

## STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION: How an Epidemic Became a Problem of Social Inequality

Over the course of 25 years, HIV has expanded in a truly democratic fashion without discriminating based on gender, sexual orientation or socio-economic status. Since the epidemic began, the stigma associated with AIDS has silenced the discussion of the problem. To talk about AIDS it is necessary to begin by acknowledging our prejudices, fears, and ignorance that make the disease disreputable and the patients guilty.

*Stigma, discrimination, silence, denial and lack of confidentiality undermine prevention efforts, care and support. It also increases the impact of the HIV epidemic on individuals, families, communities and countries.*

In 2005, a special session of the United Nations General Assembly defined stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS as an obstacle in Latin America.

UNAIDS defines stigma as a powerful means of social control that occurs by disregarding, excluding and/or exercising power over individuals showing certain attributes.

This is the point at which discrimination comes into play. It denies many universal human rights by denying prevention, care and support services because the individual is not treated as human.

In the case of HIV/AIDS, stigma and discrimination lead to:

- Reinforcing negative connotations of already marginalized behaviors, such as sex work, drug use and certain sexual practices.
- Associating the epidemic with a series of metaphors that relate HIV/AIDS to blame, death, and prohibited behaviors. These metaphors tend to accentuate discrimination.
- Strengthening the metaphor of HIV as a “punishment” while at the same time labeling those living with the virus as “different”, which exempts others from facing the problem.
- Reduction of individual risk perception, limiting personal care.
- Discouraging awareness of one’s status or refusing treatment and care in order to preserve anonymity.
- Believing that AIDS is a disease that affects other people: gays, women, Africans, “other people”, but never just anyone, or everybody.

### Human Rights

Human rights are not only good intentions that countries put on paper. History reminds us of the need to protect the most vulnerable and unprotected from powerful forces. During the 20th century, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights promoted that States create policies to ensure the health, education, equality, dignified work and privacy of its citizens. It provided a framework to address health from a more comprehensive perspective and to promote the access of this right to all.

Public health and the ministries of health of Latin American and Caribbean governments should consider the protection of human rights to strengthen and improve care and preventive services.

*Addressing stigma and discrimination is a prerequisite for developing strategies against HIV/AIDS. The promotion and protection of human rights are basic conditions to provide a response to the epidemic at the regional level.*

The Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS, approved by a Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGASS) in 2001 and signed by UN Member States, pledges to base the response to the epidemic on a framework of human rights. Some critics say seven years after the commitment of resources to provide a response to the AIDS epidemic, little effort has been made to invest in programs legally guaranteeing these agreements.

*“Full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, is indispensable to reduce the vulnerability of HIV/AIDS”*  
Paragraph 58 of UNGASS

In the case of HIV it is important to comply with the following human rights, within the framework of several international agreements:

- The right not to be subjected to discrimination or stigma for any internal or external factor that a person might have.
- Access to ARV drugs and quality care.
- The right of people living with HIV and the most vulnerable populations to participate in drafting AIDS policies and programs.
- Access to voluntary pre- and post-test counseling in a confidential environment.
- Right to access information about HIV/AIDS and sexual education as a means to increase protection.
- Right to access preventive methods, such as condoms, water-based lubricants, exchange of syringes and other programs with scientifically proven efficacy.

*Ensuring the rights of all citizens is the responsibility of the Nation, but it is also the responsibility of the citizens to ensure that the Nation protects their rights.*

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