

WE STAND TOGETHER – ZERO DISCRIMINATION DAY 2025

Every year, on March 1st, Eswatini joins the rest of the world to observe Zero Discrimination Day, a universal call to challenge and eradicate discrimination in all its forms. This day serves not only as a reminder of our shared humanity but also as a catalyst for positive change, encouraging individuals and institutions alike to foster environments where diversity thrives, and every person is treated with dignity and respect. Zero Discrimination Day was first launched in 2014 by UNAIDS, with a vision of creating societies that embrace diversity and counteract the stigmatization of marginalized groups in particular for people living with HIV.

Zero Discrimination Day is a significant day for Eswatini as it highlights the importance of promoting equality and eliminating discrimination in all forms. In Eswatini, this day is particularly relevant due to the country's ongoing efforts to address issues related to HIV and AIDS. Discrimination against people living with HIV and key populations can hinder access to life-saving treatment and support. By raising awareness and advocating for the removal of discriminatory practices, Eswatini aims to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all its citizens.

Eswatini's stance in fighting stigma and discrimination was made clear when in 2015 during His speech from the throne, His Majesty King Mswati III emphasized the need to address drivers of HIV including stigma and discrimination by stating that **“Lokukhombana akuphele kutsi nya Maswati”** translated as **“stigma and discrimination must come to an end”**. The country has done exceptionally well in fighting stigma and discrimination as the 2023 Stigma Index report highlights the progress made since the last PLHIV Stigma Index study in 2019. There is a reduction in experienced stigma to 9.10% which is less than the global and NSF 2018 - 2023 target of reducing HIV-related stigma and discrimination to below 10%.

However, according to the report, females, youth, sex workers and persons who inject drugs still disproportionately experience stigma and discrimination. There is an increase in internalized stigma where the

percentage of PLHIV who reported internalized stigma is 17.9%. The report states that internalized stigma was highest among the youth and key populations. The most reported stigma and discrimination was from the health facilities while accessing HIV-related or non-HIV related care services which was 14.9%. The disproportionately affected population with stigma and discrimination while accessing health care services were females, transgender, key populations, sex workers and PWID.

Several recommendations were made by the stigma index report, with the overarching need to develop a comprehensive strategy to eliminate stigma and discrimination. Support the PLHIV network to develop, mobilize resources and implement the strategy with tangible results. The recommendations are to support PLHIV community mobilization and advocacy for human rights by strengthening support groups, develop group (youth, sex workers, PWUID/PWID, WLHIV) specific strategies to eliminate stigma. Build PLHIV network capacity for data use and community-led monitoring.

We Stand Together

The theme for Zero Discrimination Day 2025 is "**We Stand Together**". This theme emphasizes the importance of collective action in fighting discrimination and promoting equality. It highlights the significance of community involvement and support in creating a more inclusive and just society.

For Eswatini the theme emphasizes unity and collective action in addressing discrimination based on factors such as gender, health status, age, or socio-economic status. Discrimination often exacerbates the country's challenges by preventing marginalized groups from accessing essential services, including healthcare. By standing together, the nation can tackle these issues more effectively, ensuring equitable opportunities for all Emaswati. The theme also resonates with cultural values in Eswatini, where community and solidarity are important aspects of social life.

According to UNAIDS, communities are essential to the sustainability of the HIV response and the broader global health efforts, and they remain steadfast

committed to their mission: ensuring that all people living with and affected by HIV are treated with dignity and respect.

However, for more than 40 years, communities have faced adversity—stigma, discrimination, criminalization, funding cuts, and political backlash—despite their primary role ensuring that health services reach all in need, including the most vulnerable populations.

For this reason, on this year's Zero Discrimination Day, UNAIDS calls on countries, donors and partners to fulfil their commitments to support communities as they work to build sustainable HIV responses by ensuring:

- Community-led organizations are able to deliver life-saving services and advocate without discrimination or harassment
- Community-led organisations can legally be registered in the country they are working in and can receive sustainable funding
- Communities are supported in providing health services to vulnerable and marginalised groups
- Communities are supported and funded in work to monitor respect for human rights including ending criminalization of key populations, stigma and discrimination and gender inequalities.
- Government health services include community representatives within their structures as partners in the development, implementation and monitoring of health programmes to ensure they are accessible and acceptable to people living with HIV and key populations.

Communities of people living with, at risk of, or affected by HIV are on the frontlines of progress in the HIV response. Communities both provide and connect people with person-centred health services, build trust, innovate, monitor implementation of policies and services, and hold providers accountable for human rights violations.

There is clear evidence of community-led impact on sustainability of the HIV response. Nonetheless, community-led responses are too often unrecognized, under-resourced and in some places even under attack.

To meet the 2030 HIV targets, sustained investment in community-led responses is crucial. With the critical engagement and leadership of community partners, this initiative has been instrumental in accelerating the removal of systemic human rights barriers and inequalities, paving the way for a more just and inclusive HIV response.

As we focus on the sustainability of the AIDS response now and into the future, this moment demands that we reaffirm our commitment to community autonomy, justice, dignity, and health equity.



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