Working with HIV

Unesco's Srisuman Sartsara says scare campaigns aren't needed to fight the disease because prevention is easy with effective education policies

Back in 1990, when Thai society was very alert to the dangers of HIV/AIDS, many campaigns showing the effects of the disease were released to the public.

Frightful pictures of infected people with huge blisters were put on display everywhere to emphasise the image of HIV as a deadly and dangerous epidemic for which there was no treatment.

Many people felt so nervous and afraid of the disease.

But that's not the case for Srisuman Sartsara, who says HIV is an epidemic that is so easy to prevent.

"Unlike other contagious diseases when we never know when our body is being caught, HIV is only transferred by sexual contact, blood and mother to child," she says. "If we use protection, we will be safe from it."

That belief brought the 38-year-old Ayutthaya woman into working in the HIV field.

Srisuman now works as a national consultant for the HIV/AIDS and School Health Programme at Unesco Bangkok. Her major task is to develop the monitoring and evaluation system on HIV and sex/life skills education for the Thai and Lao ministries of education.

She also works to promote better sexual health among men who have sex with men.

Before starting her current position, Srisuman was an interviewer and data collector for the National Statistics Office, doing surveys on behavioural sexual surveillance.

What she did was to talk with groups of people such as service workers, vocational students, factory workers, anonymous clinic customers and pregnant women.

Later, she became a researcher on HIV prevention for the Population Council before moving to Unesco in 2004.

Srisuman says her job is very challenging in terms of compromising to promote safer sex in the context of Thai culture.

"People always question why HIV prevention must come in tandem with the use of a condom. It is true that there are other ways to prevent HIV, such as having a monogamous relationship or even having no sex," she says.

"But we have to stay with the truth. It's impossible to prevent humans from having sex. How can we make sure that our spouse would have only us? There is always a chance for anyone to make a mistake.
"So what is the proper way to prevent HIV? How can we make sure that our good culture or the five Buddhist commandments would help? What I have to do is to reduce the negatives."

However, working on HIV prevention can be enjoyable as well as serious.

"I love to study people's attitudes, so doing surveys gave me a chance to talk with many types of people - such as vocational students - about their sexual behaviour," she says.

"It was a challenge to find the way to make them trust in me and give true information. Sometimes I got good cooperation, sometimes not."

She once even did an interview with an 18-year-old female service worker while the girl was waiting in a massage parlour for a customer.

Meanwhile, her present position, though a more policy-making role, is fun in terms of providing her with an opportunity to work with partners from outside the health sector. These have included Kasikornbank's president Bantoon Lamsam and Amata Group chairman Vikrom Kromadit.

"Unesco and the Ministry of Education cannot get rid of the HIV problem without help. We need to have partnerships with other groups. And this really gives me hope of accomplishing what I want to do."

To give a clearer picture of what she has done, it could be said that she worked as a researcher on HIV in her early career while she now works to make policy from other people's research.

Seventeen years of working only in the HIV-related field is a very long time. But Srisuman says all the knowledge she collected since the first day is the reason that makes her keep working.

"I might change the organisation, but that's all. I would regret throwing away all the experiences I have had since being a minor officer until becoming a policy-maker," she says.

However, it does not mean she has shut all doors on another job. There still a condition that could force her to change.

"I would be happy to be an unemployed person if HIV/AIDS no longer existed in our society. That would mean I had completed my mission. I don't want to work with HIV until the day I retire."

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