

11. Media Portrayal and Stigma: Analysing HIV/AIDS Coverage in Uzbekistan's Press

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Introduction

The media plays a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of HIV/AIDS (Aghaei et al. 2023). However, media representations of HIV/AIDS are often inaccurate and stigmatising. These representations can have a negative impact on the lives of people living with HIV, making it more difficult for them to access the services they need and leading to social isolation and discrimination (Jaspal/Nerlich 2022; Vaughan/Power 2023). Stigma has been driven by societal beliefs about the severity and contagiousness of HIV, perceptions that people who acquire HIV are blameworthy, and associations between HIV and behaviours that violate some individuals' behaviour variations, such as sex between men, having multiple partners, drug use, and sex work (Stutterheim et al. 2022). These stereotypes can have a devastating impact on the lives of people living with HIV. They can lead to social isolation, discrimination, and even violence. There are different national and international guidelines (mostly in developed countries) for media who report on HIV ('Guidelines for Reporting HIV. Advice for editors and journalists writing about HIV in the UK', National AIDS Trust [NAT] 2010; 'Media Reporting Guidelines – HIV', HIV Ireland n.d.; 'New guidelines for media reporting on HIV in India', The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS [UNAIDS] 2008). These policies are designed to promote accurate and respectful reporting and to avoid stigmatising people living with HIV. However, media in developing countries still frequently use hate speech and stigma and have a lack of competency in reporting on HIV. This can result in a number of negative consequences, discouraging people from seeking testing and treatment, increasing perpetuating stigma and discrimination, and undermining public health efforts.

Uzbekistan Context

According to the national data, approximately 48,000 registered people were living with HIV in Uzbekistan in 2023 (KUN.UZ 2023) and according to UNAIDS estimated data, the number of people living with HIV (PLHIV) was 54,000 (UNAIDS 2020). The HIV epidemic in Uzbekistan seems to be stabilising at approximately 3,000 new cases per year, but key populations, including men who have sex with men (MSM), people who inject drugs, and sex workers, remain at risk (Gazeta.uz 2022). These populations are at increased risk of HIV infection due to many factors, including stigma, discrimination, and lack of access to prevention and care services.

HIV/AIDS is criminalised in Uzbekistan. Article 113 of the Criminal Code penalises the intentional transmission of HIV/AIDS with up to eight years in prison. This law has been used to target and prosecute PLHIV, even when there is no evidence of intentional transmission. Sexual work is subject to administrative sanctions, although clients face no penalties (UzTAG Uzbek Telegraph Agency 2019), and MSM are still considered criminal in Uzbekistan, according to Article 120 of the current criminal code (Human Rights Watch 2021): 'satisfying the sexual needs of a man with a man without violence is punishable by restriction of freedom from one year to three years or imprisonment for up to three years' (Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan, LexUZ n.d.). These laws create a climate of stigma and discrimination, making it difficult for key populations to access the prevention and care services they need.

This study will examine how HIV/AIDS is represented in the Uzbek media and analyse Uzbek media coverage of HIV/AIDS in order to explore the frequency and nature of the coverage, as well as the style used to represent HIV/AIDS.

Short Results

The research highlights the media's role in shaping public perceptions of HIV/AIDS, which are often stigmatised and inaccurate. The findings reveal that approximately 45% of the media coverage contained stigmatising language, particularly towards women and sex workers, while only 5.1% presented anti-stigmatising views. Neutral reporting, consisting mainly of statistical information, accounted for 52.6% of the articles. The study also

notes a significant lack of information on HIV prophylaxis and prevention methods, with no coverage of blood transmission prevention and only a minimal focus on sexual transmission prevention. Incorrect use of HIV/AIDS terms was found in 17.9% of the articles. The study calls for media reform to ensure accurate, respectful, and stigma-free coverage of HIV/AIDS, emphasising the need for guidelines for journalists in Uzbekistan and the establishment of ethical reporting standards. It also advocates for policy changes, particularly the decriminalisation of HIV transmission and the cessation of gender-biased legal practices, to improve the lives of people living with HIV and enhance the efficacy of HIV prevention and care services in Uzbekistan.

