

Indian icon Shabana Azmi tells South Asian leaders to 'get real' about HIV/AIDS

Bangkok, 15 July 2004 - Indian film star and social activist Shabana Azmi told participants at the XV International AIDS Conference in Bangkok that South Asian leaders must do much more to help protect their young people from the threat of HIV/AIDS.

"Let's get real about HIV and AIDS," Azmi said. "Today's young people are simply following in the footsteps of generations before them. The danger lies in not telling them enough about the choices they have, and in failing to give them the knowledge and support that can keep them safe."

Over 5.2 million people in South Asia are living with HIV/AIDS, the overwhelming majority of them in India. Most new infections in the region are among young people below the age of 25, and are primarily driven by high-risk behaviours - injecting drugs, commercial sex and sex between men. The region is home to some of the world's fastest-growing epidemics. Cross-border migration, poverty, gender inequality and trafficking are also major factors in the spread of HIV/AIDS in South Asia.

Azmi said older generations are not open enough with young people about the risky behaviours that can lead to HIV infection. She said that young people – especially those most at risk – needed a safe and supportive environment and access to prevention, care and treatment services.

The epidemic feeds on ignorance and denial, Azmi said. "And leaders at all levels are doing far too little to protect young people from a preventable disease that is destroying lives."

Ms. Azmi was speaking at a 'Meet the Leaders' session along with Pakistan's Health Minister, the Deputy Minister of Religious Affairs from Afghanistan, and India's National AIDS Control Organisation Director. Also attending were UNICEF's Regional Director for South Asia, the Deputy Executive Director for UNAIDS, and a young representative from Sri Lanka. Azmi was invited to the Bangkok Conference by UNICEF.

During her long and successful career, Shabana Azmi has been recognized both in her native India and abroad for her social activism, particularly on behalf of slum dwellers. Azmi, one of the best known faces in Indian film, was the first celebrity to appear in a public information campaign promoting HIV/AIDS awareness at a time when AIDS was still a taboo subject.