

PART F PLWHA and Stigma

- **According to FEBS:**

Since its foundation in 1996, which earmarked the beginning of the battle against AIDS in Haiti, FEBS has worked to reduce stigma in Haiti and raise awareness of the disease. Several of FEBS staff members, who were also prominent members of the St. Marc community, announced their HIV+ status on a series of public radio and TV announcements. This news was received with shock, but opened the flood gates for the rest of the country to start talking about the issue. Through community sensitization, FEBS has made headway in the public awareness arena and has managed to diminish the public's misconception of HIV/AIDS significantly. This translated to a reduced stigma against the virus.

However, discrimination is still prevalent amongst family members and friends of those infected. Often when one reveals their HIV status they are abandoned by their family. If communication is not completely severed, they are often abused or mistreated by extended family. The affects of such stigmatization on PLWHA are profound; prolonged discrimination results in negative psychological impacts. Many FEBS clients deal with depression, low self-esteem, and in general lack the will to live. This causes a vicious cycle where depressed clients stop seeking regular ARV treatments and as a result, their physical health suffers.

Stigma against AIDS is believed to be caused by three issues; a lack of education/awareness, a recently lifted taboo, and public insincerity. It is believed that the families who abandon HIV+ member are usually poorer families with little to no education.

- **According to St. Marc's Residents:**

Most St. Marc's residents prefer not to acknowledge the prevalence of HIV in their community. Deviant behavior goes unnoticed until a friend/family member is HIV+, at which point, they are generally subjected to discrimination.



According to other residents of St. Marc, it is a question of education. Many members of the community simply have not been reached through community sensitization efforts. These members of the lower class are usually the most biased towards PLWHA since they strongly associate the virus with deviant behavior. In general, people with higher levels of education are more receptive to this vulnerable community.

Many find it unfair that PLWHA have access to free health care and nutritional support while the population at large is not able to secure these fundamental rights. This further perpetuates the stigmatization against those infected with HIV.

Most members of the community are, however, intolerant of those with homosexual preferences.

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- **According to Haitians:** According to: <http://www.plusnews.org/report.aspx?ReportId=75049> 30 October 2007:

Whether an adult or a child, man or woman, heterosexual or gay, all Haitians living with HIV are subject to the stigma linked to the virus.

If HIV is linked to a lifestyle considered “immoral”, or outside the norms of a society with deep-seated traditional values, as in the case of sex workers and men who have sex with men (MSM), the prejudice and stigma is often even greater. “MSM endure ridicule and marginalization,” said Réginald Dupont, program coordinator for Sérovie, a PHAP+ affiliate organisation working with MSM.

- **According to PLWHA:**

Stigma and discrimination are still very apparent to the PLWHA community. The lack of support from family members or friends removes their support system and greatly reduces their ability to support themselves. Often families ignore or deny homosexuality until the family member is identified as HIV+. At that point, they are often asked to leave “because of their lifestyle”.

As a result, housing is a persistent problem in the Bas Artibonite region for the PLWHA population. In the last year the situation has dramatically worsened as a result of four severe hurricanes in the 2008 season. The lack of available decent housing is worse for people living with HIV, who often face stigma when trying to rent a place to live. Of FEBS 252 adult clients, some 200 face severe housing difficulties.

In addition, many PLWHA have expressed that prototypes incorporate security measures to deter harassment from outsiders.



- **According to Religious Institutions:** According to FEBS: Stigma is supported by religion in the greater St. Marc community. Haitians typically believe and practice both Christianity and Voodoo, the combination of which has perpetuated stigmatization of PLWHA. Vodou preaches that illness is befallen on an individual by an evil spirit caused by something he/she did to deserve it.

In addition, Christian pastors have been known to preach against PLWHA, claiming that AIDS is a scam made up by the government to generate money. Although the church as an institution will not outrightly defy HIV/AIDS in the community, it has been a vastly ignored subject.

- **According to Government Institutions:** According to: <http://www.plusnews.org/report.aspx?ReportID=75049> 30 October 2007:

There is no legislation specifically protecting the rights of people living with HIV to health care, education and employment. As a result, it is often difficult to press charges for discrimination. PHAP+ and its partners have written a paper proposing legislation to protect PLWHA from discrimination, and a bill has been submitted to the Ministry for Public Health and Population.

Besides protecting HIV-positive people from discrimination, the aim of the bill is to create “a legal framework to protect the whole of society ... in terms of [AIDS-related] research, [access to] medication and awareness”. Ahead of the Haitian parliament considering the bill, PHAP+ and its affiliates have launched a campaign to educate the general public about it.