

## **Human Rights & Faith For People Who Use Drugs in Times of Pandemic**

**Friday, 11th December, 12:00 noon IST**

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognised by the United Nations, all human beings are free and equal, have the right to no discrimination, torture and inhuman treatment, and possess the right to access the basic social services. People who use drugs often have to deal with stigma, exclusion, as well as physical and mental health issues, including HIV, Hepatitis C, etc. Evidence suggests that people who use or inject drugs are at a very high risk of HIV, opioid overdose and other such grave conditions. According to a report by Avert, one-third of all people who inject drugs live in Asia and the Pacific. In 2018, 13% of the new HIV infections in the region occurred among people who inject drugs. Data also suggests that the proportion of people who inject drugs who are HIV positive and aware of their status is low. In India alone, it is estimated that nearly 6.3% of people who inject drugs live with HIV, and out of them only half the population is aware of their status. It was also observed that the prevalence of the disease is much higher among certain subgroups of the population, such as minorities and women.

Due to the stigma that still surrounds people with HIV patients and substance users, these individuals often do not get the resources they require to uplift themselves from the shackles of their past, ending up in more vulnerable situations. They are compelled to stay hidden for survival and are deprived of proper healthcare. People who use drugs are often denied human rights that give them access to essential health and harm reduction services. The situation is not any different globally. According to the 2019 report by UNAIDS; Health, Rights and Drugs: Harm Reduction, Decriminalisation and Zero Discrimination for People Who Use Drugs; people who use drugs continue to be left behind by the society. Despite HIV infections reducing among adults worldwide, there was no decrease in the annual number of new HIV infections among people who inject drugs.

In 2018, **United Religions Initiative (URI)** and **India HIV/AIDS Alliance (Alliance India)** launched a novel initiative to build bridges between harm reduction and faith communities called

**#Faith4HarmReduction**, under the Regional Advocacy Grant of the **Global Fund**, launched the **Faith for Harm Reduction Manual**- a Training Module for Sensitising Faith-Based Communities on Health and Rights-Based Approach to Drug Use. The manual is the first step that intertwines the concepts of righteousness, insaniyat (humanity) and sewa (service) found widely across all religions to theologically highlight the narrative of harm reduction in various faith traditions. Within the framework of righteousness, most faith traditions tend to prevent or undermine the use of drugs. This is not because of its association to committing a sinful act and internalising the moral and cultural context; but for reasons of health, wellbeing and peace. The quality of righteousness is, therefore, taken by the individual in a way that their necessary and indispensable acts fulfil their responsibility towards self and society.

On **11th December 2020**, URI along with Alliance India, with support from Global Fund, hosted a dialogue called the “**Human Rights & Faith For People Who Use Drugs in Times of Pandemic**” based on the module **Faith for Harm Reduction** for the harm reduction champions in the faith-based community. This was the first convening cum training involving Faith Champions from the region. With the aim of removing stigma, nurturing harm reduction champions and fostering partnerships for humanising the cause of drug use so that people who use drugs do not face barriers in accessing healthcare and harm reduction services; the **#Faith4HarmReduction** initiative was conceived under the “Harm Reduction Advocacy in Asia” (HRAAsia) programme funded by the Global Fund, which is being executed by Alliance India in 7 Asian countries under a unique partnership involving national governments, civil society organisations, community networks and key stakeholders i.e., the United Nations, faith-based organisations and academia amongst others.



The program fosters unique and previously untapped cross-sector collaborations to expand its goal of harm reduction in principle, practice, and policy. It does so by creating a space where spiritual communities and their members can build comradery with people who use drugs and other leaders of the community who work towards raising awareness. By hosting of events, discussions and such modules, **#Faith4HarmReduction** proposes to create a network of national leaders who can provide empathy and peer support to the members of the community, share information with them, and provide spiritual care for the harm reduction movement.

We were honoured to have esteemed guests like Dr. Salil Panakadan, Regional Office for Asia and Pacific UNAIDS, Ms Nicole Delaney, Senior Fund Portfolio Manager, The Global Fund, Ms Erica Poellot, Development Manager, Harm Reduction Coalition, Ms Ajeng Larasati, Human Rights Lead, Harm Reduction International, Mr Prashant Sharma, and over 50 eminent faith leaders from Asia as our speakers.

## Panel I

## **Drug Use in Asia: Global State of Harm Reduction 2020: the Asia Chapter and the Community Perspective**

The panel discussion was led by dignitaries like Ms Ajeng Larasati from Harm Reduction International and Mr Prashant Sharma, while Mr Kunal Kishore from Alliance India moderated the discussion. **Ms Ajeng Larasati** enlightened the audience by sharing the findings of Harm Reduction International's report on the state of Harm Reduction in Asia in 2020. The report stated that nearly 269 million people around the world use drugs, but do not have the essential harm reduction services. In Asia alone, 4.3 million people inject drugs and do not have funding, support or access to safe and healthy drug reduction programs. They often have to depend on support from their peers within the community. She also highlighted how minorities and women are most vulnerable to drug use and majority governments spend a disproportionate amount of money on punitive drug control rather than harm reduction which further fuels the stigma towards these communities.

