

## Library Intervention Strategies for Effective Control of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper tries to describe library intervention strategies for effective control of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria.

**Approach:** The paper expresses a personal view on how the library and some community social organizations/groups could help to educate and inform the rural populace on how to control and reduce the stigma and discrimination experienced by people living with HIV.

**Implication:** Such discriminatory attitudes are inhuman and can never be a means of fighting the deadly virus in our society. Changing attitudes are not that easy but a lot can be done through a variety of interventions, so as to reduce to the lowest ebb the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS.

**Originality/Value:** Actions aimed at overcoming stigma associated with HIV/AIDS can only be effective if executed collectively by all and sundry in our society.

**Keywords:** HIV/AIDS; Stigma; Pandemic; Epidemic; Compassion; Information; Library

**Paper type:** Conceptual

### Introduction

Generally, many people in our communities do not have adequate knowledge and proper access to information about HIV/AIDS. In 2018, about 1.9 million people in Nigeria were reported to be living with HIV (UNAIDS, 2019). The rural communities in Nigeria have higher rates of HIV (NACA, 2015). It is commonplace to see people in most rural communities who do not believe that the disease exists. Those who believe that the disease exists have lower levels of knowledge about its mode of transmission. Poverty which is synonymous with the rural community makes education and access to mass media and other sources of information more difficult. Lack of knowledge and appropriate sexual reproductive health services are among the factors that are associated with increase in HIV vulnerability among young people in Nigeria (NBS and UNICEF, 2017). The poor people in rural communities are less able to equip themselves with proper health knowledge to prevent the risk of transmission. Knowledge of every subject such as health, centers on the availability of information. Information (Health information) per se is a commodity that is very important to the growth and development of the community (Ofoefuna, 2003). Information informs, enlightens, directs and creates awareness which invariably will lead to healthy community life, especially in this era of AIDS pandemic that is shifting from cities to rural areas of our communities. In its earlier stages, the HIV/AIDS epidemic was predominantly

an urban problem, affecting more men than women, and those with relatively higher incomes (Ogden and Nyblade, 2005). Now the epidemic has rapidly moved into the rural areas of our communities, hitting those who are least equipped to deal with its consequences. Today, 95% of people living with and dying of HIV/AIDS are in developing countries. The overwhelming majorities is the rural poor, and among them women figure disproportionately (Visser et al., 2006). In spite of the vast amount of news and information on radio and television available on HIV/AIDS, millions of people in rural communities lack accurate information and analysis on many issues related to this pandemic. Experts and communities have consistently identified HIV-related stigma and discrimination as critical barriers to effectively addressing HIV (United Nations, 2006). Stigma and discrimination have permeated the nooks and crannies of our society: within individuals, families, communities, institutions and media (Heijnders and van der Meij, 2006; Ogden and Nyblade, 2005). The reason for this can be attributed to poor access to health information which has helped in the propagation of the social stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. Both urban and community libraries can be of immense help in dissemination of health information about HIV/AIDS, which would be geared in reducing the social stigma that is associated with the disease. In the light of this background information, this paper presents the possible ways the library can

partner with our community social groups in reducing the HIV/AIDS stigma in our society.

### **HIV/AIDS and the Associated Stigma**

The abbreviation HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. This virus is responsible for the disease called AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) (Ann Pietrangelo, 2018). The disease (AIDS) affects the immune system of the body (human immune system). The virus attacks the white blood cells, which protect the body from diseases. The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a lentivirus which belongs to a larger group of viruses called retroviruses (Cohen, 2000). "Lentivirus" literally denotes virus that is slow in producing disease in the body. Stigma on the other hand is an undesirable or discrediting attribute that an individual possesses, thus reducing that individual's status in the eyes of the society (Goffman, 1963). In fact, AIDS – related stigma stands out as prejudice, disconcerting, discrediting and discrimination; directed at people perceived to have AIDS or being infected with HIV and at the individuals, groups and communities with which they are associated (Herek and Mitnick, 1998). It is common to see people in our society react with disgust, anger, and fear toward men, women and children infected with the AIDS virus. Stigma related to AIDS could also affect the credibility of the person considered HIV positive. The affected victims are almost always deemed unreliable and unfit to interact with others. Many people often avoid contact or exclude AIDS victims at workplaces, schools, libraries and in their neighbourhoods. This type of behaviour could gravely affect the self-esteem of the victim and his/her capacity to interact with members of his/her community. Stigma is a "label" that sets a person apart from others and links the labeled person to undesirable characteristics (Latino Commission on AIDS, 2008). It is a negative evaluation of a person that allows individuals to avoid thinking about the stigmatized as human beings who have feelings, emotions, family, friends, jobs, and particular identities. In reality, stigma is a way to dehumanize or devalue other people.