Methods

We analysed all the publications of the 14 most popular media outlets in Uzbekistan from 1st November 2022 to 31st October 2023. There is a list of the 15 most popular media outlets according to The Nationwide Movement Yuksalish (2023). However, one media outlet from the list (www.azon.uz) was closed in the summer and is no longer available, so we excluded it from the analysis. The web pages of most media do not have user-friendly interfaces to search for old publications, so we used official Telegram channels because they are easier to search through. We used the Russian version of official channels if they had one, or the Uzbek version if they didn't.

We searched for articles with the keywords “ВИЧ” (HIV) and “СПИД” (AIDS) in Russian, and “ОИВ” (HIV) and “ОИТС” (AIDS) in Uzbek. Then we manually checked the content and excluded non-relevant articles. We found 78 relevant articles.¹

Based on the content of the articles, we constructed a table that presents a summary of the number of articles that we defined as follows: a) articles that are stigmatising; b) articles that are anti-stigmatising; c) articles that provide only statistical (neutral) information; d) articles that provide information about effective prevention measures that should be taken to avoid HIV transmission (including but not limited to condom use, harm reduction, and other activities for key populations); and e) articles that contain incorrect usage of HIV/AIDS terms.

1 A full list of the articles we analysed, including their headlines and a summary, can be found here: www.osf.io/ahf78/files/osfstorage/6548e3bc253a740383a0e3ff (for ease of comprehension, content in Uzbek has been translated into Russian).

Articles were deemed stigmatising if they shamed people living with HIV or humiliated the dignity of any group of individuals. Articles were deemed anti-stigmatising if they contained accurate data, demonstrated vulnerabilities, and facilitated a better understanding of an individual's suffering. Articles were deemed neutral if they only contained statistical information. Example of a stigmatising headline: 'A girl who infected more than 20 men with AIDS was jailed for only three years'. Example of an anti-stigmatising headline: 'HIV and status disclosure: is it easy to live with a "hidden face"?'. Example of incorrect use of HIV or AIDS terms: 'A 21-year-old girl in Bukhara deliberately infected three men with AIDS'.

Results

Table 1: Media resources and their articles on HIV/AIDS topics

Media (language: Russian or Uzbek)	N of articles, n	Stigmatising, n (%), group ¹	Anti-stigmatising, n (%)	Neutral (statistical info), n (%)	HIV prophylaxis (sexual transmission), n (%)	HIV prophylaxis (blood transmission), n (%)	Incorrect usage HIV/AIDS, n (%)
Kun.uz (Rus.)	6	0	1 (16.7)	5 (83.3)	1 (16.7)	0	0
Qalampir.uz (Uz.)	5	2 (40), SW-women	0	3 (60)	1 (20)		1 (20)
gazeta.uz (Rus.)	5	2 (40), SW-women	0	3 (60)	0		0
daryo.uz (Rus.)	3	1 (33.3), SW-women	0	2 (67.7)	0		0
podrobno.uz (Rus.)	4	2 (50), SW-women	1 (25)	1 (25)	0	0	0
uznews.uz (Rus.)	2	2 (100), SW-women, women	0	0	0	0	2 (100)
repost.uz (Rus.)	11	6 (54.5), SW-women, women, men	0	4 (36.3)	1 (9.1)	0	3 (27.3)
xabar.uz (Uz.)	7	5 (71.4), SW-women	0	2 (28.6)	0	0	4 (57.1)
nova24.uz (Rus.)	11	7 (63.6), women	0	4 (36.4)	0	0	3 (27.3)

Media (language: Russian or Uzbek)	N of articles, n	Stigmatising, n (%), group ¹	Anti-stigma- tising, n (%)	Neutral (statis- tical info), n (%)	HIV prophylaxis (sexu- al trans-mission), n (%)	HIV prophylaxis (blood trans-mis- sion), n (%)	Incorrect us- age HIV/ AIDS, n (%)
nuz.uz (Rus.)	4	1 (25), women	0	3 (75)	0	0	0
aniq.uz (Uzb.)	10	3 (30), women	0	7 (70)	1 (10)	0	1 (10)
darakchi.uz (Rus.)	7	4 (57.1), women	2 (28,6)	1 (14,3)	0	0	0
rost24.uz	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
uza.uz (Rus.)	3	0	0	3 (100)	0	0	0
Total	78	35 (44,9)	4 (5,1)	41 (52,6)	4 (5,1)	0	14 (17,9)

¹ SW-women = women involved in sex work

The analysis of the 78 relevant articles from the 14 most popular media outlets in Uzbekistan revealed a significant presence of stigmatising content. Approximately 45% of articles were defined as stigmatising, particularly towards women (in general) and sex workers. Only a small fraction, 5.1%, presented anti-stigmatising views. Neutral reporting, which primarily included statistical information, accounted for 52.6% of the coverage. Preventive measures against sexual transmission of HIV were mentioned in 5.1% of articles, while no coverage was given to blood transmission prevention methods. Incorrect usage of HIV/AIDS terms was found in 17.9% of the articles.

