



National AIDS Control Council Celebrate Unsung Heroes who Counter Disease Stigma

In October 1952, six prominent Kenyan campaigners were arrested by British rulers for their clamor for an independent Kenya. Between 1952 and 1958 Kenya experienced the most prolonged State of Emergency declared by colonialists. These events led to a day set aside to commemorate those directly involved in the struggle for independence. The 2021 edition of Mashujaa Day, hosted in Kirinyaga County, is marked within a progressively expanded scope to include post-independence heroes and aligned with the spirit of devolution.

The expansion of scope affords a more even ground to celebrate individuals in every field for their efforts to shape Kenya's history positively. In the last year's edition of Mashujaa day, we witnessed the recognition of Roy Allela, a University of Nairobi student, for inventing smart gloves that ease communication with the deaf.

During the 2021 edition, we point out heroism among individuals whose daily lives exemplify the same—people who wake up every morning to face and counter disease stigma. *Disease or Condition stigma is the devaluation of a person mainly due to the diseases they contracted or their condition being attributed to behaviours that society considers improper.* Some of the diseases associated with stigma include leprosy, Tuberculosis and HIV. Other diseases such as cancers attract a pity approach, resulting in lowering the person's value.

In her Book *Beyond Public Confession*, Dorothy Onyango, the Founder of Women Fighting AIDS in Kenya, describes the stigma associated with a condition such as HIV as a bitter pill. *"When one is declared HIV positive, the tears are bound to flow easily, secretly, and even endlessly. The subsequent stigma- self-insulated and external, is a bitter pill. Being HIV positive is a day-to-day struggle."* Thirty-seven years since the first case of HIV was documented in Kenya, HIV-related stigma persists.

But, the emergence of the COVID-19 Pandemic has exposed more than ever the element of disease stigma. Those diagnosed had to deal with the impact of prolonged forced and self-isolation. But, what could have been more baffling, is being shunned by those close to them, such as family, friends and neighbours. While the situation has improved, albeit upon the emergence of viable drugs and vaccines, tales of the individuals who faced initial disease stigma will continue to strain their social interactions in the long run.

Heroism is defined by sacrifice for the good of others, people who face the painfully stubborn and persistent challenges of our time. Their actions ignite hope where many would instead surrender to despair; They inject positivity where many yield to negativity, almost to the point of rejecting a sense of living. Such individuals have braved immense challenges.

The National AIDS Control Council takes the opportunity of Mashujaa day to celebrate people who have bravely faced HIV diagnosis and desire to live with the condition positively. In many cases, they have bravely countered self and community stigma and discrimination. A recent media article shared sad stories of a family in North- Eastern Kenya who are still denied access to shared amenities by others because of their HIV-positive status.

Since the first known HIV case was officially recorded thirty-seven years ago HIV-related stigma persists. Many lives have been lost, and families across the nation are impacted negatively by the loss of their kins. By the end of 2020, we estimated more than 2 million Kenyan lives had been lost due to AIDS-related deaths. We estimate that 1.5 million people are currently living with HIV. Among them, 1.2 million have been diagnosed and put on Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy.

Despite massive investment in education, 61% of people interviewed in a study to examine the level of HIV-related stigma in the country still perceived HIV as a condition related to bad behaviours. It is this notion that impacts negatively on the adults and more than 100,000 children living with HIV.

Disease stigma is an expense to both individual and public health expenditure. People choose to travel long distances to access medication available at their nearest centers to remain incognito. While this serves them to counter the painful experiences of being mistreated by their kins, the cost of access significantly increases their out-of-pocket expenditures.

Kenya has significantly reduced the number of new HIV infections from more than 100,000 in 2013 to 41,000 in 2019. HIV-related deaths have declined from a high of 166,000 in 2007 to 20,897 in 2020, translating to a whopping 87% drop-in death rate. While in 2013, about 33 % of people living with HIV were not on treatment, more than 80% accessed therapy by the end of 2019. In addition, more than 8,000 people who inject illicit drugs access treatment to stop drug dependence, minimize exposure to HIV infections, and improve treatment outcomes for those living with HIV.

Today we celebrate this success by remembering heroes in the HIV response. Those who, in their way, have countered HIV stigma contributed toward the success story. Initially qualified as a death sentence, some individuals have demonstrated the power of positive living. We share examples of Joe Muriuki, who was among the first Kenyans to declare his HIV status publicly. He used his experiences with a group of few others to champion HIV prevention messages to young people in school.

Dorothy Onyango, a young woman then, who mobilized thousands of women across this country to counter the disproportionate levels of HIV stigma among women and children; Kabale Arero, a long serving public servant from Marsabit, who co-founded a community based organization dedicated toward supporting persons living with HIV in Marsabit; John who bravely champions the situation of double stigma of living with HIV among men who have sex with men; Doren Moraa a young person born with HIV from mother to child transmission who use her experience to champion; Maureen Murenga, among many others, who have shared their stories countless times to shape Kenya's and global policies among many others.

To heroes such as Allan Ragi, who founded an entity in support of networks of people living with HIV and community-based organizations across the country, and many others who continue to dedicate their time to the HIV response. To the members of networks of people living with HIV across the country, we celebrate your unity in support of Kenyans who experience HIV related stigma.

To the scientist and researchers who have work tirelessly in search of a constantly elusive HIV cure and vaccines; To many programmers who dedicate their time and passion, and to our external partners who continue to share their taxpayers' funds and donations for the AIDS response to remain effective. We remain grateful to all our stakeholders. You are indeed heroes of this nation.

**Happy Mashujaa day from the National AIDS Control Council Family.
*Together we will end AIDS as a public health threat in Kenya.***