The Islamic Approach to HIV/AIDS: Enhancing the Community Response

Learning & action from the 3rd International Muslim Leaders’ Consultation on HIV/AIDS

16 October 2007, 1.30pm – 4.30pm | The Resource Centre (356 Holloway Rd, London N7 6PA)

‘Everyone wants to belong to a winning team. In order for us to all belong to a winning team, it’s so important to share’ Fatma Msumi, North Brixton Islamic Cultural Centre

Seminar aim

The aim of the seminar was to share thinking and good practice from other countries about work with Muslim communities and to discuss ways of drawing on these recommendations and examples for further action in the UK.

Plenary

Dr. Max Sesay (African HIV Policy Network) welcomed participants to the meeting and highlighted the importance of engaging Muslim communities in HIV prevention, treatment, support and care.

Sukainah Jauhar (Lambeth PCT) and Yousra Bagadi (Camden PCT) provided some feedback from the 3rd International Muslim Leaders’ Consultation on HIV/AIDS. The conference brought together 150 participants from 29 countries around the world. Participants at the conference recognised that countries with sizeable Muslim populations are affected by HIV. Themes from the Holy Qu’ran provided a basis for the consultation. The Islamic approach to HIV/AIDS was defined to include:

- Believing in Allah;
- Acquiring scientific knowledge about HIV/AIDS;
- Making use of relevant Islamic teachings and practices;
- Forming partnerships with and making use of religious leaders and their administrative structures;
- Making use of the concept of Jihad Nafs.

The approach would be implemented at individual, family and community levels. Participants at the conference expressed that controversial issues must not be ignored and must be discussed in order to tackle HIV/AIDS.

There were 17 formal resolutions, including:

- Urging all Muslim Communities and their leaders to be concerned about the HIV epidemic;
- Showing compassion towards people living with HIV;
- Encouraging people to go for HIV testing especially when preparing for marriage;
- Promoting collaboration including inter-religious co-operation on HIV work.

International debates are complemented by local work taking place in the UK.

- In the London Borough of Camden, a consultation with African Muslim women was recently carried out to identify their sexual health and primary prevention needs. This was
followed by a seminar that brought together delegates from the voluntary and statutory sectors, faith/community leaders and African Muslim women. An African Muslim women’s forum for sexual health discussion and education is currently being implemented.

- The Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham African Muslim Communities Campaign against HIV is a partnership between a number of African community based organisations and local mosques with African congregations who were concerned about the impact of HIV and STIs within their communities. Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham Primary Care Trusts provide public health support and funding for the project. It aims to raise awareness of HIV/STIs and other sexual health issues, to prevent HIV/STI transmission, signpost people to appropriate services and to support members of our communities living with HIV who may face stigma and discrimination. Work includes outreach at mosques and cultural centres, HIV/STI information and education events, youth activities and a support group for HIV positive Muslim people.

- The African HIV Policy Network is developing an Imams and Community Leader’s Toolkit to assist Muslim Faith and Community leaders in delivering workshops and other educational activities related to HIV prevention and care and support within the context of Islamic teachings and values. The aims are increased knowledge on HIV within Muslim Communities; increased access to HIV and sexual health services; reduction in the stigma and isolation faced by Muslims people living with HIV; a reduction in the transmission of HIV.

**Group work**

Participants split into three groups to focus on different themes and to identify some key recommendations.

- **Tackling controversial issues and challenging behaviours.**
  - We need to increase knowledge of HIV because people fear what they do not know.
  - Compassion and understanding is crucial. It is important to recognise the challenges that people experience within their environments.
  - We need to assess what is the lesser of the two evils (ie. risky behaviour without condoms or risky behaviour with condoms). Islam acknowledges the importance of life.
  - Necessity is the mother of invention. We should not focus on what is prohibited, but should instead focus on our choices.
  - We need to be tolerant.

- **Working with and supporting young people experiencing peer and external pressures.**
  - We need to identify who young people respect. This may be their parents or imams, but it may also be musicians, youth leaders or their peers.
  - Parents may want to be involved in supporting young people but they may not know how to do so. Parents need to be supported with background information so they can educate and support their children.

- **What should be the role of Muslim leaders in HIV prevention, care and support?**
  - Training programmes for Muslim and community leaders are important in order to increase their knowledge of HIV issues.
  - We need to engage Muslim and Asian media (radio, print, websites) in disseminating information about health issues.
  - Muslim leaders need to recognise their responsibility to engage with vulnerable groups.
  - We need to involve powerful networks and medical associations across the country such as the Muslim Council of Britain.
  - To mark World AIDS Day, faith leaders across Britain should be encouraged to give a Friday sermon on HIV/AIDS.
Questions & Answers

Q: How do we tackle HIV stigma?
A: Stigma comes from ignorance of Islam and of HIV. We tackle stigma by informing people of the modes of HIV transmission. It is often powerful when people living with HIV share their experiences and perspectives to challenge stigmatising attitudes. There are stories from within the Hadiths that can be used to illustrate that God does not want us to judge one another. It is vital to confront stigma in order to encourage people to test for HIV.

Q: Most Muslim people do not go to the Mosque. How do we reach out to them?
A: We need to widen our networks and use other channels including the media and schools. We also need a bigger platform to engage others and take the work forward.

Q: Many of the recommendations we identified apply to Christian communities too.
A: There is scope for an interfaith dialogue.

Moving forward

Participants learnt the key components of the Islamic approach discussed at the international conference. It is important to continue the dialogue by discussing ways in which these theoretical concepts can be translated into practical strategies, resources and tools. It is useful to learn from other countries that have been actively working with Muslim communities and integrating some of the ideas into our local work. In doing so, it is vital that HIV organisations work in partnership with mosques and Muslim institutions and that communities are involved in the discussions and in the activities so they are able to own the work, to lead on the agenda, and to make a real impact.

Contact details

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