the gathering a Manifesto was signed by all the participants declaring that “The prevention of STIs, including HIV/AIDS especially within the migrant communities should be focused on breaking stigma and taboo to eliminate discrimination against PLWHA, stimulating and

fostering discussions and dialogue among the community and religious leaders. Religious leaders must play a key role in this process as they occupy an influential position to do so.

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