

Welcome Address of the Meeting of Labour Ministers of SAARC Countries on HIV/AIDS

Ms. Sudha Pillai, Secretary, Ministry of Labour & Employment

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It gives me great pleasure in extending a very warm welcome to all of you in this Meeting of Labour Ministers of SAARC Countries on HIV/AIDS. It is our privilege to welcome amidst us the Labour Ministers of the different SAARC countries to discuss the issue of HIV/AIDS intervention in the world of Work. I also extend a cordial welcome in this Meeting to representatives from trade unions, employer organizations, NGOs, academicians and representatives from ILO.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic and the threat and challenges that it poses needs no elaboration. Its impact ranges from personal and familial devastation to dissemination of working population and denting the national economies. Way back in 1987, the late Jonathan Mann, then director of WHO Global Program on AIDS, identified three phases of the HIV/AIDS epidemic; the epidemic of HIV infection, entering the community silently and unnoticed, the epidemic of AIDS, which appears when HIV triggers life threatening infection and the epidemic of stigma, discrimination, blame and collective denial which makes it so difficult to effectively tackle the first two. Today, 19 years since then, while the epidemic of HIV and the epidemic of AIDS are much better understood, the third phase remains the least understood and has turned out to be as central to the global AIDS challenge as the disease itself. Stigma remains among the most poorly understood aspects of the epidemic. It is a continuing challenge; it prevents, prohibits and retards concerted action at community, national and international levels.

Stigma around HIV is strong and it strongly discriminates against the people infected with HIV. In the context of employment, the People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLHAs) are often denied jobs at the time of recruitment on account of their HIV

status. HIV positive employees are discriminated against by their co-workers and employers and their services are terminated. Often discrimination is subtler and HIV positive employees are gradually asked not to report to work. Not only do they lose job, but also attendant benefits such as provident fund and gratuity to survivors.

Stigma and discrimination are a combination of social processes that creates and maintains social control and produces and reproduces structural inequalities. It is a process that involves identifying and using differences between groups of people to create and legitimize social hierarchies and transforms these differences into social inequalities. If stigma and discrimination are understood to be the products of social rather than individual processes, it follows that challenging stigma and discrimination requires social action to change the context within which individuals and communities respond to HIV/AIDS rather than just individual action. Creating a climate in which stigma and discrimination are no longer tolerated therefore requires social and community mobilization and empowerment of marginalized group to resist stigma and discrimination, and structural interventions, specially laws and policies that protect the rights of People living with AIDS and those affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

It is in this context that this Meeting of Labour Ministers has been organized as a prelude to some concrete intervention steps that are to be taken to prevent the spread of the infection, particularly in terms formulating national policies in order to protect the rights of the people living with HIV/AIDS.

It is hoped that the discussion and joint decision emerging in this meeting will enable all of us to take to take necessary concerted action in this area.