

## International Women's Day celebration in Pakistan

Manzoor Ahmed BUTT

International Women's Day is celebrated every year on 8 March. It provides an opportunity to: (i) assess the advances in women's equality; (ii) assess the challenges women face in different social-cultural contexts; (iii) consider future steps to enhance the status of women; and (iv) celebrate the gains made in these areas.

This year the theme is 'Women and HIV/AIDS'. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), combating gender inequality is crucial in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Women's vulnerability to the epidemic is increasing throughout the world.

While HIV/AIDS is a health issue, the epidemic is also a gender issue. Statistics demonstrate that both the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS disproportionately affects women and adolescent girls who are socially, culturally, biologically and economically more vulnerable. The figures are alarming. In sub-Saharan Africa, women make up 58% of people living with the disease. In southern Africa one in four women aged 20-29 is HIV positive.<sup>1</sup>

Pakistan is considered a low prevalence but high risk country for HIV/AIDS due to the low number of reported cases and high prevalence of risk factors. The total number of reported HIV/AIDS cases in Pakistan by December 2002 was 1998. The WHO/UNAIDS forecast model estimates the number to be approximately 78 000.<sup>2</sup>

The Human Rights Commission for Pakistan (HRCP) launched its annual report titled *State of Human Rights in 2003* on 19 March 2004 in Islamabad. It states that violence against women continues and there is no evidence of a decrease, with a reported 600 women losing their lives to honor killings.<sup>3</sup>

HIV/AIDS is regarded as a curse of God rather than a disease. The sufferers are not given the status of a patient but of criminals and sinners. Their families disown them and people hate them. They are thrown out of jobs and schools. We have been trying to increase awareness about STDs through our Family Health Program for the past 4 years.

On 8 March 2004, our team launched an initiative which consisted of dissemination of the following information through handbills and regular meetings of various groups of men and women for brainstorming:

1 HIV/AIDS is a disease and not a crime or sin. Unprotected sexual activity is the major but not the sole cause of spread of this infection. Anyone can contract HIV through the following:

- infected blood;
- infected mother to newborn;
- milk of HIV+ mother;
- multiple use of infected syringes;
- infected dental instruments;
- infected instruments for piercing of ears and nose;
- infected blades.

2 Like all patients, people suffering from HIV/AIDS also deserve care, love and sympathy. They should be provided with all possible financial help by family and friends because the treatment is very expensive. They should be visited regularly. Diet should be monitored. We should also assist them to have peace of mind.

3 Because they are a part of humanity, we have a moral obligation not to:

- hate them;
- disown them;
- throw them out of home;
- throw them out of jobs and schools.

4 The community should recognise and ensure equal rights for women to have access to information, treatment, care and support regarding this disease.

Ours is definitely a male-dominant society. I have undertaken the most difficult job of informing women about their rights and men about their obligations as heads of families. I have been striving since 1993 in collaboration with my local and international friends but our work has been limited to our immediate community. The Global Family Doctor Award gave me more opportunities. People have started listening to us with interest and respect. It has helped me to get access to useful people and institutions in the country. This has really opened new dimensions for my work. I am getting a lot of invitations throughout Pakistan, especially the remote areas, to visit and work with them.

Our present parliament has more women coming in than ever before. Their presence has generated more discussions on important matters related to women; for example, a bill against domestic violence has been introduced and child sexual abuse has been discussed.

I have no hesitation in saying that WONCA has been

---

Correspondence: Dr Manzoor Ahmed Butt, Family Physician, Researcher & Trainer, Maqbool Clinic, Research & Training Center, Dhoke Kala Khan, Shamsabad, Rawalpindi-46300, Pakistan. Accepted for publication 7 October 2004.

the most useful institution for furthering our course. Last but not the least, I owe a lot to Lesley Pocock who has provided me with tremendous help and guidance. She is truly an inspiring personality.

## References

- 1 Brown MM. *Message on Women's International Day*. New York: United Nations Development Program, 8 March 2004.
- 2 Ghauri AK, Ansari MA, Rasheed A. *STDs & HIV/AIDS in Pakistan*. Cairo: World Health Organization Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office, 2004.  
Available at: [www.emro.who.int/asd/Presentations/HIVSTD\\_Pakistan.ppt](http://www.emro.who.int/asd/Presentations/HIVSTD_Pakistan.ppt)
- 3 United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks. 'Pakistan: Human Rights Commission launches Annual Report.' In: IRINnews.org 19 March 2004. Available at: [www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=40141&SelectRegion=Central\\_Asia](http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=40141&SelectRegion=Central_Asia)