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Concerted efforts from all needed to combat HIV/AIDS scourge

Abaantika Ganguli

THE economic slump has taken its toll on non-governmental organisations involved in public education programmes about HIV and AIDS.

With additional cuts in government grants, there is a dire need for these NGOs to come up with creative ideas for long-term fund-raising because the war against this dreaded disease has to go on.

The Project Wishing World initiated by the Malaysian AIDS Council during the recent Commonwealth Games is one such example.

NGOs under the auspices of MAC cashed in on the tourist draw during the Games by putting donation boxes in hotel lobbies, with the message that "every little bit counts".

This timely initiative worked with a sizeable amount collected to finance sustainable programmes in the near future.

Asian countries are among the worst affected by the HIV/AIDS scourge and Malaysia is no exception.

According to the Health Ministry, HIV infections and AIDS cases reported from 1986 to June this year totalled 26,178 and 1,726 respectively. This, obviously, is only the tip of the iceberg as many cases still remain undetected.

"In Malaysia, public awareness about AIDS is lamentably low," noted MAC president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the mainstream do not perceive themselves as exposed to the HIV/AIDS threat. They are under the impression that HIV/AIDS only affects marginalised risk groups such as drug users, homosexuals, sex workers and the like.

It is, therefore, imperative that efforts be stepped up not only to dispel myths and misconceptions associated with the disease, but also to sensitise the community to HIV/AIDS victims.

"Societal attitude towards sex and sexuality still remains conservative, and those with HIV/AIDS fall victim to communal disregard and are ostracised, giving the disease more of a social dimension than a health one," noted Marina.

Marina said although the Government offered treatment facilities, people with AIDS were not coming forward to seek therapy because of the discrimination and social stigma associated with it.

Another facet of this pandemic is the phenomenal role played by Muslim religious institutions and community leaders in the country. Unfortunately, these religious authorities are not involved in AIDS advocacy programmes, unlike the imam in Uganda and the Indonesian ulama.

"There is a crying need to bridge the chasm between the viewpoints of those involved in AIDS awareness campaigns and others who still consider AIDS as the consequence of a sinful act.

"Instead of viewing HIV/AIDS through the religious lens, we need to present them with factual information to drive home the point that we are not talking about low morals here, but are instead trying to save lives," said Marina.

Also contributing to the distress associated with HIV/AIDS is the growing trend of women and teenagers being infected with it. While the latter presumably need sex education, something more needs to be done for the former.

Socio-cultural factors such as gender-specific roles played by men as per the dictates of an essentially patriarchal society, dependence of

women on men for social support, and lack of a proven women-controlled method of prevention are responsible for this shift in the profile of the epidemic.

Said Marina: "Whilst talking to women, I have noticed that they comprehend the issue and view it as a matter affecting the family unit. After all, at the end of the day, they are the ones having to bear the brunt of it.

"Women are also distressed by the escalating number of orphans and AIDS-inflicted newborns. However, due to the decision-making power resting primarily in the hands of men, women still remain an isolated and vulnerable group," she said.

It is for this reason that the MAC has been rallying for a National Strategy Plan involving the participation of women's groups and people with AIDS in the intermediate process.

The real challenge, however, is to empower women so that they could perceive themselves at risk and help them cope with the threat of AIDS.

But this is only possible if men also take on their fair share of responsibility to achieve optimum AIDS prevention. HIV/AIDS is, after all, a pandemic affecting heterosexuals, so stopping it should be a joint effort as well.

The prevailing lack of constructive dialogue between men and women about sex and sexuality is also a major obstacle in the path of HIV/AIDS prevention.

Finding ways to equalise communication between the two sexes is a crucial element for creating a socio-sexual setting conducive to prevention. Considering that AIDS has no cure, mutual respect and discussion hold the ideal key to stemming the spread of this modern-day scourge.

"Redefining male sexuality and the place of women in society is a Herculean task. But we intend to face this challenge and combat the HIV/AIDS menace that is engulfing humanity," said Marina.

It needs to be realised that AIDS is not a far cry, but an imminent reality. Concerted efforts are needed to impede the adverse impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and to create an environment where complacency, stigmatisation and shame can be replaced by hope, understanding and compassion.

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