

*Disability inclusion - good for business "In 1997 in the wake of the economic crisis, I decided I had to return to work on a cruise line because my business was not making money and I was finding it impossible to make ends meet. I went through the usual process: had a medical exam, an AIDS test and prepared to leave. But this time I was told I was HIV-positive and could not go. This was an incredible shock. I never thought I could have HIV and now I realized there would be no chance to return to the ship. I also had to face another reality. I was not only out of work, I was going to die. I finally found my way to a doctor. He examined me and said I would be fine and could lead a normal life and continue to work. I wondered then and still wonder today, why I was denied the chance to work.*

*Juharto Mohammad, Jakarta, Indonesia*

Stigma and discrimination due to real or perceived HIV status imposes significant burdens on individuals in Asia and the Pacific. Sadly, they have been present in our societies for centuries, although HIV stigma and discrimination are not well understood. On World AIDS Day (1 December), we are given an opportunity to hear the voice of those living with HIV and AIDS and to reflect upon the journey towards a world with decent work for all.

Stigma and discrimination related to HIV are expressed in different ways around the world, from shameless acts of violence against people with HIV, limitations on international travel and migration, compulsory notification of AIDS cases, mandatory or coerced screening of job applicants, inequitable access to health services or the inequitable practices of health insurers.

In Asia and the Pacific, HIV-related stigma and discrimination in the workplace is pervasive. UNAIDS supported People Living with HIV/AIDS Stigma Index surveys carried out in 2009 in Bangladesh, China, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand among people living with HIV, found that:

20 per cent of respondents had been HIV tested during recruitment processes.

12 per cent reported being denied employment due to HIV stigma and discrimination.

41 per cent said their work duties had been changed as a direct consequence of their HIV/AIDS status

9 per cent report having been denied promotion.

22 per cent have had their HIV status revealed without their consent.

30 per cent reported being fired because of their HIV status.

Stigma and discrimination reinforce the silence and fear around HIV/AIDS and are often driven by ignorance. According to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, "Stigma remains the single most important barrier to public action. It is a main reason why too many people are afraid to see a doctor to determine whether they have the disease, or to seek treatment if so. It helps make AIDS the silent killer, because people fear the social disgrace of speaking about it, or taking easily available precautions. Stigma is a chief reason why the AIDS epidemic continues to devastate societies around the world."

This stigma also deters governments from taking action and imposes barriers to successful HIV/AIDS programming.

However, the fundamental importance of addressing stigma and discrimination as part of national AIDS programmes is beginning to be acknowledged, and supported with international standards

In June 2010 the ILO's membership adopted a Recommendation on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work (No. 200). The Recommendation is the first international human rights instrument on HIV and AIDS that specifically relates to the world of work. It addresses each of the key principles expressed in the ILO Code of Practice on HIV and AIDS and it expands coverage to vulnerable groups such as migrants, sex workers and the armed forces. For the first time the Recommendation also calls for the provision of treatment and support services to workers and their families, and the inclusion of people with HIV in all social protection schemes.

The challenge for this World AIDS Day is for us to reflect on how our actions - or lack of - contribute to workplaces in which stigma and discrimination related to HIV exist, and to make a personal commitment in the coming year to break the silence around HIV by attending HIV/AIDS workplace training and integrating the principles of the new Recommendation into our professional activities.

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