

HIV prevention and role of media

Mahfuz Anam, Editor & Publisher, The Daily Star

The issue of the role of the media in HIV prevention has been around for quite some time. Now we have a quite good amount of knowledge about HIV and AIDS since we identified HIV in Bangladesh in 1989. I think we do not have to invent the wheel again because we can learn from Africa, the US or Europe how the media has been handling HIV and AIDS. That does not mean that we do not have to care for the specificity of our culture or society. So, and this is my first point that we should bring together regional and international experiences.

HIV deals with a very intimate personal issue, one's sexual habit. People do not want to talk about it. They do not admit it. In our culture, it is far more of a challenge. So we have these slogans like "Bachte hole jante hobe". We do not know what it is that is to be learnt. Here we face a life and death situation, and yet we cannot talk about this openly. How to pass on the message directly. We have to think seriously about that.

We have been living with AIDS for the last 22 years. Our public is not yet fully ready, but nevertheless far more ready than before to talk about it. However, religious feelings and social stigma is still very strong here. We really have to trade very carefully on that.

Arthur Erken, Country Representative, UNFPA



It is said that education is the best vaccine to prevent HIV and AIDS. In that respect, the media has a very important role to play. To educate people about the disease, about the

people who are affected, and what can be done to eliminate stigma and discrimination against those who have contracted this disease. Despite the fact that many people know about HIV and AIDS, correct knowledge about it is still very low. They have heard about HIV and AIDS, but knowledge about how it spreads, how it can be prevented, is still very low. It means, we have failed, decades after the first person with HIV was detected in Bangladesh, to educate our young people about how to prevent this infection.

On top of it, there is a lot of denial among the general public when it comes to HIV and AIDS in Bangladesh. How often do we see a story in the newspapers or on TV about a person affected with HIV? It is still hidden. It is still not widely debated in society. I think this denial is driven by stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS, because it is linked with sex. And it is difficult to talk about this issue in Bangladesh. So, people who have HIV or who have full blown AIDS are, of course, facing great difficulties in our society.

We know media have done wonders in many countries to open the debate; to give AIDS a real "face". Because, after all, we are talking about real people who have HIV-infected or have AIDS. That is the most important thing we can do for those people who contracted the HIV virus or who have full-blown AIDS. Also for our society, and particularly our young people, these real-life stories are important to prevent others from getting AIDS, because only correct knowledge can help us dealing with this epidemic.

We also talk a lot about vulnerable people, marginalized people, most at risk population. And rightly so! But do we know who are increasingly the most at risk people at the moment? Married women! They are getting infected by their husbands, who frequently returning migrant workers. We do not talk about that. We think about drug users, commercial sex workers, and of course, they are vulnerable, they are at risk, but married women are the most vulnerable in this country. In that situation, stigma, discrimination, denial and the role of women in society are extremely hindering the campaign of prevention of HIV and AIDS.

UNFPA and The Daily Star organised a roundtable on 'HIV prevention and role of media' on November 18, 2012. We publish a summary of the discussions

-- Editor



Dr. Khandaker Ezazul Haque, UNFPA



At the UN Special Session on HIV, it was stated, "Beyond the key role played by communities, strong role by governments, UN systems, people living with AIDS and vulnera-

ble groups, media, parliamentarians, community organizations, traditional leaders are important." Media is given that green face. They can be involved so that they can contribute in the light of HIV preventions based on the national context.

We still have low prevalence of HIV; it is below 1%. But every year the total number of HIV positive patients is increasing, number of death due to AIDS is increasing.

Though we are a conservative society, there is a lot of extra-marital sex and a high demand for paid sex in Bangladesh. We need to talk about these issues and create a supportive environment so that people, especially adolescents and young people, can have clear knowledge about these issues.

Media can play a unique role in this case. For example, some print media have readers' forum, and these forums are based at the community level. They have engagement with local population, teachers, guardians, community leaders, religious leaders and so on. Media can thus create forums so that all sections of the society feel encouraged, feel confident to discuss this sensitive issue openly.

Collaboration among media, grass roots organizations, service providers, government agencies for services like counseling, testing, promotion of condom use and even treatment can do a great job.

Media can help making information available like how test can be done, where one should go.

Media can make HIV and AIDS messages charming and appealing to avoid monotony to ensure easy understanding of the messages. Meena cartoon is a very good example.

Media can do a lot in mainstreaming HIV and AIDS issues. Media can reach a wider section of the society, bringing policy, advocacy and positive social changes. Media can organize coordinated and multifaceted campaign for greater effect.

We need prominent coverage of this issue. Electronic media should dedicate some time for discussing HIV and AIDS so that people can have the confidence that HIV and AIDS can be talked about openly.

Leo Kenny, UNAIDS Representative



I am particularly impressed by the robust and very comprehensive coverage on AIDS by media in Bangladesh. Bangladesh made a commitment to end AIDS.

