

Suresh's life came to a standstill when he learnt of his HIV+ status three years back. A well educated young man in his early thirties, Suresh had a well-paying corporate job in New Delhi, India. He was married and had the dreams and aspirations of any young man his age. Life was good and he had a great future ahead--till one day when he fell ill and was diagnosed with TB. He was shocked when further investigations revealed he was HIV positive.

"How could this happen to me?" he despaired. "I could not believe the test result. All my dreams were shattered in a second. What would I tell my wife, my parents, younger sister....What if my wife was also infected?"

Counseling and further information on HIV/AIDS helped Suresh come to terms with his status. With treatment, he realized life could be prolonged substantially and he could lead a normal productive life.

He mustered up enough courage to break the news to his wife. She took it calmly and was reassuring. Together they went for counseling. She was advised to undergo a test. To their relief the result was negative. However, it was not so easy with the rest of his family. "I would be lying if I said that I did not feel any change in their behaviour", he confessed. His parents advised him not to disclose his status for fear that it might affect the marriage prospects of his younger sister for having a brother with HIV+.

In his workplace discrimination was palpable once his HIV positive status was disclosed. His colleagues started avoiding him. His supervisor started harassing him, "finding fault with my work, though I was still the same good worker". Though he was not fired, difficult conditions were created, leaving him no choice but to resign from his job. Without a job, he was totally dependent on his parents and wife's support for some time.

Suresh's counsellor put him in touch with a network of people living with HIV (PLHIV). The ILO has facilitated the setting up of networks of PLHIV in several states in India. Supported by the U.S. Department of Labour, the ILO project: "Prevention of HIV/AIDS in the World of Work: A Tripartite Response" has been operational in India since 2001. The three-phased programme works closely with the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MOLE), National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), Employers' and Workers' Organizations, UNAIDS and PLHIV. The programme primarily aims at putting in place a sustainable national programme on HIV/AIDS in the world of work in India.

The MOLE developed a National Policy on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work. Indian employers and central trade unions developed their joint statement of commitment on HIV/AIDS.

"The national policy is based on the ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS," says S. Mohammad Afsar, ILO Technical Specialist and National Programme Coordinator in Delhi. The ILO has also developed training and communication tools and programmes for HIV/AIDS interventions in the world of work. The project has collaborated with a number of enterprises, both public and private, to help them develop workplace policy and programmes aimed at prevention of HIV/AIDS and related issues.

The ILO's approach of supporting the setting up of networks of PLHIV and engaging them in advocacy has been very useful, both for the programme as well as for PLHIV like Suresh. Coming into the network, Suresh found many others like him living a life of dignity. Suresh now works in one of the networks and leads a productive life. Like other members, he participates in advocacy sessions organized by ILO at different workplaces.

PLHIV members received training from ILO on workplace advocacy. They regularly participate in advocacy sessions and share their life stories of discrimination they have faced from families, from hospitals, from employers, from colleagues and friends. "This has had a huge impact in changing attitudes and bringing stakeholders to come out of denial. They became convinced that PLHIV can lead a normal productive life. This resulted in development of workplace policies and programmes," says Afsar.

From deep despair to firm determination, life has come full circle for Suresh with his resolve not only to lead a normal and productive life himself but also help others build theirs.