

# **Stigma, Denial and Discrimination in the Era of the HIV/AIDS Pandemic**

**Dhee Naidoo (Mr.Y)**

## **Introduction**

Good afternoon to members of the community, fellow colleagues and friends. My name is Dhee Naidoo, I am from the Human Science Research Council in the Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS and Health Unit. I would like to thank Rani Pather from A RAY OF HOPE for this opportunity to speak at this forum. My talk today will focus on Stigma, Denial and Discrimination within the Indian community focusing on Chatsworth, where my research was conducted.

Stigma is a complicated process with various inter-related and complex factors and is affected by dynamics such as race, gender, and socio-economic status. The process of stigmatization involves labeling differences, and separating 'us' from 'them' (Smith, 2002).

The process creates blaming and shaming, and often results in isolation. It becomes easy to discriminate against people living with HIV/AIDS because people think that they no longer have the qualities that make them worthy of respect and dignity. People act on their beliefs and this often creates active discrimination and human rights abuses. Discrimination can be systemic (institutionalized) or individual (person/group directed against another person/group).

This talk will focus on HIV related stigma, denial and discrimination that are found in Chatsworth. It explores the community's attitudes towards HIV/AIDS, as well as the stigma that HIV people experience within the community.

## HIV/AIDS and Stigmatisation

HIV/AIDS is associated with certain attributes and behaviour that are seen to be contrary to prevailing norms within the community or accepted ways of behaving. According to Mani, a community member in Chatsworth,

*“All these young people today are losing their values and culture, which is why they get AIDS and die. Girls are gone too loose now; they do what ever they want and sleep with all the men, very disrespectful. People that got AIDS deserve it; it is through their immoral behaviour that they are dying now of this sickness. I don’t feel sorry for these people.”*

Verushka, member of Chatsworth community, further states,

*“I wouldn’t want to associate with anyone that has AIDS. In today’s world most of the people are loosing their values, that is why so many people are getting AIDS. It is the break down of family values and don’t care attitude by many that leads them to immoral behaviour. So these people must not complain now that they got AIDS.”*

The coming of HIV/AIDS in Chatsworth gave renewed life to the concept of disease as punishment and other moral judgments, as noted by Mani and Verushka. The association of HIV/AIDS with the break down of family values and sex further stigmatized those infected by HIV.

Stigma creates barriers to HIV/AIDS prevention and care by creating an environment in which it is difficult to talk openly about the ways in which HIV is transmitted and how to stop it from being transmitted. It also creates the false impression that only certain people can become infected. Rani further states,

*“Most of the people that I have counseled that are HIV positive, believed that HIV did not affect Indians, they said they thought it was only among the Black community or the homosexuals. They didn’t believe it could have happened to them.”*

In Chatsworth HIV/AIDS, according to most of the people interviewed, is still seen as someone else's disease. South African Indians largely perceive it to be a Black or homosexual disease. Rene explains,

*"I never knew HIV could affect Indians, I always thought it was among gay people and black people. Everyone in the community when you talk to them say the similar thing."*

From Rene's statement, it is clear that people are often ignorant of the fact that they are in as much danger of contracting HIV/AIDS as any Black African person or other South African. These stigmas are formed from stereotypes and a certain degree of fear. If people believe that a certain group is the only one that is susceptible to the disease then it creates a false sense of security for the people who are not within the designated infected group.

It is because of stereotypes like these that most of the HIV positive people interviewed in this current study feared to disclose their status. Their greatest fears are associated with stigma that surrounds the disease and not the actual pain and suffering of HIV/AIDS. Jackie states,

*"My boyfriend gave me AIDS. The both us did not ever think that an Indian person could get AIDS. I did tell him use a condom most of the time, as I feared getting pregnant. I did not tell anyone I got AIDS, not even my family. I know I will be called names, as most people do not think it can happen to Indians."*

Most of the information gathered from the participants revealed that many Chatsworth residents are in denial and are prepared to hide their status at the cost of their health. The reason for this silence is that they are afraid of being judged and labeled because of the lack of knowledge surrounding HIV/AIDS and the existing stigmas and stereotypes that surround the disease.

## **Stigma, Denial and Discrimination**

Stigma is facilitating the growth of the HIV/AIDS pandemic within the South African Indian population. While poverty and low levels of education are amongst peoples' worries, HIV/AIDS stigma is also a big worry. Freddy states,

*"I am HIV-positive and always getting sick. I am rejected by the community, my family doesn't want anything to do with me. Only my sister is willing to look after me. She took me in when her husband died. When I moved in with her, I used to talk about HIV and AIDS to educate them but the people are ignorant, they don't talk to my sister anymore."*

Freddy is one of just a handful of people in Chatsworth who are willing to disclose their HIV-positive status. Most are shunned by the community. Vassie explains,

*"Since I told my family about my status, they turned their backs on me and blamed me for the illness, saying I was a loose woman that is why I got AIDS, no decent Indian women will sleep around and that is why I got AIDS."*

The experiences of people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS in Chatsworth stand testimony to the stigma and discrimination that they face on a daily basis. Shanthi says,

*"When I told my parents I was HIV positive, they told me never to set foot in their house again. My husband died few years ago. My family does not want anything to do with me. I am all alone. I should have never told them."*

Discrimination experiences were common and internalized AIDS stigmas were prevalent among participants who were HIV infected. Most of the participants in this study had never talked with a friend or family member about their HIV status and a few that did disclose their status said that they were treated differently by friends and family since they had tested HIV positive, as seen in the cases of Freddy, Vassie and Shanthi. They experienced discrimination resulting from having HIV. These adverse experiences accounted for why most of the

participants said that they had not told people about their HIV status because of fear of their reactions. Mangla states,

*“I am too afraid of disclosing my status. My family and friends will not understand. I do know of people who are HIV positive and did tell their family, they were disowned and kicked out of their homes.”*

## **Conclusion**

Due to fear of discrimination many of the people interviewed felt that disclosing their status is a huge challenge, one which they are not yet ready for. They would rather keep their problems hidden. Yet, by doing this the disease continues to spread in the community, unabated and shrouded in silence.

Discrimination against those with HIV and stigmas attached to HIV/AIDS has grown rapidly within the community of Chatsworth, fuelling anxiety and prejudice against those living with HIV or AIDS. People's experiences with HIV clearly revealed that HIV/AIDS is as much about social phenomena as it is about biological and medical concerns. The disease is largely associated with stigma, repression and discrimination, as individuals infected or affected by HIV have been rejected by their families, their loved ones and their community more generally.

THANK YOU.....