

STIGMA BIGGEST HURDLE TO AIDS PREVENTION IN SOUTH ASIA

Satellite session at XV International AIDS Conference on critical themes for AIDS in South Asia

Bangkok, 13 July 2004 – Stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and gender inequality remain the two biggest challenges to AIDS prevention in South Asia, according to experts. A satellite session at the XV International AIDS Conference today reviewed the progress made and challenges in mounting an effective AIDS response in South Asia.

“In South Asia, women are more vulnerable both socially and economically,” said Dr Nafis Sadik, Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for HIV/AIDS in Asia and Pacific, and Chair of the satellite session. “They have less opportunity to protect themselves.

Organized by the UNAIDS South Asian Intercountry Team and South Asia’s Theme Group on HIV/AIDS, the session brings together AIDS activists, researchers and programme managers from around the world.

“There are two epidemics spreading – AIDS, and the stigma against people living with HIV,” said Mr. Zahir Uddin Swapon, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Group on HIV/AIDS and Member of Parliament in Bangladesh. “People stigmatise due to fear stemming from ignorance,” he said. Protecting the rights of people living with HIV, partnering with health and education sectors to counter stigma, amending laws that criminalise marginalised groups who are vulnerable to HIV, must become priority areas to strengthen the AIDS response.

AIDS experts point out that low condom use in South Asia is a major hurdle in AIDS prevention. Indicators suggest a close link between the poor status of women due to patriarchy and their vulnerability to HIV. Poverty, discrimination against women, and violence against women and girls are fuelling the epidemic. “The needs of vulnerable groups, including women and young people, continue to be neglected throughout Asia,” added Ms Kathleen Cravero, Deputy Executive Director of UNAIDS, who spoke at the session. “Until women and girls have equal access to effective HIV prevention and treatment services, there is little hope to beat the epidemic.”

India has the largest number of people living with HIV outside South Africa — an estimated 5.1 million in 2003. Though national HIV prevalence is low -- between 0.4% and 1.3% -- a closer focus reveals that there are serious epidemics in a number of territories and states. Elsewhere in South Asia, increasingly there are warning signs of serious HIV outbreaks. In some areas, injecting drug use and sex

work are so pervasive that even low-prevalence countries could see epidemics surge suddenly. "It is a myth that the social fabric and culture of South Asia will give it immunity to the AIDS epidemic," warned Dr Sadik.

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