Bandhu Social Welfare Society (Bangladesh)

Working with public leaders to change attitudes

Strategies:

- Creating HIV policy and advocacy strategies at the local and national levels
- Developing public relations and awareness initiatives

Long before global health organizations recognized the urgency of fighting HIV among MSM, the Bandhu Social Welfare Society in Bangladesh began working on the sexual health and human rights of MSM and transgender populations. With its extensive experience beginning in 1996, the group has been able to develop a wide-ranging series of successful programs, including education and outreach among MSM and transgender networks, socializing and community-building activities, HIV prevention and sexual health programming, human rights advocacy, and capacity building.

Data on the HIV epidemic in MSM and transgender populations in Bangladesh are inconsistent, though the prevalence rate is believed to be between one and five percent.* Bandhu is the only community organization in Bangladesh working with MSM and transgender people, but it is actively engaged with police and policy makers, advocating human rights reforms and educating authorities about the health and rights issues of transgender persons and MSM. Much has improved since Bandhu first opened its doors.

According to Bandhu staff, their advocacy efforts are crucial to their ability to deliver HIV services. “While doing fieldwork, our staff members are constantly getting harassed by police and other people,” explains Shale Ahmed, the executive director. “It’s really difficult for us to carry out even small field activities, so we decided that we’d have to deal with policy, both in the central government and at the district level. Given the importance of these issues, we set up a policy department in 2006 and since then, even though there are lots of problems, it has helped us improve things.”

In their own words

Shahab Uddin is a peer educator at Bandhu Social Welfare Society

“I heard about the Bandhu in 2008 when I used to be a sex worker. I was hesitant at first to go to the center, scared that people would find out about my sexual orientation. But I went to a session on HIV and AIDS and from that day Bandhu has been a big part of my life.

I was attracted not only because of the educational and medical facilities provided by the center but because it gave me a sense of belonging in society even while keeping my identity secret. I became a volunteer in 2009 and started bringing friends to the center and educating my clients through leaflets on HIV, AIDS and STIs. After one year of volunteer service, I took a job as a peer educator because I wanted to share my knowledge. Bandhu showed me that I, too, can do something for society.

Before, I used to feel guilty and disrespected because of my sexual orientation and profession. Now, when I provide services for my peers, they respect me. Now I know that being an MSM is not a crime and that I can lead a respectful life, not resorting to degrading and risky sex work.”
Stigma, social exclusion, and discrimination are given for transgender people in Bangladesh, who face harassment and sexual violence from law enforcement agents as well as their neighbors. By working closely with local police, government, lawyers, human rights groups, and the media, Bandhu has been able to influence attitudes towards transgender people and those who work with them to fight HIV. Bandhu now sends representatives to police stations regularly for face-to-face information sessions. The group has even provided a list of its outreach workers to police—which, paradoxically, has helped protect them from official harassment. In the city of Chittagong, police have even willingly helped solve a problem related to a particular transgender cruising spot.

To reinforce a larger move toward greater tolerance and understanding, Bandhu has engaged Bangladesh’s media, holding a roundtable meeting for journalists that was attended by representatives of the country’s National AIDS Program and law enforcement agencies. Media have responded with more positive and nuanced coverage of MSM and transgender health and human rights concerns.

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