

Headline **Sex workers, gays at high risk of HIV in Asia**
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Sex workers, gays at high risk of HIV in Asia

VIENNA: The criminalisation of sex workers, drug users, and men who have sex with men were highlighted as major sources of concern in the fight against HIV in Asia, at the world AIDS conference here Wednesday.

Twenty-five countries in the Asia-Pacific region still impose the death penalty for offences related to the possession and abuse of drugs, creating a huge stigma that means abusers often avoid treatment for fear of imprisonment, said Anand Grover, a lawyer and special rapporteur for the UN Human Rights Council.

Injected drug use is acknowledged as one of the main causes of the spread of AIDS worldwide, alongside sexual transmission.

In some countries, "drug users still have to go to jail before they actually can access harm reduction services", said Rachel Ong, of the Asia Pacific Network of People Living with HIV (APN+).

Meanwhile, over 15 countries penalise consensual same-sex behaviour, pushing potential HIV patients further underground, according to Anand.

This trend of criminalisation is not customary for the region but rather an "alien British colonial legacy and we have to get rid of it", he said provocatively.

In parts of India, small tablets of opium are traditional gifts, he noted, adding that in earlier times, "sex workers... were revered, they were given a high status".

The current trend needs to be reversed and these groups decriminalised, Anand urged.

Ong meanwhile criticised that

Asian governments lacked visibility in the fight against HIV/AIDS, compared to the richer nations, which donate much of the aid to fighting the disease.

"The donors' block usually makes most of the decisions and it's very difficult for the implementing countries, or countries in 'the global south' as they call it, to actually voice their opinions."

However, several Asian nations, such as Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Singapore - which still has the death penalty for drug-related offences and where homosexuality is illegal - are no longer developing countries and should make a bigger contribution to human rights, she said. - AFP

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SEX workers and activists participate at the fashion show from the Brazilian label Daspu to raise awareness on sex workers rights during the 18th International AIDS Conference in Vienna. PHOTO:AFP