Community leader **Mr Prashant Sharma** drove the discussion further, by talking about his experience as a member of the Sikkim Drug User Forum. He highlighted how people who use drugs are subjected to stigmatisation and discrimination from the rest of society, and how the pandemic has only worsened the situation. A lot of lives have been lost, and the government and government bodies stayed ignorant to their problems until much later when the law enforcement officials reached out to his organisation and provided support for their program to help vulnerable people who use drugs during the pandemic. He ended the panel by saying, "Don't judge but love," a message that resonated with everyone in the meeting.

### **Panel II**

**New 2025 Global Targets for the AIDS Response in the context of People Who Use Drugs- Strengthening Harm Reduction and Creating an Enabling Environment for People who Use Drugs to Achieve 95-95-95**

The session was moderated by Mr Kunal Kishore and the panel consisted of notable guests Dr. Salil Panakadan from UNAIDS and Ms Nicole Delaney from the Global Fund. **Dr. Salil Panakadan** shared the current goals of UNAIDS for tackling the HIV epidemic. He emphasised on the importance of having a human rights-based approach and integrating the HIV response with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. In the long run, the aim is to make drug use safer, remove legal and social barriers that cause stigma and deprive people who use drugs of basic human rights. It is for this that the collaboration with faith leaders is essential as during a crisis it is them who people turn to for help.

To make harm reduction more accessible, it is essential to discuss the prospect of funding. **Ms Nicole Delaney** from the Global Fund mentioned how the lack of government funding can cause difficulty in creating packages that are need and situation-based. However, with efforts being made to work with government bodies and organisations, “*there is hope*”, she said. Faith leaders and community leaders work at the grassroots and are a source of support and comfort for members of these communities. Therefore, working with them becomes crucial to provide social capital, financial support and breaking stigma, one step at a time.

### **Panel III**

#### **The Intersection of Harm Reduction, People who Use Drugs and the Interfaith Community**

The third-panel discussion was addressed by honourable **Ms Erica Poellot** from the Harm Reduction Coalition. She conveyed her message via a video, through which she prompted many important questions from her experiences. She started the Spirit of Harm Reduction Toolkit with her church after coming across people who use drugs and sex workers who did not feel welcome in Church despite wanting to have a space of spiritual support. The toolkit provides these individuals with a safe space, an opportunity to express themselves, spiritual and mental health support. She ended the session by emphasising the need for resistance against the abuse of human rights of members in the community, and the ill effects of isolation and shame.

## #Faith4HarmReduction

Atmarpit Vidhiji of Shrimad Raj Chandra Mission, Dharampur and Basit Jamal Ji then took the audience on a spiritual journey. The story of Mahatma Gandhi and his lesson of ahimsa (non-violence) inspires everyone across religions and nationality. **Atmarpit Vidhiji** shared the inspiring journey of the Mahatma, and how a close encounter with a saint transformed his life. She stated the importance of reducing the immediate cause of harm, but to also find a bigger purpose to keep one going. Her impactful words “*Hold onto the higher to let go of the lower*”, stayed with the audience.



**Basit Jamal Ji** then talked about the stigmatised moral standpoints that people hold against people who use drugs. With the help of the Holy Quran, he explained why one must not feel hate towards them. If the lord taught people to be gentle and understanding towards *Firon* (the most hated man in the Quran), then why embody hate against those people? He also mentioned how it is alright to dislike an action, but not the person, echoing the words of Mr. Prashant Sharma - “*Don’t judge but love.*”

## Panel IV

### Role of Faith-Based Organisations Within the Context of Drug Use



The panel included distinguished faith leaders from seven different countries from around the world, where they had fruitful dialogues and scattered the seeds of their wisdom. The session was divided into five different breakout rooms, where the participants and the speakers discussed the relationship between drug use, religion and the community. The faith based organizations (FBOs) and leaders actively shared the role of religion in removing stigma, discrimination and addressing structural barriers in accessing health services. They also highlighted the on-going work in this regard, that they or their community leaders and organisations are fulfilling.

Representatives from diverse backgrounds shared their unique perspectives and programs that they were a part of. There was consensus on the fact that there is a lot of stigma against people who use drugs and people living with HIV, and this stigma must be dealt with, not through judgement, but **understanding, love and respect**. It was also noted that a lot of times these habits form due to lack of happiness or distress in personal lives, which is why judgement and hate are not the solutions.



Many dignitaries from esteemed organisations like the **Art of Living, BAPS, Shrimad RajChandra Mission Dharampur, Nahdlatul Ulama, Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic Fatwa Division, Bahai Faith, BTB church of Christ, Phnom Penh Church of Christ, Siem Reap Church of Christ, Better life Church of Christ, Phnom Reap Community Church, Kilos Metre 7 Mosque, Asian Interfaith Network on AIDS, Thai Interfaith Foundation for Social Development, Moha Montry Monastery, Rakmak Niyaram, Gautum Budh University, Sikkim Drug User Forum, Center for Peace and Spirituality, Indialogue Foundation, Harm Reduction Coalition, UNAIDS, India HIV/Aids Alliance, The Global Fund, United Religions Initiative** partook in sharing new solutions along with existing practices they have been following. All the breakout room sessions were facilitated by volunteers from United Religions Initiative. The faith groups also shared the programs they have to provide physical and mental health support, financial, social, economic and spiritual support to people who use drugs, making efforts towards accommodating them into society without prejudice.

