

Young People and HIV-related Stigma and Discrimination



What are HIV and AIDS related stigma and discrimination?

HIV and AIDS related discrimination and stigma are described by UNAIDS as “a ‘process of devaluation’ of people either living with or associated with HIV/AIDS; Discrimination follows stigma, which often stems from the underlying stigmatization of sex and intravenous drug use, and is the unfair and unjust treatment of an individual based on his or her real or perceived HIV status.”

HIV and AIDS related stigma and discrimination are rooted in social inequalities, especially those linked to gender, sexuality, race, age and socio-economic class. Young people are particularly affected by these inequalities and as such, are especially vulnerable to stigma and discrimination related to HIV and AIDS. As a result, young people are often obstructed from accessing adequate information, education and services for the prevention, treatment and care of HIV and AIDS. This is especially true for marginalized groups, including Injecting Drug Users, Sex Workers, young LGBT people and young people living on the street.

What was achieved in the UNGASS 2001 and 2006 meetings related to stigma and discrimination?

The Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS 2001 includes 5 commitments that directly mention HIV and AIDS related discrimination and stigma. Specifically, the document emphasized that HIV and AIDS related discrimination and stigma must be addressed in order to effectively respond to HIV and AIDS. Key actions, commitments and goals include:

1. Multi-sectoral national strategies and financing plans for combating HIV and AIDS should be developed and implemented to confront stigma, eliminate discrimination and marginalization, and address gender and age-based dimensions of the epidemic. Also the full participation of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLHA), vulnerable groups and people at most risk, including women and young people, are encouraged to actively participate in this process.
2. The goal of ensuring that young people (ages 15 – 24) can access youth-specific HIV and AIDS information, education and services in full partnership with young persons, parents, families, educators and health-care providers. The specific targets are to achieve accessibility for at least 90% of young people by 2005, and by 2010 at least 95%.
3. Legislation, regulations and other measures are committed to eliminate all forms of discrimination and to ensure the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by PLHA and vulnerable groups. Strategies of women’s empowerment are also encouraged.

The 2006 UNGASS resulted in the development of a Political Declaration, in which, vulnerability and the increasing infection rate among women and young people was highlighted. In addition, the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, the elimination of stigma and discrimination, as well as gender equality were highlighted as essential elements in the global response to the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

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How large is the gap between commitments and reality?

Many efforts have been made since 2001 to combat HIV-related stigma and discrimination. However, these forms of stigma and discrimination still exist in many parts of the world. For example:

- PLHA continue to be excluded from communities based on their HIV-status
- PLHA continue to be forced to leave school and lose their jobs based on their HIV-status
- PLHA continue to be denied access to health care services and health insurance based on their HIV-status
- Several countries have HIV criminalization laws that increase stigma and discrimination
- Mandatory testing for groups of people such as sex workers in total disregard for their rights and dignity
- A number of countries have travel bans that prevent PLHA from entering and/or transiting through the country

What can young people do at UNGASS 2008 and beyond?

Demand that our governments and other leaders:

- Ensure the meaningful participation of Young People living with HIV and AIDS, and other key youth populations at risk, at all levels of decision making, as well as in the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes to address their specific needs
- Recognize the specific and diverse realities of young people, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, education background, social status, etc.
- Increase research, programmes and campaigns on discrimination and stigma to build strong evidence-based progress
- Take a stand against the criminalization of HIV and AIDS, denouncing these laws as violations of human rights
- Take a stand against HIV-related travel restrictions, denouncing such restrictions as violations of human rights which have dire public health consequences
- Take a stand against mandatory testing for any groups of people, denouncing such practice as a violation of human rights
- Ensure quality information which is widely available, accessible, and education and services for YPLHA and young people in general to strengthen their commitment to the goals.