

Stigma and discrimination and HIV/AIDS

What is stigma and discrimination?

Stigma is a social label that alters the way individuals view themselves and are viewed by others. People who are stigmatised are usually considered deviant or shameful and as a result are being avoided and rejected. Stigma is a process of devaluation of people living with or associated with HIV/AIDS and of marking boundaries between 'normal people' and 'outsiders', between 'them' and 'us'. Discrimination follows stigma and is the unfair and unjust treatment of an individual or group based on real or perceived HIV status.

What causes stigma?

- Stigma in HIV and AIDS is interlinked with social and personal views, beliefs, fears and taboos around drugs, sex and death. Attitudes and moral judgements shape how communities view people living with HIV and AIDS.
- The knowledge that HIV can be transmitted sexually causes an association of HIV with socially "improper" sex and perceived immoral behavior (sex with more than one partner, sex with same sex partners, anal sex, sex with sex workers).
- Similarly, intravenous drug use is seen as culturally unacceptable behaviour, and infected drug users are regarded as having brought the infection on themselves.
- The most important factor causing stigma is incorrect knowledge and understanding about HIV and AIDS (such as the difference between HIV and AIDS, the fact that opportunistic infections can be treated and cured). Thus, HIV and AIDS are equated with immediate death and this fear perpetuates beliefs in casual transmission and hence avoidance of

those living with HIV and AIDS or anything at all connected to them. Cultural perceptions of disease can further add to these fears (witchcraft, sex with 'polluted' partners, perceptions of hygiene and contagiousness of all bodily fluids).

- HIV and AIDS are considered taboo subjects in many countries and as a consequence there is a silence surrounding the subject and leaders as well as policy makers are avoiding to discuss it publicly or to develop policies addressing HIV/AIDS.
- Stigma is not only discrimination expressed by individuals, but a social phenomenon which builds on and strengthens existing differences and is used by dominant groups to legitimize and perpetuate inequalities such as those based on gender, age, sexual orientation, class, race or ethnicity.
- Where AIDS is seen as a punishment for sins there is a strong likelihood that stigma will happen. In some cases badly informed political and religious leadership may contribute to this misconception and therefore to increased stigma.

What are manifestations of stigma?

Stigma is happening at every level of society.

- At individual level people who disclose their status or are perceived to be infected, face physical and social isolation from their family. Often they are chased out of the house or kept isolated in a separate place. They are blamed to bring disgrace to the family.
- Women are blamed more than men, automatically considered to be prostitutes and the source of infection.
- At household/family level, stigma is experienced by family members and especially children, who are avoided

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because of their close association with an infected person.

- At community level, stigma may lead to expulsion from school, community organizations or public functions.
- Within the health care setting, stigma is particularly severe. Often also based on incomplete knowledge and fear for transmission, health workers are found to deny treatment and care, to breach confidentiality, to test without consent, and to use excessive precautions.
- Similarly, stigma in the workplace can lead to job loss, degradation, and isolation at work.

Consequences of stigma

- Stigma has a negative impact on the well being of a HIV positive person and leads to stress and depression which precipitate death.
- Fear of stigma and discrimination prevents people to get tested, to adopt behaviors that prevent infection of others, to disclose their status or to seek treatment. Thus a cycle of continued transmission is created.
- The health and care of infected persons is negatively influenced by fear of stigma by (family) care givers, by the stigmatizing attitudes in health services and by denial of treatment.
- Even in places where anti-retroviral treatment is available (and free), people are seen to avoid treatment because of stigma.
- Stigma affects adherence because people do not want to be seen to take their drugs in public. This eventually may lead to individual drug resistance and to resistant HIV strains.
- Stigma is perpetuated because it prevents people from being open about being infected and this in turn leads to the continued perception that HIV and AIDS are the same and the

cause of immediate death.

- People are prevented from living as long as possible in order to continue to leading productive lives (thus affecting the economy) and being caring parents (thus affecting the next generation).
- Stigma, causing unemployment, can lead to increased risk behavior for survival (commercial sex, migration) increasing spread of the epidemic.

HIV related stigma and human rights

The Human Rights framework provides access to existing procedural, institutional and other monitoring mechanisms to enforce the rights of PLWHA and for countering discriminatory action. Human rights related to stigma include: the right to non-discrimination and equality before the law, human rights of women, human rights of children, the right to privacy, the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, the right to education and the right to work (see fact sheet 7).

Strategies to address stigma

Because stigma is manifested at multiple levels (individual, social and policy), a multi-pronged approach is needed:

- Improve knowledge and understanding of HIV and AIDS at all levels through a variety of mechanisms
- Involve PLWHA in strategy development and implementation
- Use participatory approaches to mobilize communities for prevention, care, support and mitigation of impact promoting multi-sectoral partnerships
- Ensure codes of ethics and professional conduct in health care settings, provide VCT
- Advocate for development of stigma reducing policies and legislation with government, to break the silence around AIDS and create a more open society that is free from stigma and

discrimination.