This is the inspirational goal to have zero new infection, to have zero discrimination and zero AIDS related death by 2015. Media's role in stimulating partnership between people living with HIV and community can not be underestimated. We have seen in every country of the world the robust response of the media in this regard.

Media has a critical role of playing the watchdog role. It has mechanism of evaluation and monitoring. Bangladesh made a commitment in the UN General Assembly in the last year. For example, Bangladesh is going to make sure that by 2015 we would reduce sexual transmission by 50%, cut HIV TB related death by 50%, cut IDU related infection by 50%, address laws that is stopping us reaching the target, show zero tolerance to sexual and gender based violence. Media can be a watchdog on this. They can be pro-active too. Media has tremendous role in giving voice to people living with HIV.

To take a look at human rights situations, the laws and practices of Bangladesh which may stop us from reaching the 3 zeros. For example, the law which allow a sex worker to be a sex worker but do not allow her to have control over own sexual and reproductive health rights. Media has a role in telling that you can be a sex worker but you cannot work in a brothel which is the only we can help protect the rights and really organize those people.

We have to be strategic in how to use media, and how to build partnerships we are talking.

Journalists should be trained so that they can report effectively, and then offer incentives to report more effectively.

Dr. M. Ziya Uddin, Unicef



Our most important task is to increase our literacy rate so that we spread this message of HIV infection through our education system.

We usually talks about sex workers, IDOs and MSFs, but we have to include women, children and adolescents in our programmes. Media can play a role in

moving our concentration beyond our usual concentration.

Media should work more in a manner of facilitation rather than some scoop news, which holds back the response.

Media have to do the job of monitoring and finding the existing bottlenecks.

M.S Mukti, Executive Director, MAB



Most of newspapers have health pages. Time to time they can dedicate a page to the HIV positive people. We usually find pages or features on AIDS day. However, we need regular publication.

Many of the projects has been stopped. Media should find out these issues, and create pressure on the government and NGOs to continue these programmes.

HIV people often face violation of their human rights. This side should be considered seriously.

Dr. Zeenat Sultana, BCCP



My experience says that media are interested in publishing news on this issue. We have to help them get information about the real picture.

There is a silence about the issue; there is stigma. Journalists can come forward strongly to break the silence. In media, we have to bring real life story or human story of HIV positives rather than only providing statistics. We should involve decision makers of media.

Early marriage makes young girls prone to HIV infection. Therefore, there is a nexus of these social issues with HIV infection. Journalists should be made aware of that.

Abdul Quayum, Associate Editor, Prothom Alo



The prevalence of AIDS is quite high in our neighbouring countries. Therefore, there is still risk for our country. We have to be aware of that, and media can create that awareness.

Many Bangladeshis have been going abroad for work. They have little education. There is high risk of contamination of AIDS

by them when they back home.

We have to make people know about the science behind AIDS. They should know how HIV contracts one. We know that it mostly contaminated by blood. So we have to emphasise on blood screening. We have to make people aware of safe blood donation as well as taking.

We have to create campaign against drugs. Because when several drug users use same syringe then there is high chance to get infected by HIV virus.

We have to be very careful about taking services from dentistry. It should widely published that after every time of use all the equipments should be properly cleaned with medicine. If we can disseminate these scientific messages then it will help break social stigma.

Akhtar Jahan Shilpy, Technical Specialist, NASP



In the Third National Strategy Plan, there is a clear guidance about the role of media in HIV prevention.

Through media we have to create awareness among people so that they can learn about the support and services available to HIV positives.

We have emphasise on our youth population. On one side they should made aware of HIV infections and on the other they can work as a volunteer in this cause.

We have to explore new media like internet and mobile phone to disseminate HIV related messages.

Leo Kenny

Through the Third National Strategy Paper, the government has recognized the role of media. Only information about HIV is not enough. We have to tell day-to-day story of HIV positives so that we can bring out real picture and make people aware about the rights of HIV positives. Media's duty is to give voice to the voiceless.

Another important aspect of media is ensuring accountability. Multi-million dollars has been invested in HIV projects. Where the money goes? Whether is it utilized properly? Is there any corruption? Media can go through these issues.

Syed Kamrul Hasan, BNNRC



I think there is huge potential in community radio. We have now 14 community radio operations in 13 districts. 500 people are working in this profession. This is a

booming media. Through community radio, we can reach deep into a community, and provide them information related to HIV infection and AIDS. There is a scope in community radio to localize the information so that they can be easy communicating with the message.

We have to provide proper training to these new professionals so the can learn how to present these messages to their community.

Arunthia Zaidi Urmi, Manager, Counselling & Training, ICDDR,B



In our media we lack coverage of specific issues. Now we have to go more in details about AIDS rather just slogans. Media should publish expert opinions on HIV regularly. It is

also important to disseminate the information about facilities from where one can get service.

Many service providers do not know many facts about HIV. They should be trained properly.

Checking up HIV status is very important. Everyone should be aware of that.