‘Getting to zero’ HIV/AIDS requires effective addressing of HIV issues in LGBT community

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Abstract

This communication is regarding the necessity to address the HIV-related needs of LGBTQIA+ community (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/transsexual, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexuality, and others) for attaining the ‘GETTING TO ZERO’ theme for zero new HIV infections, zero AIDS-related deaths and zero discrimination. Most of the times, prevention of HIV/AIDS is talked about in terms of faithfulness to one’s partner, use of protective devices such as condoms, pre and post exposure prophylaxis, using anti-retroviral therapies and use of microbicides, behavioral change etc. HIV-related issues are however, one of the pertinent issues that needs to be effectively addressed in the LGBTQIA+ community. Clin Ter 2018; 169(6):e269-271. doi: 10.7417/CT.2018.2090

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Introduction/Background

From year 2011 to 2015, the international theme for World AIDS day has been ‘GETTING TO ZERO’ i.e. zero new HIV infections, zero AIDS-related deaths and zero discrimination. To achieve this, prevention of HIV/AIDS is mostly talked about in terms of faithfulness to one’s partner, use of protective devices such as condoms, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) (1,2) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) (3,4) using anti-retroviral therapies and use of microbicides, behavioral change etc. Furthermore, the research for HIV vaccine that would offer a significant protection from HIV infection is still continuing (5,6). But one of the important HIV-related issues that has not been effectively addressed while talking about the ‘getting to zero’ theme, are those related to LGBTQIA+ community as pointed out by international organizations WHO and UNAIDS also.

The terminologies and definitions related to LGBT community are always changing and they may mean different interpretations to different people (7-9). However, to define LGBT community, the newest and the exact acronym is “LGBTQIA+”. Here, L stands for ‘Lesbian’ - a woman attracted to other women i.e. homosexual females; G stands for ‘Gay’ - A man attracted towards other men i.e. homosexual males; B stands for ‘Bisexual’ - when the person is attracted towards both men and women i.e. both the sexes; T stands for ‘Trans’ - An umbrella term used for transgender and transsexual people; Q stands for ‘Queer/Questioning’ - Queer literally means abnormal or strange, this term is used describe the gender whose gender identity is outside the strict male/female binary i.e. who identify as both genders, neither gender or parts of each gender, and questioning refers to the persons who are unsure of their sexual orientation or gender identity; I stands for ‘intersex’ - this may be used in biological terms where there is a mixing up of secondary sexual characteristics of males and females, in other words, they are not exactly fitting into the definition of a male or a female; A stands for ‘Asexual’ - meaning that the individual experiences no sexual attraction (or little) towards another person; The “+” signifies those individuals who do not fit into the above mentioned categories (7-9).

Various researchers have talked about the detrimental effects that criminalization of homosexuality can have on the health of individuals involved especially contracting of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. A recent study on MSM (Men who have sex with men) in Nigeria also pointed towards the harmful consequences of criminalizing homosexuality in achieving global goals of HIV eradication (10). Such laws have been previously condemned in Africa, where Academy of Science of South Africa through its report on ‘Diversity in human sexuality’ stated that these laws are not based on scientific evidence and these in fact obstruct the efforts of prevention of HIV/AIDS and other STDs (Sexually transmitted diseases) (11).

Homosexuality and corrective rapes

The western part of the world is progressing towards recognizing same-sex marriages and equality of civil rights. However, approach of many countries on the Eastern part of the globe including India is still not encouraging as homo-
sexuality in these countries is considered to be an unnatural phenomenon and laws have been enacted for criminalizing this act, which may have a serious impact on public health. In 2013, Supreme Court of India reinstated the section 377 in 2013, thereby criminalizing same-sex behaviour (12). Not only is the legal system disappointing as far as the LGBT issues are concerned in many countries, these individuals also have to suffer discrimination and stigma at the hands of society.

In one of the progressive development in this regard, the Supreme Court of India decriminalized the Section 377 of the IPC in September, 2018. Most societies regard heterosexuality as the only ‘normal’ sexual orientation as sexual and marital relationships between men and women are accepted; the heterosexuals who defy and challenge such roles are considered ‘abnormal’ and ‘unnatural’ and they have to face discrimination and violence at the hands of the society. These discriminatory practices of extreme prejudice and homophobic attitude of people along with the absence of legal framework causes many psychosocial and mental health issues in individuals of this community. Various forms of discrimination include physical and mental abuse, discrimination in schools and hospitals, illegal detention, use of psychiatric drugs, hormones and electric shock therapy etc. One such act of discrimination and violence reported against homosexual ideation is the “corrective rapes”. “Corrective rape” is the term used to correct the sexual orientation of homosexuals with the aim of penalizing them for their “unnatural” sexual behaviour. The term was first used in South Africa in early 2000s. These cases have also been recently reported from India where the Times of India on 1st June, 2015 in its report entitled ‘Parents use corrective rape to straighten gay kids’(13), mentioned about corrective rapes in the Telangana State of India as found by the “Crisis Intervention Team of LGBT Collective”. Earlier such cases have been reported from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Thailand, Uganda and Ecuador. Most shockingly, the perpetrators of these rapes are usually the close family members of these victims. This act of “hate crime” is an example of extreme prejudice and homophobia given the fact that studies have pointed that genetics is among one of the many social and environmental factors that influences sexuality (14) and also that gene mutations during gonad development in embryo can result in growth of female characteristics in an otherwise male child and vice versa (15).

In southern African countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia; there are instances where such victims of “corrective rapes” contracted HIV/ AIDS due to the repeated, forceful and unsafe sexual encounters (16). It will take some time to establish similar links in other countries due to the limited reporting of such incidents owing to the reluctance of the victims to share their stories. Furthermore, the risk of ‘corrective rape’ victims contracting HIV/ AIDS or other STDs is worsened by fear of stigmatization. There is a strong need to discuss issues for the rights of homosexuals in many countries that criminalize homosexuality.

Rights of LGBTQIA+ community

There is lack of reliable statistics on “corrective rapes” because of the apathy of the society as well as the legal system to act on such cases. Most often, such cases go unreported because of the involvement of close relatives/family members in this discriminatory act. Increasing awareness about the rights of the homosexuals and severe punishments for the perpetrators can serve as a deterrent for similar crimes in the future. Laws clearly stating and supporting the rights of LGBTQIA+’s can thus help in reducing the HIV/AIDS burden to a considerable amount in this community thereby reducing global burden of this highly infectious disease (17-20). Approaches to HIV/AIDS prevention must change with the changing world as advocacy of anti-discriminatory practices and passing of jurisdictions recognizing the rights of homosexuals can help to improve the health of people infected with HIV/AIDS and will also further prevent many other people from contracting this disease in the future.

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Getting to zero’ HIV/AIDS requires effective addressing of HIV needs of LGBT community


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