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Overlooked, ignored, forgotten? No longer: Groups call for an end to transphobia in Asia Pacific

Bangkok, Thailand, 17 May 2013 “HIV remains a serious threat to transgender people worldwide,” states a new policy brief, *Overlooked, Ignored, Forgotten: HIV and Basic Rights of Transgender People in Asia and the Pacific*.

For Asia and the Pacific, HIV rates among transgender people are disturbingly high, ranging from 49% in Delhi, India to 11% in Bangkok, Thailand. The Asia Pacific Transgender Network (APT N) and the Asia Pacific Coalition on Male Sexual Health (APCOM) released the policy brief today as part of the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia.

“While HIV remains a significant issue, it’s not the only serious issue affecting the health and well-being of transgender community.” Said Khartini Slamah, Founding Board Member of APT N. “Transgender women and men still face a lot of stigma and discrimination, often on a daily basis.”

During a meeting last year of the HIV and the Law Commission, JVR Prasada Rao, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for AIDS in Asia and in the Pacific, declared, “Transphobia is a health issue!” Transphobia is an irrational and unfounded fear of and antagonism towards people who are transgender or who otherwise go against traditional gender roles. Transphobia manifests as stigma with beliefs that transgender people are somehow less worthy than others, deeply defective or even less human, with a prejudice that includes unfavourable and groundless stereotyping of individuals.

“One of the important recommendations from this policy brief is the need for basic information about transgender communities within Asia and the Pacific” Said Midnight Poonkasetwattana, Executive Director for APCOM. “We need more quality research that is transgender specific, rather than transgender people being a sub category of MSM.”

It is estimated that there are nearly 10 million transgender people in this region, many of who often endure stigma and prejudice every day of their lives. Governments and communities alike must take steps to fully recognize, and begin to protect, the individual rights of all of citizens – including transgender people – if the region is to reach the goals in the UNAIDS strategic vision for the year 2015 of “Zero new HIV infections. Zero discrimination. Zero AIDS-related deaths.”

Transphobia often results in transgender people being caught up in a “stigma-sickness slope”, as reported in the recent ground-breaking paper, *Lost in Transition: Transgender People, Rights and HIV Vulnerability in the Asia-Pacific Region* (UNDP 2012). The downwards spiral of the stigma-sickness slope is explained in today’s policy brief by examining just how transgender people are often pushed to the outer margins of society, in the name of cultural norms or religious constructs.

Marginalisation leaves transgender people more vulnerable to risky situations. For instance, they may feel the need to settle for romantic partners who may be abusive, or encourage unsafe behaviours, such as illicit drug use or unsafe anal, vaginal or neo-vaginal sex. Moreover, extreme poverty may leave the transgender person with no choice but to seek work exchanging sex for money or necessities, thereby leaving them at dramatically increased risk for HIV infection, other STIs and violence. All of these situations unfortunately serve to reinforce the stigma that allows or gives tacit approval to prejudices and poor treatment of transgender people.

“Governments have a legal duty to protect everyone,” Ban Ki Moon, UN Secretary-General, said in a message at the 2013 Oslo Conference on Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. He continued, “Some will oppose change. They may invoke culture, tradition or religion to defend the status quo. ... I respect culture, tradition and religion – but they can never justify the denial of basic rights.”

Overlooked, Ignored, Forgotten: HIV and Basic Rights of Transgender People in Asia and the Pacific concludes with four key recommendations for immediate action to support transgender people and their communities.

Recommendations:

1. *Research to acquire basic information on Asia and the Pacific transgender communities.*
2. *Research the impact of HIV on Asia and the Pacific transgender communities.*
3. *Support the development of transgender people and their organisations.*
4. *Sensitizing and training all those involved in access to public health care systems.*

To download the policy brief ‘*Overlooked, Ignored, Forgotten: HIV and Basic Rights of Transgender People in Asia and the Pacific*’ and view the four recommendations in detail, go to *The Source*, APCOM’s online knowledge and information sharing website, by going to: www.apcom.org

<http://apcom.org/policy-brief-overlooked-ignored-forgotten-hiv-and-basic-rights-transgender-people-asia-and-pacific>

Defining “transgender people”: “Persons who identify themselves in a different gender rather than that assigned to them at birth” and may choose to “express their identity differently to that expected of the gender role assigned to them at birth.” Transgender people in the region “often identify themselves in ways that are locally, socially, culturally, religiously, or spiritually defined.” (*WHO regional meeting in Manila 2012: Consultation on HIV, STI and other Health Needs of Transgender People*)

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*The **Asia Pacific Transgender Network (APTN)** is a region-wide network of transgender individuals and organisations working to enable trans women and trans men in the Asia Pacific region to organize and advocate to improve their health, protect their human rights, enhance their social well-being and the quality of their lives. APTN is committed to a world free of gender stigma, discrimination and marginalisation, where everyone has the same life opportunities regardless of their gender identity or sexuality.*

*The **Asia Pacific Coalition on Male Sexual Health (APCOM)** is a regional coalition of MSM and HIV community-based organisations, the government sector, donors, technical experts and the UN system. The main purpose is advocating for political support and increases in investment and coverage of HIV services in Asia and the Pacific.*