



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
16 December 2008
English
Original: French

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-third session

2-13 March 2009

Item 3 (a) (i) of the provisional agenda*

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS

Statement submitted by International Association of Charities, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2009/1.



Statement*

“The role of women and men in caring for people, particularly AIDS victims”

Introduction

HIV/AIDS first appeared in Cameroon in 1986. In the absence of a cure or a vaccine, the infection rate rose from 0.5 per cent in 1985 to 5 per cent in 1988, before peaking at 12 per cent in 2001. Certain attitudes among Cameroon's population contributed to the exponential spread of the disease during this time. People refused to acknowledge the presence or indeed the existence of either the virus or the disease. Many people thought it had been invented by white people to achieve their objective of family planning. As more and more people were affected by the disease, everyone knew it was present. However, no one wanted to admit it, let alone accept that someone close to them had been infected with, or died from, AIDS. People referred to HIV/AIDS as cancer of the blood, slow poison or witchcraft. All these names pointed to a much deeper malaise that only years later would reveal its hideous face and harmful consequences in the form of stigmatization. What is stigmatization? How does it manifest itself in society in general and within the family in particular? What are its consequences and how can they be overcome?

Stigmatization and family responsibility

The word stigmatization comes from Latin and refers to the action of pointing a finger at an individual and causing him or her to bear a mark. In the context of HIV/AIDS, stigma refers to the raft of physical and psychological problems — sense of guilt, rejection, isolation, ostracism and sense of shame — facing persons infected with, and affected by, HIV/AIDS.

As a general rule, anything relating to sex is taboo in Cameroon. This partly explains why HIV/AIDS infection — one transmission mode of which is sexual activity — is not openly acknowledged. Owing to the difficulties encountered by researchers in their quest to find a cure or a vaccine, HIV/AIDS is seen as an illness that leads inevitably to death. This increases the sense of guilt among infected persons and subjects them to even greater rejection.

Our determination to combat stigmatization stems from our many contacts with people who are living a life of solitude and despair owing to their HIV-positive status. The social and family environments are essential to the survival of infected persons. **When fully accepted, well integrated and properly cared for, HIV-positive people can live an almost normal life.**

The family: a key component in the effort to combat HIV/AIDS

We are convinced that, if nothing is done to eradicate stigmatization from our families and our society, HIV/AIDS infection will continue to increase. Stigmatization and its consequences hinder efforts to combat the pandemic of the century and push infected and affected people into the depths of despair. This

* Issued without formal editing.

encourages them to carry out irrational acts, since they know their lives are already ruined for good. Rejected by those close to them, they live under a death sentence. This is damaging to their health, which is already fragile owing to the presence of the virus.

What are the causes of stigmatization?

- The disease's incurable nature
- Fear of death
- Other people's opinion
- Intolerance
- Ignorance
- The fact that one mode of transmission is sexual activity

What are the consequences of stigmatization?

- Rejection
- Blame
- Denial
- Isolation
- Guilt
- Withdrawal into oneself
- The progression of the disease (sometimes even suicide)

Persons living with HIV/AIDS belong to a unique socio-epidemiological category. They face simultaneously the risk of infecting others and that of becoming reinfected themselves. Moreover, they are physiologically, psychologically and socially vulnerable. Consequently, they are in urgent need of social assistance. The men and women featuring in their HIV/AIDS plan have a duty to care for them medically, psychologically and socially. Such care is not a given, however, in an environment where HIV/AIDS education is severely lacking. Stigmatization of persons living with HIV/AIDS is a reality that is nourished by the social networks to which we are all attached, whether families, professional environments or hospitals.

Stigmatization within the family

The family is the environment par excellence in which solidarity is created and hopefully experienced. People have a duty to care for any members of their immediate or extended family who are living with HIV/AIDS. Husbands, children and, in particular, wives are victims of stigmatization because of HIV/AIDS.

Women: the persistence of the phallus and/or of patriarchy

HIV/AIDS infection increases the extent of the social domination of women. Women are a priori considered responsible for bringing HIV/AIDS into the family. Accordingly, it is common for women to be discriminated against, excluded, blamed and rejected by their families if they, their husbands or even their children become

infected with HIV/AIDS. When an HIV/AIDS-infected husband dies, the wife is chased out of the family home with her children by her in-laws, who keep the assets and the house at the expense of the legitimate heirs. In the worst cases, wives are accused of killing their husbands. This situation is made even more worrying by the fact that sometimes the wife's own family rejects her, accusing her of witchcraft. This reality seriously undermines efforts to combat the pandemic, on the one hand, and demonstrates the urgent need to step up such efforts, on the other. This situation facing women is also a violation of their rights. Their children, who are sometimes very young, must endure various forms of suffering throughout their lives.

Children: innocent victims

AIDS orphans who have been disinherited owing to the ignorance and selfishness of their family are destined to live in extreme poverty. The consequences of this are under-education, child labour, street children, children heads of household, paedophilia and exploitation.

Such human injustice under the pretext of HIV/AIDS is, however, avoidable. Notarized documents such as wills can protect children's inheritance in the event that their parents die. The existence of a proper family code would help limit some of the effects of the human crises caused by HIV/AIDS, **as would raising awareness of the rights of persons living with HIV/AIDS.**

The family, a place of warmth and friendship, must rediscover the full sense of its primary meaning as a place for exchanging forgiveness and affection

The manifestations of stigmatization within families

- Expulsion of the widow
- Separation of children from their mother
- Confiscation of property by the husband's family
- Refusal by men to be tested
- Lack of dialogue on sexuality

Recommended solutions

- Men and women must:
- Raise awareness of the rights of widows and orphans;
- Encourage couples to talk more about sexuality and the problems associated with HIV/AIDS;
- Educate the population about the need for prenuptial examinations;
- Encourage the population to develop the habit of drawing up wills;
- Encourage couples to get tested;
- Improve information about modes of transmission;
- Promote a good Christian education;
- Raise awareness of HIV/AIDS.

Our approach is based on engendering a sense of responsibility in general and within the family, in particular

Responsibility creates a relationship between a person and a thing or between a person and one or more other persons. Indeed, human beings are by nature and by definition social beings. They therefore have an obligation to create and maintain a balance. They are called on to undertake a series of measures with a view to eradicating the pernicious evil of HIV/AIDS.

Conclusion

The main causes of stigmatization are fear of death, fear of contagion, ignorance of transmission modes, shame and intolerance.

Our aim is to raise awareness by focusing on the fundamentals, in particular modes of transmission, while at the same time stressing the importance of family and its responsibility at all levels. We have a shared responsibility to combat stigmatization. **Only then will we have a chance of gaining an upper hand over HIV/AIDS. We must all act!**
