AWAY WITH STIGMA | Fred Gori

*To fight HIV & Aids, recognise sex workers*

This year’s World Aids Day was

observed under the theme: “Getting

to zero: zero new HIV infections.

Zero discrimination. Zero Aids-related

deaths”. The theme is a rallying call for

greater access to treatment for all and

for governments to act more decisively

in putting in place policies that enhance

prevention and behaviour change.

Kenya has made great progress in

taking the battle to HIV and Aids,

bolstered by support from development

partners, mainly the US Government

But significant hurdles remain. Notably,

large gaps in treatment coverage remain

as only 500,000 are on life-sustaining

treatment. And whereas prevention of

mother-to-child prevention is now widely

available, many babies are still born with

the virus.

Wide gender gaps stick out, with

women and children continuing to suffer

the double tragedy of debilitating poverty

and HIV/Aids.

Stigma surrounding HIV and Aids is a

major obstacle to treatment, prevention,

care and support. Many Kenyans view

HIV and Aids as life-threatening and

react to it in strong ways. Some associate

it with unconventional behaviour (such

as homosexuality, drug addiction,

prostitution or promiscuity) that are

already stigmatised. What is needed is an

environment where no one is ashamed to

live with the virus.

The HIV prevalence in 2012 (15-49-

year-olds) is estimated to be 6.3 per

cent, a considerable reduction from the

estimated 15 per cent in 2001. However,

the situation gets messier among sex

workers, for whom the prevalence rate

remains alarmingly high at 15-16 per cent.

Stigma and discrimination among key

population segments often result in less

opportunity to access healthcare. There

are comparatively fewer medical facilities

that focus on them.

For the country to get rid of HIV, there

is a need for greater emphasis on men

who have sex with men, intravenous drugusers,

long-distance truck drivers and the

fisher-folk around Lake Victoria. Unless

this is done, there’s a big risk that the

gains made so far in the fight against HIV

and Aids could be lost.

Some non-governmental organisations

have been involved in empowering

socially disadvantaged women and girls

to make intelligent choices for themselves

and their families. The best example of

such an organisation is the little known

Her Story Centre led by Prof Elizabeth

Ngugi of the University of Nairobi.

The centre has for 20 years championed

the rescue of women and girls from sex

work and provided them with tailor-made

training programmes on how to create

and run small businesses.

It is now decision time. The

government, including local authorities,

must realise that there is no virtue

in chasing around sex workers and

portraying them as outcasts when an

army of new recruits continues to grow

each year. As long as poverty, limited

economic opportunities and jobs, gender

inequality, substance abuse and low levels

of education remain, the sex trade will

continue to thrive.

The best way out is to provide some

level of recognition for sex workers, which

would allow them to operate within the

law. This way, they would access regular

health services including HIV testing

and counselling. Those who are infected

will be put on early treatment, and more

importantly, will not put their clients at

risk of infection.

Mr Gori is a communications counsel.