

From Architect to Street Vendor: Discrimination at work against Persons Living with HIV in the Arab States

Most Arab States do not have coherent national policies and laws designed to deal with HIV and AIDS in the workplace. They thus lack the means to prevent discrimination at work against nearly half a million of people living with HIV in the region. ILO Online reports from the capital of Jordan, Amman.

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By Farah Dakhlallah

AMMAN, Jordan (ILO Online) – On a bustling Amman street corner sits 36-year-old vendor Karim¹ calling out to passers-by to glance at his wares. If he is lucky today, he will earn US\$30 from selling used shoes, or, like most days, he may go home with nothing.

Only last year, the world seemed a different place to this up-and-coming architect, who had been designing skyscrapers in the Gulf for over ten years until he was diagnosed with HIV.

Foreign workers in most Gulf countries are required by law to take an HIV test when renewing their work permits.

Karim unquestioningly complied with the routine procedure but when he went to collect his results, the police were waiting for him. He was informed that he was HIV positive, and promptly arrested and deported to his home country.

“I was in complete shock. What’s worse, I was treated like a criminal,” he recalls. “Within 48 hours, I was deported, with no time to say my goodbyes or get my life in order. They took it upon themselves to inform my employers and the Jordanian Embassy, all this without my consent.”

After spending a night in prison, Karim was allowed to go to his apartment under police supervision to pack his suitcase. He was then accompanied by police escort to the airplane.

On arrival, the devastated young man made his way to his parents’ home in Amman, but he could not bring himself to tell them of his condition.

“I could not face telling my mother and father,” he says. “It would have brought great shame on the family. I also knew very little about HIV and felt I had nowhere to turn to,” he adds.

Finally, Karim approached a government-supported voluntary counselling and testing centre (VCT) for persons living with HIV (PLHIV). They provided him with life-saving anti-retroviral treatment, as well as important information and advice about living with HIV.

Soon after, Karim shared the news with his family who helped him through his recovery. With the help of the medication and support provided by the VCT, he is now able to lead a healthy life.

Finding a job, however, was no easy task.

“I could not get work in the public sector because I would be automatically excluded due to mandatory HIV testing,” he says. “Many private companies that provide insurance coverage have also recently started to impose such tests to screen out persons living with HIV. I went from one interview to the next, but as soon as I was asked to take the test, it was over.”

Like nine out of ten persons living with HIV around the world, Karim is still in his productive prime and poses no threat to co-workers. But PLHIV continue to face discrimination at work due to widespread misinformation about their condition, and invasive policies such as mandatory HIV testing that effectively exclude them from the workplace.

After months of searching, Karim turned to the informal economy to try to make a living.

¹ Karim (his name has been changed to protect his identity) is a member of Visions Positive, the first association of People living with HIV established in Jordan in February 2011.

"I went from architect to street vendor," he laments. "All those years of experience, all my qualifications, they have come to nothing because of the stigma associated with my condition."

With no system of benefits in place for PLHIV in Jordan, Karim could not afford to be without an income. His retired parents also relied on him for financial support.

"I could not stay without work, my ageing parents used to rely on the remittances I sent them when I was working abroad. I was their pension plan. Now we are all struggling."

Karim is one of nearly half a million people living with HIV in the Middle East and North Africa region, which had 59,000 new HIV infections and 35,000 AIDS related deaths in 2010, according to the latest UNAIDS 2011 World AIDS Day report.