

The disabled are also sexually active and need awareness

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While persons with disabilities face many challenges, the threat posed by Aids spells disaster unless urgent action is taken.

Many myths around the disabled and Aids and the fact that not much research has been conducted about the issue threaten to decimate persons with disabilities.

Beliefs such as disabled persons are not sexually active hence cannot acquire Aids does not help much. Another belief that the disabled are "virgin" exposes them to greater danger.

The assumption among many service providers that the disabled are one homogenous group is another challenge. This leads to generalised initiatives which fail to take cognisance of the various types of disabilities and attendant unique needs.

Mental disability

In some communities, people with mental disability are used for cleansing widows before they are inherited. Others believe that having sex with such persons can cure one of Aids. The lack of factual information and statistics regarding Aids and disabled persons is a major handicap in terms of knowing the actual prevalence and incidence among this population, not forgetting the fact that existing strategies — such as behaviour change and communication BCC and anti-retroviral treatment (ART) — are not inclusive and accessible.

According to a study conducted in 2007 by Handicap International, persons with intellectual disability are the most challenged in access to HIV programmes. The visually impaired come second. The study found that there was little adaptation of information to suit these disabilities. More than 50 per cent of caregivers are not making an effort of passing information on HIV to persons with disabilities. Analysis further revealed that caregivers' lack of skills and their attitude towards HIV as it relates to the disabled poses major barriers to engaging caregivers to pass information.

Safe pool for men

The situation gets worse for women with disabilities. While a man with disability may gather some information from social places, the woman with disabilities gets little or no information, yet such women are perceived as a safe pool by men who do not want to change sexual behaviour. The good news is that the disability fraternity is not taking this challenge lying down.

In response to the urgent need to mainstream disability in HIV/Aids interventions in Kenya, the United Disabled Persons of Kenya (UDPK) has worked to turn around the situation and responded to the needs of persons with disabilities.

NGOs such as Liverpool VCT are pioneering great service particularly for the deaf to ensure they receive appropriate VCT, care and treatment services.

The Regional Aids Training Network, (RATN) under "Addressing the Balance of Burden of HIV among Vulnerable Groups" programme, is undertaking research in this field that is not only linked to generating information but also policy advocacy. These services are not sufficient though. Under the international covenant on economic, socio and cultural rights, health is universally accepted as a right.

Dr Sam Tororei, a commissioner with the Kenyan National Commission for Human Rights — who is visually impaired — says there is need to consciously include the disabled in overall policy planning and programming. Substantive resources are required for various aspects such as research and development of innovative approaches, including treatment and care.

National Aids Control Council needs not only to enhance better coordination of these initiatives among research institutions, service providers, mainstream NGOs and development partners. The council needs to initiate national survey and studies to help provide updated information and statistics to inform targeted planning and development of appropriate strategies and programmes.

Innovative solutions

There is need for reliable data as to how many people with disabilities are infected by disability type and accompanying services if any and challenges thereto. The need for creative and innovative solutions, for instance the development of a brailed condom that can be used by the blind, is a long overdue challenge to researchers.

Disabled peoples organisations must engage the Government and development partners to provide more resources for model and learning projects in this sphere. Development partners can however do more by demanding direct inclusion and integration of persons with disabilities as a conditionality in disbursement of support and funding of the multi-billion HIV/Aids sector.

This, says Helen Obande, UDPK's Executive Director, will go a long way in ensuring stakeholders prioritise this issue in their programmes. "The greatest challenge lies in getting mainstream NGOs and development partners to integrate into their policies and programmes the issue of HIV/Aids and the disabled as an integral part of their work; for now very few if any do that," she says.

As Kenya and the world moves to contain the HIV/Aids pandemic, the challenge is whether that progress is carrying everybody on board, including those with various forms of impairment.

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