

“Reporting on HIV needs a positive attitude”—Loksatta newspaper

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By Shekhar Deshmukh

“Media has paid very little attention to an epidemic of HIV/AIDS that is swiftly spreading throughout the country. Perhaps, it would become an attractive story only when entire villages are found to be infected,” said the editor of Loksatta, Kumar Ketkar.

A workshop was jointly organized at Hotel Heritage in Mumbai by Loksatta and the Kaiser Foundation. Statewide representatives of Loksatta participated in this workshop to learn the intricacies of reporting on HIV/AIDS.

In his inaugural address Mr Ketkar stressed media’s role in covering the epidemic in a serious manner. Others present included Ms. Kalpana Jain from “Kaiser Health Journalism Programme”, Mr. Shankarrao Shinde, Brand Manager of Loksatta and Dr. Nirupama Borges, Project Director of Mumbai AIDS Control Organization.

The epidemic has thrown up a different form of “untouchability.” HIV positive people are not easily accepted by larger society. The need of the hour is that all should come forward and work in partnership with the media. This workshop is a part of that effort, informed Mr. Ketkar.

Mr. Anand Grover, a noted lawyer, fighting for the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS said these people were rejected by their own near and dear ones. A person is denied his/her right to get employment just because he/she is HIV positive. Patients are turned away by private hospitals and health centers, said Mr. Grover. A law should be enacted to check such discrimination.

On the second day of the workshop the subject of positive reporting of any social issues and responsibilities of representatives was widely discussed. Mr. Shekhar Deshmukh from Loksatta said a helping hand extended through our positive reporting would go a long way in serving the cause.

Ms. Shabana, who has been living with HIV for the past few years, narrated her own experiences. She said when journalists write about HIV/AIDS, they invariably use phrases such as HIV-infected, AIDS-infected, AIDS patients. She suggested that a reporter should try to use positive words. “We live with HIV. It does not affect our day-today-life. So when someone calls us infected, it hurts.”

She said a reporter should not insist on knowing the route of transmission while interviewing a person living with HIV. No one can change his/her past and no one can guarantee that a person will tell the truth how he/she became HIV-positive. As an HIV or AIDS patient, a person is already facing immense hardships in all walks of life. As a reporter one should be sensitive and try to write positive stories.”

Mr. Akshay Karunkar, also living with HIV, elaborated this point. He said he has been living with HIV for the past ten years. “I had gone to commercial sex workers once or twice. I had a girl friend and few years ago, I had gone to a dentist for treatment. Out of these three one may be a probable cause of my HIV positive status. But now this is my past, it is not important for me. Because of active support of my family I live a life as normal as anyone else. I am living with HIV.”

Mr. Ashokrao Kavi, who voices concerns of gays through his columns and is founder of ‘The Hum Safar Trust’, an NGO working for gay people addressed the second session. A gay person is targeted in the society because of ignorance and misunderstanding. He said just like some people are left handed and it is taken to be normal, so is a person’s sexual preference. A person can also be homosexual and heterosexual at the same time. In homosexuals, the possibility of contracting HIV is high as they change their sex partners frequently. Mr. Ashokrao Kavi informed that the Hum Safar Trust works for gay people by providing them condoms, counseling

and advising them against changing partners. This organization also works with eunuchs.

Mr. Ratnakar Matkari, a Marathi playwright, participated in the final session. He said that a woman is always taken for granted in various walks of life in this male-dominated society. A woman is even blamed for man's misdeeds.

Ms. Kalpana Jain of Kaiser Family Foundation moderated the sessions.

Loksatta's representatives from Nagpur, Pune, Sangli, Solapur, Kolhapur, Ahmednagar, Mumbai and Thane participated actively in this workshop.

