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Fighting Aids Through Sharia, Poverty Alleviation**BYLINE:** This Day**BODY:**

As the HIV/Aids pandemic continue to ravage the Nigerian population, some state governments and organisations are daily devising new strategies to fight the scourge. Zamfara State Government and some non-governmental organisations are approaching the fight differently. Imam Imam writes

More than two decades into the HIV/Aids pandemic, substantial gains have been made in understanding how HIV is transmitted and its effects, including physiological, psychological and socio-economic. At community levels, the scourge has left population devastated, resulting in an increased burden on governments to support the people who are ill, as well as the dependents of those infected.

Even though different governments face different epidemic dynamics, all governments respond in almost familiar manner so as to mitigate the impact of the disease. In Zamfara, the state known all over the country as a Sharia state following its adoption of the Islamic legal code in the year 2000, the government has deployed religious strategy to battle the disease and from all indication, the effort is garnering some successes.

Being a very conservative society, open discussion about the disease has over the years proven to be one of the most worrisome impediments to the success of the war against the scourge. In addition, being a state with a low literacy level, ignorance is playing a key role in the spread of the disease.

Zamfara, like Nigeria itself, is a state whose majority of its citizens is ravaged by the problem of poverty. So realising this fact, the government made the battle against poverty an integral part of the fight against Aids.

Speaking at a recent workshop organised for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in the fight against Aids, Deputy Governor of Zamfara State, Alhaji Mahmud Aliyu Shinkafi said for many years, HIV/Aids was viewed as a medical and health problem, rather than as a broad socio-economic challenge. The focus, according to him, was on the medical implications of the epidemic, especially the search for cure and vaccine.

"In the last few years, the damage the pandemic is doing to years of development gains, and the potential for future development, has been recognised. That is why we in Zamfara state put the fight against Aids side by side with the fight against poverty, unemployment and other social vices.

"To express our commitment to fight the scourges together, the government has, over the years been granting motorcycle loans and other empowerment strategies the same way it issues out ARVs in its hospitals to infected persons free of charge and to other NGOs involved in the fight against Aids," the deputy governor emphasised.

Studies have shown that poor people suffer from higher levels of illiteracy and lack of access to health care and other social services. This makes it much less likely that they will receive information about HIV and how to avoid infection.

Poor diets and housing make those infected by the virus more vulnerable to opportunistic infections. At the same time, the impact of HIV/Aids on the households can be catastrophic. In the absence of widespread social safety nets,

including health insurance or social security, the illness of a family member means both an increase in medical expenses and a decline in family income, often plunging families into poverty.

Ignorance most times compounds the issue, as early cases of infection are not reported. They are rather attributed to traditional and religious beliefs. In a recent interview with THISDAY, Alhaji Ibrahim Tudu, the chairman of the Coalition of Non-governmental Organisations involved in the fight against Aids in Zamfara State, said despite massive public enlightenment on the dangers of the disease, lots of people are still ignorant about the disease.

He said both the government and NGOs have to devise strategies of educating the people on what HIV is and how to treat infected persons. "A lot of people still believe one can only contract the disease through illicit sexual behaviour. In addition, the society here doesn't want to have any contact with infected persons for fear of spreading the disease.

That is why voluntary testing for HIV is so rare. People don't want to come out and admit they are infected because their family and other members of their communities will reject them," he said. Tudu described ignorance as the biggest impediment hindering the fight against HIV/Aids not only in Zamfara State, but also in the northern part of the country.

According to him, there are widespread ignorance from those infected with the dreaded virus as well as general members of the society on the basic knowledge of how the virus can be contacted as well as how to manage it. He said lots of people, especially in Zamfara State think, "it is only commercial sex workers who can contract the disease," while in the actual fact, it is not the case.

He said to tackle the problem; both NGOs working in the state as well as Zamfara State Action Committee on Aids (ZAMSACA) have embarked on massive enlightenment campaign to intimate members of the public on various means the virus can be contacted. He equally urged people to go for voluntary counseling and also for them to know their HIV status because only if that is done "would someone effectively protect himself and his loved ones."

Stakeholders in the state are of the opinion that lots of people, especially in the rural areas, are still in denial of the existence of the disease and this can be attributed to fear of losing their means of livelihood.

Project Manager of ZAMSACA, Dr. Umar Muhammad Maru said many people in rural areas who make their living from trade that may increase the risk of HIV/Aids infection, are reluctant to take extra caution. "Rural dwellers who engage in trade like barbing, nail cutting and the likes still don't believe Aids are real. If you tell a person like nail cutter to sterilise his scissors, he will think you are joking. So a major problem we are facing is how to convince these people of the dangers they pose to the society," Dr. Umar said.

