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Drawing Muslim leaders into fight against AIDS

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RELIGIOUS and secular organisations working together to fight the scourge of HIV/AIDS? Impossible.

But isn't the problem of HIV/AIDS sufficiently big enough to warrant a truce, so that a comprehensive solution from all parties can be found?

If the hoo-ha at the recent Second International Muslim Leaders Consultation (IMLC) on HIV/AIDS is anything to go by, the answer is: not quite, yet.

What began as an objection to the contents of a presenter's paper snowballed into a week-long argument between the conservatives and the liberals about how the problem should be tackled, what the problem is, and whose solution is Islamic.

Meanwhile, non-governmental organisations, social workers, healthcare workers and people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) stood in the sidelines and shook their heads in disbelief.

Meanwhile, too, outside in the real world, more people were being infected. Going by last year's figures, 19 people are infected every day in Malaysia.

"All sectors of society need to work together to effectively manage the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Leaving any gaps would allow the virus to get through and spread," says Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir.

And, since Malaysia is a country where religion is important, leaving out the religious sector would be a major omission.

"When we go out on the field, religious questions pop up, and, even though we have the knowledge to answer, since we are not the ulamas, we are seen as not qualified to do so," says Marina.

"People want answers from their religious leaders. These leaders must come down to the ground. Otherwise, people will get the perception that the ulamas are uncaring."

In Malaysia, says Marina, the response to the epidemic has been slower than in African countries, partly because the country is at least 10 years behind in infection levels, and partly because it is still invisible, so people don't realise the importance of setting up a comprehensive response.

At least one heartening sign from the IMLC was that the event was co-organised by MAC and the Islamic Development Department (Jakim).

Yet even with such a solid new partner, it will not be easy to change the perceptions that many people have of the disease.

Foremost in the minds of some religious leaders are issues of sexual orientation, illicit sex, condoms, needles and the "guilt" or "innocence" of an HIV/AIDS sufferer.

"SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) is easier to deal with than HIV/AIDS because it is not associated with the stigma of sex," says Disease Control Division (AIDS/STI) deputy director Datuk Dr Faisal Ibrahim.

But, medically, it is a virus, an infectious disease, just like SARS. Yet, people don't react in the same way to HIV/AIDS sufferers as they do to people with SARS.

Yet, when it is seen as a public health issue, few people have problems with condoms and clean needles for intravenous drugusers (IDUs).

"In dispensing my duties, I don't get any trouble from religious bodies

because they know that I am doing public health work," says Dr Faisal.

But when it is seen as a moral issue, then all of a sudden, it is not enough to solve the problem of the here-and-now.

The belief is that "the ends can never justify the means". Even when a condom is used for health safety reasons, in an illegal sexual relationship, which is completely forbidden in Islam, it is haram.

"That's because they don't want to be seen as bersubahat (abetting the crime), and that's completely understandable," says Khartini Slamah, a consultant on HIV/AIDS specialising in sex workers.

NGO officials like Khartini know that it would be too much to expect religious organisations or leaders to push for condom use in non-marital relationships.

Or even for imams and ulamas themselves to give it out (to married couples).

"We are a conservative society and we cling to our traditions and religion very tightly. We have to understand that," says Khartini.

"At the same time, for the sake of public health, I hope that religious leaders won't try to stop us or tell people not to use condoms."

Dr Faisal agrees. "The condom is just a tool to prevent infection.

"As a Muslim, I would like to tell my peers that we have to fear God. But if you are not afraid of God, then at least be afraid of the virus!" Interestingly enough, while condom use outside of marriage is seen as haram (forbidden), the supplying of clean needles to drug users is not.

Because of the high rate of drug users and infection through contaminated needles in Malaysia, there is actually a consideration to supply the needles.

"As the situation is rather grave here, and as there is no solution in sight to the drug problem, the strategy to supply clean needles can be seriously looked into," says National Fatwa Council chairman Datuk Dr Ismail Ibrahim.

Yet, drug use in Islam is haram. How can this be so, unless drugs are not seen as a "moral issue"?

Some religious people at the IMLC even refused to discuss the issue of other sexual orientations (lesbians, bisexuals, gays and transgenders) because they felt that as such activities were wrong, they shouldn't be discussed.

"But they are there. You don't have to accept them, just acknowledge that they exist," says Khartini, herself a transgender.

"Not acknowledging them won't solve the HIV/AIDS problem."

Dr Faisal agrees. "When we look at the HIV+ person, we look at the disease.

"It's the same as a motorcycle accident: we don't judge them on whether they were riding recklessly - we treat their wounds."

Khartini believes that people need to understand that HIV/AIDS is more than just a health issue. It could develop into a economic, social and development problem, too.

Besides the cost to the nation in terms of health care, there is also the issue of lost human resource. The death of breadwinners brings economic and social disruption to families, and when parents or adults in a family die, orphans are left to fend for themselves.

In sub-Saharan Africa, where so many young people of working age are infected, the spectre of empty offices is very real.

"Talking at the mimbar (pulpit) of the mosque is not good enough," says Dr Faisal. "It's all very well to say that Islam has the answer, but Muslims so far do not provide solutions."

Dr Faisal believes religious organisations should look after the welfare

of the AIDS orphans, and the wives and children of men who have died of AIDS.

"We look after the medical side, but when they leave the hospital, society must provide a support system," he says.

Religious leaders should also put pressure on pharmaceutical companies to reduce the price of HIV/AIDS medication, and arrange for Baitulmal and zakat money to be made available to people who need AIDS medication, which costs RM950 per month.

Marina says the Paediatrics AIDS Fund gets a lot of money because people think that children are innocent victims but people are less willing to give to adult sufferers because they are not seen as "innocent".

What people don't realise is that innocent children, whether positive or negative, will be affected if their HIV-positive parents don't get the support and medication they need to survive.

Some people even discriminate against the non-infected children of HIV-positive parents.

"If people are truly religious, this would not happen. For instance, to date, only two of our AIDS babies have been adopted. Where then, is the care for the innocents?" asks Marina.

Khartini, too, believes that religious organisations can help lessen social problems.

"Don't just complain about sex workers. Look into the demand - the men that go to sex workers.

"And, instead of condemning sex workers, look into why they are there - extreme poverty. It is wrong for a Muslim to go to bed at night if his neighbour is hungry.

"If every person was a true Muslim, then no one would have to prostitute themselves because of poverty."

Religious leaders can get other organisations or the private sector to provide capacity building - to give the sex workers an opportunity for a decent livelihood in other occupations.

"But not sewing machines. With proper training, ex-sex workers have a higher potential to contribute to the workforce other than being seamstresses," says Khartini.

And if religious leaders are failing in their duty, then lay people should question their ulamas to account for the neglect, says Marina.

"Preserving life is preserving religion."