



Fiennes, Shilpa Raise AIDS Awareness in India



Shilpa Shetty

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British actor Ralph Fiennes and the UK Celebrity Big Brother winner Shilpa Shetty are doing their parts to raise AIDS awareness in India.

With 5.7 million infections, India has the world's largest number of people living with HIV and AIDS. According to UNAIDS figures 202,000 of these are children, with about 60,000 more children likely to be born with HIV every year.

Although the Indian government offers free drugs and people are gradually beginning to speak openly about the issues involved, a social stigma commonly surrounds the disease. People affected by HIV and AIDS are often disowned by their families, denied treatment at hospitals, made outcasts in their communities, and their children barred from schools.

At the end of January, Fiennes visited four villages in five days while travelling as an ambassador to UNICEF. The *English Patient* star listened to the experiences of young people and children affected by HIV in the western Indian state of Maharashtra.

"What has moved me is not the tragedy or the shadow over these people, but the strength it brings out in them," he said about meeting with people were disowned by their families once they learned they were HIV positive.

"Education, awareness and prevention are the key, but stigmatization and exclusion from family is what makes people suffer most," he said.

AIDS has also been an important issue to Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty for the past four years. She is starting a charity dedicated to raising AIDS awareness called the Shilpa Shetty Foundation, and is donating all of her winnings from Big Brother to the cause.

Shetty's performance as an AIDS patient in the Bollywood film *Phir Milenge* won her several Best Actress nominations.

She says, "India is the second largest affected country in the world with the AIDS. So I think it's important to do something about it and it's every person's right to live with dignity in our country, even it's a person who is HIV positive."

Celebrities

Ralph Fiennes, Shilpa Shetty

Charities

Shilpa Shetty Foundation, UNAIDS, UNICEF

Causes

AIDS, Children, Health, Human Rights, Poverty