He added that despite such risky behaviours, progress is being made in the area of awareness especially among urban dwellers, explaining that this awareness has resulted in the fall in prevalence rate of the disease in Nigeria in general and Zamfara State in particular.

"As you may be aware, Zamfara State has the least number of HIV prevalence rate in the country and for the past six years, the rate has been on the decrease. In 2001 the prevalence rate was 3.5 percent, in 2003 it was 3.3, while in 2005 and which we are using now, it is 3.0 per cent. We are expecting the new rate by the end of this year.

"So, if you look at the figures you will see that we are making progress and if the trend continues, we will be talking of less than one per cent in the next ten years," he said. Umar commended NGOs, which he described as integral part of the battle against the scourge, adding that the recent grant of N69m to NGOs in Zamfara by the World Bank will go a long way in tackling the problem.

One key feature of a theocratic society like Zamfara is the predominance of religious/traditional rulers in the running of affairs of the society. It is in realisation of this fact that ZAMSACA employed the services of the two institutions to propagate the gospel of HIV/Aids. At a sensitisation workshop for the two institutions in Gusau recently, Umar said the only way to ensure success of the fight is to fully engage both the religious and traditional rulers.

According to him, taking the HIV crusade to Mosques, churches and palaces is a sure way to ensuring success in the battle against the scourge. He said if allowed unchecked, the HIV will touch the very foundation of our faiths because a sick person cannot perform his religious obligations well. According to him, should members of the society follow religious teachings strictly, then we won't have problem of Aids.

"Our two major religions, Islam and Christianity preach total and unconditional abstinence to the issue of sex outside marriage and also being faithful to one's spouse(s). Since it has been established that 80 per cent of infections in

this state are through sex, the adherence to religious teachings will reduce infection rate by about 80 per cent," Umar added.

But how has the government deployed Sharia to fight HIV/Aids? At a recent workshop for NGOs involved in the fight, Zamfara State Deputy Governor Alhaji Mahmud Aliyu Shinkafi said by the nature of the legal code, all vices that lead to infection have been curtailed. According to him, brothels have been dislodged while prostitutes, who, in his words, serve as agents of doom and spread of the disease, have been pushed out of business by the coming of Sharia. "As you are aware, it is illegal to operate a brothel under Sharia. So prostitutes have now moved to other states in the country to ply their trades." Other government policy that has positively affected the fight against HIV/Aids is the help rendered by the government to orphans and victims of the disease. This is done through the Zamfara State Zakat Collection and Endowment Board. The board takes care of orphans and also distributes donations collected from wealthy individuals and groups.

The fight received a major boost in the state recently when the World Bank, through ZAMSACA disbursed the sum of N69m to 22 NGOs to fight the dreaded scourge in the state. Presenting the cheques to the benefiting organisations, Shinkafi urged them to utilise the funds judiciously so as to meet the purpose it was meant for. He said the fight against HIV/Aids is a collective one and all stakeholders must join hands to keep the scourge at its lowest. Speaking at the occasion, the chairman of the state action committee on Aids, Dr. Bello Buzu said the money, which will be paid in tranches, is meant to manage the disease and also help the organisations to provide counseling to those affected by the disease and all other willing members of the public who will want to undergo tests to know their HIV status.

He said the 22 NGOs were the ones who met the criteria for the disbursement from a selected list of 200 who applied to be considered. The transparency shown in the selection process, he added should be emulated by the NGOs in the way and manner they disburse of the funds and urged them to ensure that it gets to those it was meant for.

One positive aspect of the battle against Aids in the state is how some people infected with the disease raised to ensure its spread is limited. Hajiya Asma'u Muhammed Ibrahim is HIV-positive and since last year, she has been the leading voice in the fight against discrimination. The virus infected her through her husband who "got it somewhere." Always in her Hijab (Islamic head wear), Asma'u moves from house to house in Gusau, the state capital and other towns and villages to sensitise the people.

She does not feel different from other people and expressed delight that ARVs are made available to them free of charge at designated government hospitals. She said as part of measures to alleviate the sufferings of those infected with HIV virus, the Federal Government has agreed to establish four additional anti-retroviral centres in Zamfara State so as make the drugs available to people living with the virus in the state.

She said the centres, when established, would be equipped with adequate drugs that would make it easier for patients to have access to them. The centres will be located at the General Hospitals in Gusau, Talata Mafara, Anka and Kauranamoda.

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