### **Reasons Why HIV/AIDS Victims Are Stigmatized**

In the past when the causative agent that causes leprosy was not known, people living with the disease were highly stigmatized. This negative attitude of people towards affected leprosy victims later became a thing of the past when people were properly informed and educated about the disease and its mode of transmission.

Today, despite all the reassurances provided by health professionals that HIV/AIDS is not transmitted through casual contact, HIV/AIDS victims in our communities are continuously being stigmatized. The stigmatization of HIV/AIDS victims is borne out of ignorance and fear about the disease. Some people stigmatize HIV/AIDS victims so that they will not contact the disease. No member of any community would want to associate himself or herself with HIV/AIDS victim for the fear of being "labeled" as one with HIV/AIDS disease.

### **Social Consequences of Stigmatization of HIV/AIDS Victims**

Many people in our communities see HIV/AIDS victims as people that should be ostracized from our environment. Hardly will people shake hands or sit near people they assume to be infected with the AIDS virus. Almost always, these AIDS victims are avoided by family members, friends, coworkers and neighbours. Newspapers in Nigeria and outside Nigeria have carried reports of HIV/AIDS victims that have been fired from their jobs or evicted from their rented houses by their landlords. The consequence of this maltreatment of AIDS victims is their withdrawal from social contact. The HIV/AIDS victims that are stigmatized by the society face severe psychological imbalance. These groups of people experience negative emotions such as fear, depression, hostility and anxiety (Barbee et al., 1998). Societal rejection of HIV/AIDS victims intensifies their feelings of loneliness and alienation among the victims. Most of these victims feel very annoyed with the society's ignorance concerning their positive HIV/AIDS status. Stigma has been found to have negative consequences for the physical health of people with HIV/AIDS (Brown et al., 2003). Many people will not go to the health centres and other test centres to be tested as a result of fear of stigma or rejection. Individuals who shield their HIV status may be under stress and poor health than those who disclose their illness. This is because, those with positive HIV/AIDS status will always have access to social and medical support that will in the end decrease their levels of stress and improve their health status (Falk, 2001). Those people who hide their HIV/AIDS status due to fear of stigma, experience additional stress, which will invariably contribute to weaken their immunological competence.

### **How Libraries Can Partner with Community Social Groups in Educating the Rural Populace in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS Stigma**

It has become just as important to combat the stigma as it is to develop medical cures to prevent or control the spread of HIV. Changing attitudes

are not that easy. Eliminating stigma completely remains at this stage only a dream, but an overview of researches does suggest that something can be done through a variety of

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contact with someone that is living with HIV or AIDS (Brown et al., 2003). Whatever approach that is adopted in tackling the problem of HIV/AIDS stigma, should always be “compassion” oriented. Compassion means to have empathy and sympathy for other peoples’ suffering, to care about other peoples’ well-being (UNAIDS 2007). Library managements in our society and some community social groups can partner together to address the issue of HIV/AIDS stigma, bearing compassion in mind.

**Religion:** Religion is one avenue that can be used to disseminate adequate information about HIV/AIDS. There is no religion that does not preach compassion for one another. Compassion offers human beings the possibility to see and treat each other with understanding and love. Religious leaders in our communities should endeavour to disseminate the message or information about HIV/AIDS in their churches and mosques. They can make use of community information centres to disseminate information on HIV/AIDS to members of their communities. A community information centre is an integrated information service that disseminates information to members of a community and diagnoses their information needs and conveys their needs to relevant agencies (Opara, 2007). Religious leaders in collaboration with community library management and community information centres can come together to give periodic talks and counseling to community members with respect to HIV/AIDS stigma. Community members should be meant to understand the effects of HIV/AIDS stigmatization on the lives of HIV/AIDS victims. Not only that, the churches/mosques should be able to show that leadership role by organizing evangelism with such slogans as “HIV/AIDS victims are God’s children”, “Stigmatizing HIV/AIDS victims is a sin”, “Show compassion to HIV/AIDS victims” etc. Today, medical science has shown that AIDS is not transmitted by sheer contact with an infected person. Community churches/mosques should be encouraged by community libraries to procure health books, magazines and periodicals that publish articles on HIV/AIDS and its mode of transmission. Family members of AIDS affected individuals, instead of stigmatizing them, should encourage them to go to church/mosque and worship God. There is no disease that is beyond God’s curing power.

