Promoting greater involvement of people living with HIV/AIDS

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Every day, national UN Volunteer Nguyen Thi Dieu Hang (left), with UNV’s Greater Involvement of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GIPA) project, shares technical advice, such as how to access health care services, as well as her own experience living with HIV/AIDS with others facing the same situation, such as the woman shown here in Hanoi, Viet Nam. (UNV)

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“At that time, HIV was considered by society as a horrible and incurable disease,” she recalls. “Those were the saddest days of my life struggling with the pain while going to work and taking care of my daughter. She gave meaning to my life and was the greatest motivation to stand up and work for both our survival.” Tragedy struck when her child died a few years later.

Hang has spent the past five years visiting people living with HIV (PLHIV) in Hanoi, providing technical advice on accessing health services, setting up peer support and empathy clubs, and on becoming volunteers in programs to explain, prevent, treat and live with HIV.

The GIPA project, which ran from 2006 to 2011, aimed to increase the voluntary participation of PLHIV in planning and implementing HIV activities and other efforts to improve their lives, families and communities. UNV cooperated with the Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU) at the national level and in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Haiphong and Quang Ninh to implement the project.

The project has helped reduce self-stigma amongst PLHIV and promote their rights and dignity. It has improved the extent to which they are able to participate in decision-making processes. After many years of non-representation on the Country Coordinating Mechanism of the Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria, PLHIV are now represented on this body.

Another benefit has been VWU’s increased knowledge and awareness of women’s experiences and vulnerabilities regarding conception, childbirth and child-rearing for PLHIV women, transmission and prevention of HIV, abilities to negotiate safe sexual practices with regular and non-regular partners and care and treatment, and access to care and treatment for women.

VWU will integrate HIV prevention and awareness into its core communication and education activities from now on, so that the wider community of women in all four areas will benefit.

“Many people consider it an honour to be a UN Volunteer,” Hang says. “Personally, I feel that it is more than an honour.”

Hanoi, Viet Nam

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