



## **The HIV/AIDS Scenario in the Dominican Republic**

Yaceibol Ballast

The Dominican Republic is a country located in the Caribbean which has a population of over 9 million inhabitants. Its capital and government headquarters are based in Santo Domingo de Guzmán.

The Dominican Republic is a developing country of medium income, depending mainly on agriculture, commerce, services and especially tourism. Although the services sector has surpassed the agricultural sector as the main supplier of jobs, agriculture still remains the most important sector in terms of domestic consumption.

Since the 1960's, economic problems have led to the migration of many Dominicans to United States, mainly to the coastal metropolises of the east. The Dominicans are one of the most numerous groups of Latin Americans in the United States of America.

### **HIV/AIDS Scenario**

The Dominican Republic has 120,000 people infected with HIV, nine times the total number of reported cases, and in the last decade around 20,000 individuals have died from an AIDS related illness. HIV/AIDS is the main cause of death in women of a reproductive age. Low income groups have the highest incident of this illness (5 percent of adults), among these are many Haitian immigrants that live in rural communities and work in the sugar cane plantations. The incidence of this disease amongst women who are involved in the commercial sex trade is around 8 percent, although in some cities it can reach as high as 12 percent. Tuberculosis (TB) is the most frequent opportunistic infection affecting the people that have AIDS.

In 81 percent of cases, HIV is transmitted through heterosexual relations among people aged between 15 and 44 years, and of the 4,000 women that tested HIV/AIDS positive in prenatal tests, it is probable that they gave birth to 1,300 children who might be living with HIV. The implicit causes of this situation are: high rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), high birth rates amongst adolescents and young women, and active migration.

## **Government actions against HIV/AIDS**

As a response to the epidemic of HIV/AIDS the government has incorporated the following elements:

- Create by Presidential Decree a high level political institution (the Presidential Commission of the AIDS, COPRESIDA), which depends directly on the President and is responsible for coordinating the fight against the epidemic. COPRESIDA covers common, private, and public organizations.
- To undertake the theme of HIV/AIDS from a cultural, social, and economic perspective, and to involve different sectors and actors through associations with the government, the private sector and the organizations of the civil company, including the people that are infected with the virus.
- Innovating measures that change the epidemic, fortifying and expanding the strategies that are successful, including testing, counselling and individual orientation volunteer of HIV/AIDS, control of ITS, prevention of mother to child transmission, and delivery of attention and processing to the people infected with HIV that require treatment according to the established guidelines.
- To concentrate on the most efficient interventions in function of the costs, usually directing the work towards the most vulnerable populations.
- Law 5593 (1995) undertakes the theme of HIV/AIDS, and was promulgated to establish the features of non-discrimination against those who live with the virus.

## **Women**

*Women are subjected to obligatory tests of HIV in this country, during the processes of birthing.*

The women of the Dominican Republic face diverse forms of inequality, discrimination and social exclusion. In spite of the fact that the rates of literacy and the levels of primary education of men and women are relatively high in the Dominican Republic, women are found significantly sub-represented in the labour market. Many women are victims of domestic violence, and suffer severe limitations in possibilities of social

interaction and movement by hand of their husbands or partners in long-term relationships.

In a survey performed in 2002 by Measure DHS + (Survey ENDESA), more than half the women interviewed which had long-term partners, declared that their husbands or male partners expected to remain informed of their activities at every moment. Eighteen percent of these women said that their husbands or male partners actively limited their access to friends, and 11 percent reported that they were also limited in access to their family.

The limitation of the social interaction and movement in long-term relationships can be the prelude of the domestic violence; therefore an environment is created which assumes that the women should be submitted to the authority of the male. The survey ENDESA of 2002 found that 24 percent of adult women in Dominican Republic had been physical abused. The same survey demonstrated that the 27 percent of the polled women had suffered physical, sexual or emotional abuse by the hand of their husbands or their partners in stable unions, and that the 5 percent had suffered all three types of abuse. According to well-proportioned figures by the government, domestic violence was the main cause of female mortality in the year 2000. In 2003, 83 percent of the female victims of murders were murdered by their current or former husbands or regular partners. Only five police parties exist specialized in receiving complaints of domestic violence throughout the country (these parties are called "Friends of the Woman") and serve as the only refuge for victims of violence, which is administered as an NGO.

Women do not receive equal payment for employment and do not receive an egalitarian deal in the places of work. A study by the World Bank demonstrated that the women earned only 76 percent of what was earned by males in comparable jobs (63 percent in the rural areas), and that unemployed doubles amongst women.

The social slant that requires fidelity holds women responsible in cases of her husband or regular partner's infidelity, complicating the fear felt by many women of being exposed as HIV positive. The fear of being presented as HIV positive is not groundless. The Law on AIDS requires that the partners with whom you've had sexual relations are notified. Women are more likely to be tested for HIV than men, and consistently are more likely of being aware of their condition. Therefore, it is more probable also than third parties they know on their status. This reinforces

the perception that women are the ones guilty of bringing HIV to stable relationships.

In the health area, the department of pre and post testing is extremely insufficient. Health professionals divulge the test results of HIV without authorization, and deny or delay medical attention to women living with HIV. Many people living with HIV in the Dominican Republic are excluded from employment or are prevented from accessing health services due to fear of stigmatization and abuse.

### **Stigma and Discrimination in the Health Sector**

- Objection to serving patients living with HIV
- Delay or retention of other forms of attention (food, hygiene)
- Lack of attention to the patients in bed
- Tests carried out without the consent of the patient
- Violation of confidentiality
- Observations or inappropriate behaviour
- Use of discretion of theoretically universal precautions
- Use of excessive precautions

### **Conclusions**

The government has recently implemented a series of measures that contribute to the prevention of HIV/AIDS and it deserves to be congratulated. Nevertheless, it has not taken seriously the inequality and discrimination of women, nor addressed this as a contributing factor to the propagation of this illness. It has also failed to demonstrate political will to provide solutions to the discrimination and generalized suffering of workers living with HIV or AIDS. The Law on AIDS contemplates sanctions for the unauthorized disclosure of HIV tests results, but these sanctions do not apply despite it diffused that are the abuses.

Reform is urgently needed to guarantee the essential deployment of pre and post tests to all those who request it, as well as it set in motion of strict measures that assure the confidentiality adopting at the same time a zero tolerance politics set against the violations of the same one.