

World AIDS Day: December 1, 2019

Another World AIDS Day is here and the theme for this year's is "*Communities make the difference*".

HIV/AIDS status of populations around the world is steadily improving over the years, especially with the advances in the diagnosis and treatment, but it is still a disease of great concern. Globally, 38 million people were living with HIV at the end of 2018. According to UNAIDS estimates around 1% of adults aged 15–49 years worldwide are living with HIV, although the burden of the epidemic continues to vary considerably between countries and regions. The vast majority of people with HIV are in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In 2018, there were 20.6 million people with HIV (57%) in eastern and southern Africa, 5.0 million (13%) in western and central Africa, 5.9 million (16%) in Asia and the Pacific, and 2.2 million (6%) in Western and Central Europe and North America.

The term HIV care continuum refers to the sequence of steps a person with HIV takes from diagnosis through receiving treatment until his or her viral load is suppressed to undetectable levels. Each step in the continuum is marked by an assessment of the number of people who have reached that stage.

The stages are: being diagnosed with HIV; being linked to medical care; starting ART; adhering to the treatment regimen; and, finally, having HIV suppressed to undetectable levels in the blood. UNAIDS's 90-90-90 goals set as targets that by 2020, 90% of all people with HIV will know their HIV status, 90% of all people who know their status will be on ART, and 90% of all people receiving ART will have viral suppression. Tracking progress toward those goals, UNAIDS reports that in 2018, of all people with HIV worldwide; 79% knew their HIV status; 78% of all people who knew their status were accessing ART; and 86% of all people receiving ART had viral suppression. Targets are not likely to be reached, especially in many LMICs where the prevalence of the disease is much higher, these targets are far from being met. UNAIDS cautions that the pace of progress in reducing new HIV infections, increasing access to treatment, and ending AIDS-related deaths is slowing down, with some countries making impressive gains while others are experiencing rises in new HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths. AIDS-related deaths have been reduced by more than 55% since the peak in 2004. In 2018, around 770,000 people died from AIDS-related illnesses worldwide, compared to 1.2 million in 2010 and 1.7 million in 2004

UNAIDS targets, although essential, is about direct assault on the disease. Attention needs to be drawn on indirect attack on the disease at **primary health care**, i.e. at community level. It is encouraging to note that this year's theme signifies that. We have known indirect causes of HIV spread for sometime now and a number of initiatives are being addressed, although without the focus on Universal Health Coverage.

STI prevention and control has widespread public health benefits. Left untreated, some sexually transmitted infections (STIs) increase the risk of HIV transmission during unprotected sexual

contact and lead to complications, such as pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), infertility, ectopic pregnancy, miscarriage, fetal death and congenital infections. Estimated STI-related mortality includes 200 000 fetal and neonatal deaths each year due to syphilis in pregnancy and over 280 000 cervical cancer deaths each year due to HPV. [1] In 2018, 1% or more of antenatal care attendees in 36 of 80 reporting countries were diagnosed with syphilis. Syphilis in pregnancy is the second leading cause of stillbirth globally, and also results in prematurity, low birthweight, neonatal death, and infections in newborns. These adverse outcomes can be prevented with a simple and inexpensive rapid test followed by treatment with benzathine penicillin. All pregnant women must receive STI testing, including HIV/AIDS, at first contact with health services.

Mother-to-Child Transmission: In 2018, 92% of pregnant women with HIV received ART to prevent transmitting HIV to their babies during pregnancy and childbirth and to protect their own health. This is compared to 49% in 2010, a tremendous achievement. However, all pregnant women must take a test and know their status to prevent transmission. Antenatal care should be universal and every pregnant woman must be offered HIV testing with counselling along with syphilis testing.

Health Education and Awareness: Despite advances in our scientific understanding of HIV and its prevention and treatment as well as years of significant effort by the global health community and leading government and civil society organizations, too many people with HIV or at risk for HIV still do not have access to prevention, care, and treatment, and there is still no cure. Further, the HIV epidemic not only affects the health of individuals, it also impacts households, communities, and the development and economic growth of nations. Some schools, colleges, universities and work places incorporate awareness and education on HIV/AIDS, but shouldn't it be mandatory for all public places? Moreover, in places where we treat and care for illnesses, health education is seldom mandatory. Primary health centers must consider it their responsibility to engage outpatient and inpatient in regular health awareness programmes.

Sex workers and their clients: UNAIDS define sex workers as. "Female, male and transgender adults and young people who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, either regularly or occasionally". Sex work varies between and within countries and communities. Sex work may vary in the degree to which it is more or less "formal" or organised, and in the degree to which it is distinct from other social and sexual relationships and types of sexual economic exchange". [2] Sex workers are 13 times more at risk of HIV compared with the general population, due to an increased likelihood of being economically vulnerable, unable to negotiate consistent condom use, and experiencing violence, criminalisation and marginalisation. Some large development project have demonstrated implementation of effective control programmes, taking the responsibility of construction workers and the neighboring sex workers. [3] Where HIV prevention programmes are available they are generally well received, however sex workers often face many barriers in accessing them. HIV prevention services that are sex-worker led and community based are proven to be most effective when they address the legal and social barriers that affect sex workers. Although sex workers are one of the groups most affected by HIV, they are also one of the groups most likely to respond well to HIV prevention programmes. Proof of this can be seen in countries such as Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, India and

Thailand, where reductions in national HIV prevalence have been helped by initiatives targeting sex workers and their clients.[\[4\]](#)

Status of Women: Finally, it boils down to how society treats its women. It starts with even before pregnancy and how it continues throughout life, even to the old age. Higher undernutrition among girls, opportunities provided to them in education and development, at home or workplace, all determine the vulnerability of women in society. From most powerful men to the men in remote and rural communities, men see women as a commodity and are instrumental in their inability to think for themselves. Focus on men and their ability to understand that equality is to their advantage is the only way forward. The process must start from home where parents treat both boys and girls as equals.

See also some of the awareness and education activities illustrated below from different programmes:

References:

- [\[1\]](#) WHO Report on global sexually transmitted infection surveillance 2018
- [\[2\]](#) UNAIDS. UNAIDS Guidance notes on HIV and Sex Work. 2012.
- [\[3\]](#) This website: Large development projects. June 29, 2019. (Under old Items)
- [\[4\]](#) UNAIDS. Miles to go: closing gaps, breaking barriers, fighting injustices. 2018.