

NEWS

The Crime of Being Gay (and Having to Hide It)

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Jim Pickett (at right) stands with with Brian Kanyemba of the Desmond Tutu HIV Foundation in Cape Town, South Africa, in (Photo)

The dream of the AIDS-free generation will never be realized as long as we remain countries in the world that kill and imprison people for being gay.

Same goes for countries that won't even acknowledge homosexuality within their national boundaries and therefore fail to provide targeted HIV prevention and treatment services. Such are the realities underscored by a new report, "[an AIDS-free Generation for Gay Men and Other MSM,](#)"

(http://www.amfar.org/uploadedFiles/In_the_Community/Publications/GlobalRept2012.pdf), released by amfAR and Johns Hopkins University Wednesday.

The report studied the funding and implementation of HIV services targeting MSM (men who have sex with men) in eight countries where same-sex activity is criminalized or heavily stigmatized: China, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Guyana, Mozambique, India, Nigeria and Ukraine. Among other findings, the report concluded that MSM are “deprioritized and marginalized by national HIV prevention programs.”

In the report’s own words: “It will be impossible to achieve an ‘AIDS-Free Generation’ if MSM are left behind.”

(For those who may not know, the phrase “AIDS-free generation” has become a battle cry for people and organizations involved in the ongoing efforts to end the 30-year-old AIDS epidemic, gaining momentum since Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used it in her historic November 2011 speech.)

The report rings true for Jim Pickett, director of prevention advocacy and public health for the AIDS Foundation of Chicago (AFC). Pickett is also chair of the [International Rectal Microbicides Advocates](http://www.rectalmicrobicides.org) (<http://www.rectalmicrobicides.org>), a group that does what its name suggests. His work takes him all over the world to advocate for microbicide research and other HIV prevention strategies.

“Sadly, it’s not new. It’s what we know. But ... it’s really important for us to put that message out there. It’s another way to have this discussion shed light on these disparities and to move forward in the right direction,” Pickett said. “(This report) is a really important document.”

Pickett was in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, just last month for a meeting with the launch of [Project ARM](http://www.rectalmicrobicides.org/docs/Project%20ARM%20fact%20sheet) (<http://www.rectalmicrobicides.org/docs/Project%20ARM%20fact%20sheet>) (stands for Africa for Rectal Microbicides). Project ARM is an IRMA initiative. The launch conference coincided with the 2011 International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa.

It was wrought with tension from the get-go, as anti-gay religious groups wind of an African gay men's health pre-conference satellite and began a protest. Eventually, they were silenced by the Ethiopian government. But it was an uncomfortable learning experience: IRMA and Project ARM on their own agendas low-profile and encountered no problems.

At the Project ARM meeting, advocates from Malawi, Uganda and others talked about the fear of being discovered gay after receiving threats of arrest and death.

"We acknowledge that in our quest for developing these new HIV prevention strategies like rectal microbicides, they are for naught if people aren't safe. You can't be who they are wherever they are," Pickett said. "If you are so deeply stigmatized or demonized that you have to be hidden, you're not going to go to the counter and get a rectal microbicide. You're not going to get these services."

As an example, Pickett pointed to the arrests of nine gay men in Senegal during the 2008 ICASA. Word quickly rippled through the gay community in Senegal.

"It had a terrible chilling effect on their services," Pickett said. "They had different programs and services – no one came anymore. ... When those things happen, people go underground and they don't show up, don't get what they need, and they hide."

One strategy is to try to change the laws and reverse the tide of public opinion in countries where homosexuality is either criminalized or heavily stigmatized. HIV services for gay men and other MSM can be offered while making an argument based on science, epidemiology and the public's health, Pickett said. For some organizations do outreach and services for gay/bi men as part of their or "sex worker" programs.

"It's almost better to say 'sex workers' and fold in gay/MSM there," he said.

Despite the overwhelming challenges that gay/bi men in these countries face, Pickett said, there are reasons for hope. The Internet has served as a connecting community all over the world. The HIV advocates in these difficult countries are resilient, lively people, Pickett said. And they are organizing and making

“I’m hopeful,” Pickett said. “We’re in a terrible situation, but I feel like the energy addressing it, more reports coming out like this one, giving you in Vietnam or Ethiopia tools to advocate to their public health authority funders to say hey you can’t ignore this.”

Progress is not linear. But Pickett said he became emotional as he looked into the room with the Project ARM advocates in Ethiopia last month. He was surrounded by 40 or so people who had traveled from various African countries enduring hellish visa problems in addition to the typical discrimination in their homelands, just to be there.

“They were there to talk about rectal microbicides and talk about new technologies and hope and the future,” Pickett said. “And they were energized, inspired and engaged. I just thought, my God, they have all these other challenges, they still have that. And they’re organizing. They’re the most inspiring”

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