



2008 MSM Pre-Conference
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TRANSCRIPT

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It's high time, in fact long overdue that the world, the whole world accepts, if not celebrate that there have always been and always will be men who have sex with men. Some men have sex only with men. Others have sex with men and women. All of them, all of us have the right to health, the right to life, the right for freedom from discrimination and persecution. 25 years into the epidemic, fewer than 1 in 20 men who have sex with men around the world has access to prevention, treatment, and care, according to UNAIDS. Homophobia continues to fuel the spread of HIV in countries with concentrated epidemics and in countries with generalized epidemics alike. This must change! Research has demonstrated over and over again, that reducing the social exclusion of men who have sex with men through the promotion and protection of our human rights is not only consistent with, but a prerequisite to, public health. The International AIDS Society (IAS) considers it a major priority to put this evidence into practice everywhere and now. On behalf of the International AIDS Society, I would like to welcome you all to the Global Forum on MSM and HIV's pre-conference to the 17th International HIV and AIDS Conference.

This is the region where the fight for human rights, for women's rights, for gay rights, for migrants' rights have been at the forefront in the response to HIV since the beginning. It is therefore fitting that the rights of men who have sex with men throughout the world, to their lives, to their loves, and to their health begins to take center stage at this conference. Many of you are aware that the IAS has undergone significant changes since our relocation and re-organization began in 2004. We built up a small but strong central secretariat of 40 persons both to organize and ensure the institutional memory of our conferences, and to link our conferences to a structured education, policy, and advocacy agenda; to accelerate research and implementation of evidence into sound policy and programming throughout the world. In 2007, the IAS adopted 5 policy priorities, one of which is to combat stigma and discrimination. These priorities stem from 25 years of evidence that clearly shows that public health is undermined where stigma and discrimination persist.

In the past year, our work in this area has focused on three fronts: working more effectively with our partners through the Living Partnership to strengthen the meaningful participation of people living with HIV and the response; acting as the global secretariat for a task team convened by UNAIDS to eliminate entry, stay, and residence restrictions on people living with HIV; and working more closely with our partners to strengthen research, programming, and the protection of human rights for men who have sex with men.

Our work in the past year to expand the meaningful involvement of people living with HIV and the response has resulted in the Living 2008 Positive Leadership Summit taking place now in Mexico City; an expanded roster of presenters and sessions in the conference program devoted

to this issue; and within the IAS secretariat itself, in the recruitment of a number of strong leadership positions from people living with HIV.

On the issue of entry, stay and residence for people living with HIV, we have seen how concerted effort of a diverse, committed group of individuals and organizations can quickly lead to results. On Wednesday earlier this week, President Bush signed into law the PEPFAR re-authorization bill, which included striking the law, the shameful and discriminatory 20-year law that has banned people living with HIV from entering the US. China has considered removing its entry restrictions on people living with HIV, and in the past two weeks, there have been reports that Russia and a number of Middle Eastern countries aim to do the same. A comprehensive database on country-by-country on restrictions is now available at www.HIVtravel.org.

Turning to the issue of men who have sex with men, at the end of February this year, IAS convened a meeting with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Geneva (with) 25 leading gay and human rights advocates from around the world. The meeting focused on the state of global advocacy for the HIV prevention needs of gay men and other men who have sex with men.

Out of that meeting emerged five (5) key recommendations. One, the policy of criminalizing homosexuality is a contributing factor and violence towards HIV transmission between gay and other men who have sex with men. All international actors engage in HIV or human rights advocacy should adopt decriminalization of homosexuality as a key part of their advocacy agenda. Secondly, UN agencies must expand their leadership on, and identify their responsibilities towards MSM and HIV advocacy. To this end, we are very pleased that UNDP has been agreed on, and agreed to act as the focal organization for overall responsibility within the UNAIDS family for men who have sex with men issues. Thirdly, organizations involved with planning global and regional HIV responses, as well as national HIV responses including country coordinating mechanisms and HIV control committees must ensure that HIV-related services are available to men who have sex with men, and that funds dedicated to these services at the national level are proportional to the impact of HIV on men who have sex with men in that country. Fourth, men who have sex with men must be included in national surveillance and independent epidemiological and behavioral research studies. The IAS (also) believes that much more research with men who have sex with men across all disciplines should be funded and completed in order to drive effective policy and programming. Finally, donors must create systems of accountability that require implementing agencies to expand access to prevention and treatment technologies for gay and other men who have sex with men. We can and we must implement these recommendations and much more.

Throughout the world, gay and other men who have with men continue to be harassed, beaten and jailed. We continue to be disproportionately affected by HIV, underrepresented in treatment cohorts, and in many cases, we continue to remain invisible in our societies. Some countries have moved towards full rights for homosexuals, including the right to marriage and to adopt children. The disparities become ever more acute against countries that execute, jail, or condone state-sponsored harassment. The recent case of Ugandan gay activists arrested at the PEPFAR conference in June is just one glaring example of increasing intolerance that can no longer be tolerated. The International AIDS Society commits to continue to speak out through the media against these issues and continue to work with all of you towards this end of the elimination of intolerance. In my own 45 years of life, I have evolved from a young man terrified that my desire for other men would at worst result in me burning eternally in the fires of hell, and at best result in a life of loneliness and social exclusion, to finding great support, fun and acceptance in the gay community; to watching friends, lovers, and colleagues die of AIDS; to

finding a lover I could never dream to be so wonderful; to embracing the love and celebration by our families for the love we share; to having my government in Canada recognize our love through the right to marriage. I consider (it) a privilege and a responsibility to fight for everyone to have the same dignity and respect that I have acquired. I wish you well over the next two days at the pre-conference, and I wish you well at the International AIDS conference. I look forward to working with all of you towards an AIDS free, homophobe free world. Thank you for listening.