Yekaterina Totskaya (centre) is a UN Volunteer serving as Advocacy, Information and Communication Specialist with UNAIDS in Uzbekistan. (UNV, 2015)
Fighting stigma and discrimination

Tashkent, Uzbekistan: Few people realize that, although currently there is no cure for HIV, the existing medicine has turned HIV into a chronic disease, with which HIV-positive people can and do live long, productive, flourishing lives, and have HIV-negative partners and children. Moreover, if taken correctly, modern medicine minimizes the risk of HIV transmission to others and allows partners to take preventative medicine. Yet, misunderstanding and stigma persist. Fear to touch, share food, or even communicate with people living with HIV impede their fully functioning as members of society and even having access to information and medical services.

Being a national UN Volunteer with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) Country Office in Uzbekistan allowed me to connect with the real stories of people living with HIV and, by means of access to correct and unbiased information, fulfill my personal commitment of non-discrimination regardless of status -any status- and to advocate for and promote their human rights.

My passion to fight stigma and discrimination on the grounds of nationality, sex, gender, sexual orientation or occupation has been fulfilled in my role as UNV Advocacy, Information and Communication Specialist and the Zero Discrimination campaign spearheaded by UNAIDS. Every human being has a right to education, health, work, family and a dignified life. People living with HIV, and key populations with a higher risk of HIV transmission must also be guaranteed these rights.

During my service as a UN Volunteer, I had the chance to meet and work with remarkable people who commit their time, effort and resources to the fight against stigma and discrimination on the grounds of HIV status. These exceptionally talented volunteers continuously find innovative and creative approaches to advocate for the human rights of people, and they work tirelessly to create a stigma-free society.

On World AIDS Day 2014, for instance, they organized a photo exhibition featuring a variety of people showing that an HIV-positive person does not differ from the rest and can lead as fulfilling a life as anyone else. They also created a "human library", first of its kind in Uzbekistan, where visitors could sit down with people living with HIV and hear their stories. This barrier and fear between "negative" and "positive" people was shattered thanks to volunteers and their commitment.
During my assignment as a UN Volunteer, I was able to share my passion and knowledge with youth who also joined the campaign through various contests, participated and/or organized charity events, and were taken with the spirit of volunteerism for the betterment of humanity. The power of volunteerism is deeply inspiring. The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme creates opportunities for people to tap into this power and share it with everyone around, while working for the benefit of all and leaving no one behind.

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