

WELCOME ADDRESS BY JOSEPH WHITTAL, DEPUTY COMMISSIONER CHRAJ, AT A WORKSHOP ON COMBATING DISCRIMINATION AND STIGMA REDUCTION, AT THE CHRAJ CONFERENCE ROOM HELD ON OCTOBER 8 2014.

Esteemed Resource Persons...

All Participants and invited guests at this workshop...

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen...

I bring you warm and fraternal greetings from the other Commission members. I welcome you all to the Commission and hasten to add that they would have loved to be here but for her engagement in an equally important assignment.

The CHRAJ has a constitutional and statutory obligation to educate the public on human rights and freedoms. It is important to recognise that human rights are the concern of everybody even though human rights activists, generally speaking, appear more concerned than the rest of society with the actual implementation of human rights standards and norms.

The concept of human rights means that everyone everywhere is entitled to the standards or conditions necessary for living a decent life. It is in this light that we deem the issue of stigma and discrimination as a core human rights violation that has bedevilled man-kind.

People living with HIV (PLHIV), in Ghana face severe stigma and discrimination from their families, communities, workplace, school, health care providers and even in religious institutions. Indeed, this often leads to loss of livelihood, poor care within the health sector, loss of marriage and reputation etc. The fear of discrimination prevents many people from testing

voluntarily for HIV, and also prevents PLHIV from seeking and accessing health care services. Additionally, PLHIV may be reluctant in disclosing their HIV status for fear of being stigmatized and discriminated against.

The stigmatization of people living with HIV implicitly contributes to the spread of the pandemic. However, many people who discriminate against HIV positive persons may not be aware that their attitudes and actions inadvertently play a role in promoting perilous conduct among the general population.

Undoubtedly, acts of violence are perpetrated against specific individuals for who they are. Men who sleep with men (MSM) and female sex workers (FSWs) suffer discriminatory laws and practices and acts of violence based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. Primarily however, these individuals are human beings with rights and dignity just as all of us that have to be respected.

Indeed Article 12 of our 1992 Constitution captures the duty on all of us to respect the human rights of all others most succinctly as follows:

12(1) "The fundamental human rights and freedoms enshrined in this chapter shall be respected and upheld by the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary and all organs of government and its agencies and, where applicable to them, by all natural and legal persons in Ghana, and shall be enforceable by the courts as provided for in this Constitution.

(2) Every person in Ghana, whatever his race, place of origin, political opinion, colour, religion, creed or gender shall be entitled to the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual contained in this

chapter but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest." (emphasis supplied)

The enormity of the issue is worth highlighting and accords the Commission to place premium on this workshop which seeks to sensitize and challenge Civil Society Organization's (CSO) to be well-armed to counter the meanness and the unnecessary moralizing and pontification on matters clearly dealt with by the Constitution as the supreme law. I have no doubt whatsoever, that we have assembled professional Resource Persons versed in the subject - from the Ghana Aids Commission, Heart to Heart team, WAPCAS as well as astute personnel from CHRAJ.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will end my speech by acknowledging the contribution and support of our key partner (GAC), whose collaboration with the CHRAJ, since 2012, led to the establishment of the 'Health's Rights Desk' in CHRAJ, Anti- Stigma and Discrimination Reporting System, Health Rights Team, as well as series of competency trainings, to mention but a few.

Participants, this is a great opportunity for which you are entreated to utilize to the utmost benefit for society. I wish you fruitful deliberations.

Once again you are welcome and thank you all for coming.