Examples of articles with stigmatising language: 'One more woman in Bukhara was convicted of deliberately infecting others with HIV. It was established that a 30-year-old woman living in the Romitan district of the Bukhara region deliberately infected others with HIV'; 'A 21-year-old woman was caught while travelling from Andijan to Bukhara and infected men with AIDS. The number of people infected with HIV due to contact with them is increasing'; 'In Bukhara, a young woman has been detained, despite being HIV-positive, she repeatedly engaged in sexual relations with various men'.

Examples of incorrect usage of HIV/AIDS terms: 'She had sex with men for a pin money and hid her illness from her partners. During investigation, it became known that more than twenty men were deliberately infected with AIDS'; 'A man was found in Bukhara who deliberately infected a woman with AIDS'; 'The list of professions prohibited for people with AIDS is being updated'.

Discussion

The media's portrayal of HIV/AIDS in Uzbekistan not only shapes public opinion but also reflects and potentially reinforces the stigma associated with the disease. A particularly troubling aspect of the media coverage is the emphasis on the criminal penalties faced by women under Article 113 of the Criminal Code, which penalises the transmission of HIV/AIDS. The media materials frequently highlight cases where women are prosecuted, even though: 1) the majority of registered HIV-positive individuals in Uzbekistan are men; 2) the overall number of people convicted in 2020 under Article 113 of the Criminal Code, disaggregated by gender, from the report of the organisation 'Ishonch va hayot' with Eurasian Woman's network on AIDS,

was 131; and 3) 100 criminal cases were initiated during nine months of 2021 (Ishonch va hayot 2021), desegregation by sex not available. This gendered narrative in the media perpetuates a blame culture that disproportionately targets women, exacerbating gender inequality and discrimination.

In the context of Uzbekistan, a significant concern in the criminalisation of HIV transmission lies in the legal ambiguity surrounding the concept of ‘intentional transmission’. Courts typically determine intent based primarily on whether an individual has been formally notified of their HIV-positive status. Moreover, the legislation criminalises actions that put others at risk of infection, such as engaging in unprotected sex. This legal framework poses a dilemma for individuals who engage in high-risk behaviours like commercial sex work or the use of injectable drugs. In scenarios where access to condoms or new syringes is limited, and if HIV infection is suspected, individuals may be deterred from seeking official assistance due to the potential legal ramifications.

This approach to criminalisation, often echoed in media narratives and particularly in the portrayal of women, has several detrimental consequences. It can inhibit individuals from seeking HIV testing and treatment, driven by the fear of legal repercussions and societal stigma. Additionally, this narrative erroneously positions HIV as an issue predominantly concerning women, despite statistical evidence indicating that the majority of HIV cases in Uzbekistan involve men. Such a skewed representation fosters inaccurate public understanding of HIV’s epidemiology, which can adversely affect the effectiveness of public health strategies. This misrepresentation necessitates a more informed and balanced public discourse to enhance the efficacy of health interventions and policies related to HIV in Uzbekistan.

An equally concerning issue is the dramatic lack of media coverage on effective HIV transmission prevention, both through sexual contact and blood. This omission is a significant oversight, given the importance of prophylaxis in HIV prevention strategies. The absence of such critical information in the media discourse deprives the public of knowledge on how to protect themselves and others from HIV transmission. It also fails to highlight the advancements in HIV treatment and prevention, such as antiretroviral therapy (ART), pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), which are essential components in the global response to HIV/AIDS.

The media’s failure to adequately report on preventive measures contributes to the persistence of myths and fears about HIV transmission.

This gap in reporting needs to be addressed through comprehensive media training and the development of guidelines that ensure the inclusion of informative and life-saving medical information in media reports. By doing so, the media can play a pivotal role in educating the public and promoting health initiatives that can lead to a reduction in new HIV infections.

