

Headline **Equal access recommended**
Date **24 Jul 2011**
MediaTitle **Daily Express (KK)**
Section **Health**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Daily (EM)**
Circ / Read **30,557 / 97,836**

Language **English**
Page No **15**
Article Size **67 cm²**
Color **Black/white**
ADValue **138**
PRValue **414**



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THE World Health Organization is urging governments to eliminate laws criminalizing sexual activity between consenting men, as part of an effort to ensure they get equal access to HIV prevention and treatment.

The UN health agency said that men who have sex with men face legal or practical discrimination obtaining medical services in many countries, particularly the estimated 76 countries where gay sex is illegal, and are among the hardest-hit by the HIV epidemic.

"If we do not pay major emphasis and attention to the epidemic in key populations we will not be able to eliminate it," said the director of WHO's HIV department, Gottfried Hirnshall.

WHO said surveys showed many men in those countries where gay sex is illegal fear going to clinics because they risk being turned away, publicly identified or even beaten and killed.

Up to 40 per cent of gay and bisexual men in some countries are HIV positive, according to WHO.

That figure can be as high as 68 per cent among transgender populations.

Last week the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council for the first time condemned discrimination of gay, lesbian and transgender people around the world.

Mariangela Simao, the head of prevention at UNAIDS, said the vote was a "major breakthrough" for her agency's efforts to highlight the need for anti-discrimination laws as part of public health measures to contain HIV.