

Statement by Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, delivered at a press conference at the XV International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, July 14, 2004

In the midst of the inevitable sense of dread that pervades what HIV/AIDS is doing to the women and girls of Africa, there is one remarkable good news story which has not been given profile. I want to do so now.

The country of Swaziland faces what is perhaps the greatest orphan crisis in Africa. It is estimated that by the year 2010, fully 10% to 15% of the total population will be orphans, overwhelmingly children orphaned by AIDS. To face this accelerating catastrophe, Swaziland has decided to mobilize ten thousand women, to take on the task of helping to care for thousands upon thousands of orphans, over and above all the other work these women already do in their own communities: looking after their own children; absorbing children who are orphans, as part of the extended family; looking after the sick and the dying; running their own households.

All of that work is of course 'voluntary'. And it's invariably unacknowledged and unpaid. It really amounts to conscripted labour, but that's a truth that the world has never been willing to admit.

Swaziland, in a dramatic way, has departed from the pattern of wilful and unbridled exploitation. In its recent proposal to the Global Fund, the Government of Swaziland made the decision to include the ten thousand women, and said that they wanted them to be paid. It wasn't a lot – \$30 a month – but it represents the first time, in the life of the pandemic, that women would finally be compensated for keeping the society alive far beyond the call of duty, and for having their extraordinary contribution recognized.

I am pleased/delighted/almost intoxicated to report that when the Global Fund recently announced the approvals for the 3rd round of proposals, Swaziland was approved in whole, and with it, payment to the ten thousand women – Community Care Givers, as they will be called.

This is truly an astonishing precedent. And I assume that hereafter, Government upon Government will do the same. It's possible that the Global Fund will turn out to be the vehicle through which the international community is finally forced to acknowledge the value of women's work in the developing world.

Having said that, permit me to make a few additional observations.

The larger question of orphans has been little addressed at this conference. Only yesterday, in the release of the report "Children on the Brink", with new estimates of numbers, did we finally get a moment when the issue of orphans was confronted. But the recitation of numbers, and a "Framework" for response, hardly adds up to a credible plan of action, and that of course is what has perpetually been missing, with disastrous consequences for the millions of children.

It's impossible, in a brief statement, to cover adequately any one dimension of the orphan crisis. But let me remind you, with special emphasis on girls, that one of the things which plagues the lives of children orphaned by AIDS most profoundly, is the inability to attend school. And the inability to attend school is often compromised because children cannot afford the school fees or the uniforms or the text-books or the registration costs. One wonders when, if ever, there will be

a mass mobilization, on the continent, to have school fees abolished everywhere. The maintenance of fees is an explicit violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Ironically, the document tabled yesterday on orphan children mentions school fees not at all. But the major UNAIDS report, issued just before the start of this conference, mentions the question of schooling and fees time and time again. Let me give you the flavour:

Quote: “For example, In Zimbabwe’s Manicaland, poorer households report receiving help with food, clothing and labour, but no assistance with paying school fees (p.49)”.

Quote: “Special care could include home visits, food and nutritional support, and waiving school user fees (p.49) ...”.

Quote: “Other broad-based strategies include programmes providing child support payments or school lunches (p.50) ...”.

Quote: “An estimated US\$ 1 billion per year is the net additional cost to offset the results of AIDS (i.e ... incentives to keep orphans and vulnerable children in school (p.51) ...”.

Quote: Many AIDS-affected families may withdraw children from school to compensate for labour losses, increased care activities and competing expenses (p. 52) ...”.

Quote: “Children orphaned ... by AIDS may not attend school ... simply because they cannot afford the fees (p.53) ...”.

Quote: “To date, in high-prevalence countries, too few governments have created policies or funding to enable children from AIDS-affected households and communities to go to school (p.53) ...”.

Quote: “ ... the study advised ... income support or subsidies that are linked to school attendance (p.58) ...”.

Quote: “Ensuring access to education is critical in responding to the orphan crisis (p.63) ...”.

And the final quote: “Staying in school offers orphaned children the best chance of escaping extreme poverty and its associated risks. Thus, everything possible needs to be done to keep them in school (p.63) ...”.

It’s not rocket science. Indeed, the Secretary-General’s Task Force on Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa, just released, has a whole separate chapter – chapter 2 – entitled “Keeping Girls in School”. It begins thus: “One of the first imperatives in turning around the HIV/AIDS pandemic is to make sure that girls receive the best education possible”. It then goes on to say: “We know that school enrolment and poverty are directly related. Wherever formal or informal fees are introduced, fewer children stay in school. Girls may respond to this kind of economic pressure by dropping out, or they may end up in relationships with older men who help

pay for their education. “The abolition of school fees is therefore critical to maintaining enrolment levels ...”.

What more needs be said? Why in Heaven’s name have we not had a campaign to abolish fees? What solace, comfort or value is there in report after report underscoring the obvious, and the fees remain in place? The prejudice to children, with emphasis on girls, is measured not in the thousands but in the millions.

So you have these millions of kids who are orphans, and we know the best place for them is in school, and a huge percentage of them can’t afford to attend, and we then hire thousands of women to care for them throughout the day. Is there something crazy about that picture?

And the caregivers, these remarkable women who carry the entire burden of care, which is now so pervasive as to be called the ‘care economy’ (the brutally exploitive features of which are described in reports ad nauseam with virtually nothing done about them) ... these women are increasingly grandmothers.

There was a fascinating study done in the year 2000 in Namibia, which shows that 61% of the orphan children are in the care of their grandmothers. There’s no reason to believe that Namibia is exceptional (a much smaller percentage represented child-headed households with the burden frequently falling, as everyone knows, on the oldest girl who has been withdrawn from school, first to look after the ailing mother, and then to care for the orphan siblings).

We almost never think of the grandmothers, except in passing. Yet they are emerging as the unheralded heroes of the continent. They’re poor, they’re old, they live with the inconsolable anguish of having buried their own adult children, they’re tired, they’re hungry, and yet they’re fast becoming the true, resilient, indomitable, magnificent hearts of the struggle against the pandemic.

And no government, or any part of the international community, my beloved UN included, pays them more than scant attention.

Of course, they’re women. And this is a press briefing primarily concerned with gender.

I’m therefore moved to say that this International Conference has predictably dealt with issues of funding and treatment and political controversy. And they are all important. But the human factor somehow gets lost. And the most vulnerable part of the human factor in this raging, all-consuming pandemic of HIV/AIDS in Africa, is the vulnerability of women and girls.

Seventy-five percent of the infected 15-24 year-olds in Africa – almost 5 million – are young women and girls. This is the legacy of gender inequality. This is what gender inequality hath wrought.