Furthermore, addressing the media's portrayal of HIV/AIDS must go hand in hand with policy changes, particularly the decriminalisation of HIV transmission and the cessation of gender-biased legal practices. By improving media practices and revising punitive laws, Uzbekistan can make significant strides towards improving the lives of people living with HIV, fostering a more equitable society, and enhancing the efficacy of HIV prevention and care services.

There is no public data on undetectable viral load. The UNAIDS 2020 Country Report was published without the information about the number of individuals who achieved an undetectable viral load (UNAIDS 2020). Government officials avoid discussing this issue directly and use the manipulative term 'significant reduction in viral load' instead. Only 74% of people in treatment achieve the 'significant reduction in viral load' (Ministry of Health Press service 2022).

Uzbekistan is experiencing rapid population growth (Eurasian Research Institute [ERI] 2020), resulting in a significant portion of the population being comprised of children and young adults. This age group is more prone to engaging in risky behaviours, making it crucial for them to have access to reliable information about HIV prevention and treatment. The absence of such access results in the underutilisation of available prevention methods. The challenge of effective prevention is exemplified by the existing data on condom usage, which shows a substantial drop from 80% in 2011 to 50% in 2015 (UNAIDS 2020). Unfortunately, more recent data is not available through publicly accessible sources. According to the national reporting on sustainable development goals by the Agency of Statistics under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, approximately 50% of women have resorted to modern contraceptive methods (indicator 3.7.1.1) in the last decade (Agency of statistics under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2023). However, a global report with disaggregated data available on the United Nations website reveals a different scenario. In the latest comprehensive report (submitted for the year 2006), it is shown that only 2% of women use condoms, while the indicator for the provision of intrauterine devices (IUDs) stands at 49.7% (United Nations 2022). These data suggest a near-total lack of use of barrier methods of contraception by

women. Additionally, according to the same UN data, only 2% of women use oral contraceptives. This information further substantiates the existence of gender discrimination and the subordinate status of women in Uzbekistan. The predominant reliance on intrauterine devices, which can only be administered by a medical professional, likely occurs with the consent of a male partner. This reliance on IUDs over other forms of contraception, such as condoms or oral contraceptives, underscores the limited autonomy women have in making decisions about their reproductive health.

Similarly, there is a lack of data on the annual number of new HIV cases among individuals under the age of 18, and the information on children living with HIV is sporadic in brief official reports. These reports do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the trend: in 2012, 2,500 children under 18 years were living with HIV, and in 2021, 8,100 children under 18 years were living with HIV (KUN.UZ 2022; O'zbekiston Milliy axborot agentligining [UzA] 2022; Institute for War & Peace Reporting [IWPR] 2012). Furthermore, the authors of the reports did not give an explanation for the statistics. The combination of limited awareness, difficulties in obtaining HIV prevention tools, and prevailing gender stereotypes could potentially lead to a significant rise in new cases among adolescents and young people.

Conclusions

The findings of this study call for a concerted effort to reform the media's representation of HIV/AIDS in Uzbekistan. Media professionals should be encouraged to follow guidelines for HIV reporting, ensuring that coverage is not only accurate but also respectful and free from stigmatising language. There is an urgent need in Uzbekistan to develop guidelines on ethical standards in journalism, which will also include topics related to news involving vulnerable people. It is necessary to include these standards in training programs for journalists, and monitor their compliance with various information campaigns in the media.

Furthermore, addressing the media's portrayal of HIV/AIDS must go hand in hand with policy changes in Uzbekistan, particularly the decriminalisation of HIV transmission and the cessation of gender-biased legal practices. By improving media practices and revising punitive laws, Uzbekistan can make significant progress towards improving the lives of people

living with HIV, fostering a more equitable society, and enhancing the efficacy of HIV prevention and care services.

Limitations

Firstly, the selection of media outlets, though popular, may not represent the entire spectrum of Uzbek media, potentially overlooking regional and less mainstream publications that might offer different perspectives. Secondly, the reliance on digital media and official Telegram channels may introduce a selection bias, as it excludes print media and other forms of journalism not available online. Additionally, the manual selection and classification of articles also introduce a subjective element to the determination of stigmatising content. Furthermore, the study does not account for the readership's perception and interpretation of the media content, which could impact understanding the real-world influence of media portrayal on public stigma. Lastly, the focus on media content alone does not address the broader socio-political and legal context that both shapes and is shaped by media narratives, warranting a more multidisciplinary approach in order to fully grasp the complexities of HIV/AIDS stigma in Uzbekistan.

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