

Dear All,

Greetings on the World Health Day!

World Health Day is celebrated annually to draw attention to a specific health topic of concern to people all over the world.

On this Health Day, we bring to you the story of Vanlalruati, who fought back the social stigma associated with HIV-AIDS, to become a leader for the health rights of HIV-AIDS survivors in Mizoram. According to a report by the WHO, HIV continues to be a major global public health issue, having claimed 36.3 million (27.2–47.8 million) lives so far. Due to the stigma associated with the disease, the standard preventive measures for it, can't meet its goals.

Born to a middle-class family, Vanlalruati recalls her childhood as a happy one. Her happy childhood received its first shock when she lost her father at the age of 11. Before she could make sense of the loss, her family started crumbling with meagre resources. At an innocent age, she found herself responsible for nurturing her younger siblings and was forced to drop out of school. Unable to garner support for the entire family, Vanlalruati was sent to her aunt's place where she faced dire neglect.

Searching for sources of comfort, Vanlalruati spent most of her time with friends, where for the first time, she was introduced to drugs. Aizawl, in the early 2000s, was a city of substance abuse. Drugs were the

way of life and the route to peer acceptance. At the age of 16, Vanlalruati's first boyfriend gave her the attention that she had never received, albeit on her engaging in drug abuse. In less than a year, she was in the throes of hard substance abuse. At the age of 22, the disease affected her severely and she was hospitalized. Without Vanlalruati's consent for the test, she was tested positive for HIV-AIDS by the hospital. Instead of being provided with care and medication, she was isolated and sent to the prisoner's ward. She says, **"I did not know when I would die, with no rehabilitation centre for women addicts and zero government support. I wanted to impact at least one life before dying."**

Struggling alone with de-addiction, Vanlalruati's conviction enabled her to win over the addiction. Mesmerised by her indomitable spirit, the local church introduced her to the Mizoram People Living with Aids Society (MPLAS). With this support by her side, there was no looking back. Through the network, she worked relentlessly to ensure that the right information about the disease reaches the community. She trained herself and counselled more than 1,000 women living with HIV (WLHIV) between the ages of 13 to 25 years, in and around Mizoram. To seek out more women like her, she collaborated with 14 NGOs to run sensitization programs across the region. Reaching out to 10,000 drug users, she raised awareness about the relationship between Injecting Drug Users (IUDs) and AIDS.

Women like Vanlalruati have been the harbingers of public health change and need support to expand the path-breaking work being done on HIV-AIDS.

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Today, Vanlalruati is a part of many Government committees advocating for the basic rights and entitlements of HIV-positive patients. Her efforts have yielded the acceleration of free Antiretroviral Treatment (ART) in the state and established the first community-based Link ART Centre. Her advocacy has led to the inclusion of 3,500 People Living with HIV (PLHIV) in the general healthcare system of the state. During the COVID-19 lockdown, through Government liaisoning, she ensured that no positive patient in the farthest corners of the state was deprived of the medicines.