**Schools:** To reduce the stigma that is associated with HIV/AIDS is to deal with the fears about the transmission of this ravaging epidemic. Medical science has tried to resolve the misconception that

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cough or sneeze, hugging or shaking hands with someone that is HIV positive. Adequate and proper information on the transmission and prevention of the disease should be made available to primary, secondary and tertiary schools by librarians, especially those who work in medical libraries so as to dispel unfounded fears associated with this disease. This can be done through periodic seminars, workshops, symposia and film shows. Community libraries can also organize outreach programmes where students and other members of the community could be enlightened and informed on the need to show love and compassion to HIV/AIDS victims instead of stigmatizing them. Community libraries can also arrange periodic visits by health experts to schools in their communities so as to educate the students on the need to stop stigmatization and discrimination of HIV/AIDS patients. Through proper HIV testing in schools, pupils and students in schools will be furnished with adequate information and knowledge about the mode of transmission and prevention of the disease which invariably will help in reducing or checking the level of stigmatization. Health officials who perform the tests on pupils and students in various schools should create the awareness in schools concerning stigma and discrimination as well as the need to see them as social ills in our communities. Pupils and students in schools should be taught how to show love and compassion to HIV/AIDS victims. There is a great need for the ministry of education to consider the introduction of the social effects of HIV/AIDS stigma in school curriculum at all levels.

**Community Libraries:** The mere presence of a library in a community should not bring hope and attention to areas that may have experienced neglect but should also try to tackle some social vices such as the stigma and discrimination of HIV/AIDS victims. Community library management in conjunction with community health officials should reach out to all nooks and crannies of the community using handbills, pamphlets etc that will address fears and misconceptions of HIV transmission. Such handbills and pamphlets should be able to provide detail information on HIV/AIDS and its mode of transmission. The handbills and pamphlets could be distributed to remote areas of the rural communities in community library vans.

**Age Grades:** Various community age grades in partnership with community library management can be used to mobilize action as well as disseminate information to challenge HIV/AIDS stigmatization. These age grades with library officials can always mount an awareness campaign that will not only educate the public but enlighten them on the need to show love and compassion to HIV/AIDS victims. Such campaign will go a long way in reducing the level of HIV/AIDS stigma in our community.

**Market Traders:** Community library management can always organize film shows, documentaries and symposia on HIV/AIDS for market men and women in our rural communities. Through such organized activities, these traders will be properly educated and informed. They will have the opportunity of seeing how people from enlightened society show love and compassion to people living with HIV/AIDS.

**Community Health Centers and Maternities:** Rural community health centers and maternities should be equipped to screen patients for HIV/AIDS, especially pregnant women. Such health centers and maternities in conjunction with their community libraries should always organize anti-stigma/discrimination workshops where people should be meant to show love and compassion to HIV/AIDS victims in their communities. Activities of this nature will not only provide the much-needed information on HIV/AIDS but will also provide adequate education and counseling to both HIV/AIDS victims and non victims in our communities. By so doing, indirect and direct interactions between victims of HIV/AIDS and non victims will be promoted and thus help in dispelling the myths about people affected with the disease.

#### Conclusion

Actions aimed at overcoming stigma associated with HIV/AIDS can only be effective if executed collectively by all and sundry in our society. Such actions should be based on deep social transformation. Almost always, HIV negative people are the group that stigmatizes against HIV/AIDS victims in our communities/societies. To reduce the level of stigmatization in HIV/AIDS victims, the HIV negative people need to be properly informed and educated in order to create an enabling environment free of fear of HIV biased social attitudes. The community library managements together with the various community social organizations can be used as powerful tools to achieve the objective of reducing HIV/AIDS stigma in our rural communities.

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