



International Community of Women Living with HIV Eastern Africa

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A call to action to catalyze and accelerate elimination of all forms of stigma and discrimination among people living with HIV in the COVID-19 era

Today the International Community of women living with HIV Eastern Africa (ICWEA) joins the rest of the world to celebrate the lives of all those who have died of AIDS; and all those champions living with HIV who are still raising their heads so high to work to ensure that stigma and discrimination in all its forms is eliminated.

We applaud all efforts made to end stigma and discrimination.

We congratulate the UN Family together with all Civil Society Organizations and communities affected by HIV that have put up the initiative of the Global Partnership for Action to Eliminate all Forms of HIV related Stigma and Discrimination. We believe that this initiative if joined by all countries will help us eliminate stigma and discrimination in all its forms.

ICWEA on this candle light day congratulates all countries and governments that have signed up to join the Global Partnership for Action to Eliminate All Forms of HIV related Stigma and Discrimination.

In a very special way, we thank Uganda and South Africa for having been the first countries in Eastern and Southern Africa to sign up to join the partnership.

We however recognize that there are still high levels of stigma and discrimination which continue to be a hindrance factor to accessibility and utilization of the available HIV and AIDS, sexual reproductive health and rights services and the achievement of the global aspirations of getting to Zero Discrimination.

Stigma is a key driver of any epidemic. No matter the form in which it is measured, its effects are largely negative and grossly affect the quality of life of people infected and affected by that epidemic.

Stigma and discrimination has impacted the HIV response, impacted People Living with HIV (PLHIV) and their access to services and full enjoyment of their human rights.

According to the PLHIV stigma index, a global project by people living with HIV, social exclusion as a form of stigma and discrimination is still prevalent at different levels, for instance at social gatherings, religious functions; and at family activities. Some people reported losing jobs or incomes.

What does this mean in the COVID-19 Era?

Continuous stigma and discrimination means that PLHIV are more likely to hide from COVID-19 services to avoid double stigma from both HIV and COVID-19.

Stigma and discrimination prevent people from seeking health care immediately and discourages them from adopting healthy behavior.

Stigma and discrimination in Eastern and Southern Africa have been manifested in women living with HIV where they are beaten, discriminated against, arrested on allegations of trying to spread HIV and charged of attempted murder and worse still are exposed to forced and coerced sterilization because of their HIV status as reported in most countries in the regions.

There is evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic is resurrecting family and community-level stigma and discrimination towards PLHIV as they struggle in their spaces to access food and health services in the COVID-19 era.

Fighting COVID-19 related stigma and discrimination is a collective and multi-sectoral responsibility:

We are challenging every individual, society, the private sector, religious leaders, civil society, and various government sectors to take responsibility in fighting against COVID-19 related stigma and discrimination.

We must all be mindful of a new and emerging form of COVID-19 related stigma and discrimination and fight it collectively to safeguard the achievements that we have gained under the HIV response for over 30 years.

While following the safety health precautions by the World Health Organization and the respective government guidelines to prevent COVID-19, we need to guard against any new uncalled for stigma and discrimination against such vulnerable groups to maximize health gains.

Bring communities on board in the fight against COVID-19 – let PLHIV lend their expertise and experience to COVID-19 response, bring them on tables, fight stigma and discrimination.

We call upon all of you to use appropriate and non-stigmatizing language, use proper communication channels and messaging to avoid fueling fear and stigma among populations.

Speak accurately about the risks from COVID-19, based on scientific data and latest official health advice; talk about “people who have COVID-19”, as “people who are being treated for COVID-19. Do not attach locations or ethnicity to the disease; this is not a “Wuhan”, “Chinese Virus” or “Asian Virus”, this is COVID-19. Do not use inciteful or hateful language towards people who have been affected by COVID-19.

Let us respect and support each other to fight COVID-19-. Our common goal, fight stigma and discrimination, prevent and control COVID-19. Follow the “No Harm Principle to Deliver to Public Health Good”.

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