

## Int'l Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific **Lack of political will key obstacle to preventing AIDS**

Ashfaq Wares Khan, from Colombo

Lack of political will and commitment contributes significantly to stigmatising and ostracising the HIV-positive people, preventing the social cohesion required in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Experts, practitioners and donors made this comment at the 8th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific yesterday, being held in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo.

At the conference, Bangladesh was reported to have the highest incidences of trafficked women who are highly vulnerable to HIV.

"The lack of political will and commitment to do something about HIV is a significant factor in contributing to stigma. If political and social leaders show no concern for HIV, then why should their people?" asked Noerine Kaleeba, chair of Actionaid's International Board, at the opening plenary session.

"By discussing HIV openly, sensitively and rationally, leaders can make people sit up and listen," she said.

Otherwise, the people affected with HIV face a kind of 'social death' whereby an individual or affected family are ostracised by the community and cannot access various services, she added.

HIV/AIDS-related stigma is one of the key obstacles to accessing care for persons and families affected by this pandemic as many of them do not know their status either due to lack of facilities, lack of appropriate information or due to fear of stigma, Kaleeba said.

Bangladesh has many suspected unreported cases because of social stigma in both rural and urban communities, she said.

Deputy Executive Director of UNFP Purnima Mane told a plenary session, "Going beyond the silence into action is the only way we can face the future generations knowing that we are doing our best to ensure an AIDS-free generation."

She emphasised the urgency for all countries to make universal access to sexual and reproductive health and to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support a priority. "The greatest impact can be achieved when we link prevention with treatment and care," she said.

A UN Development Programme study on 'Human Trafficking and HIV' unveiled at the conference found that a large number of trafficked women in South Asia also run the risk of contracting HIV. "The highest reported incidence of this double burden is in Nepal, Bangladesh and India."

The study identified gender inequality, violence and the lack of economic opportunities for women, especially young women, as major factors increasing their vulnerability to both trafficking and HIV.

The study recommends better coordination in national efforts to integrate trafficking and HIV interventions into key sectors, and to create laws and policies regarding the two issues.