

Speech

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National African HIV Prevention Conference

London, 27 March 2008

**Speech by
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure to be here with you today, and I thank you very much for inviting me to give the keynote address at this very important and necessary conference.

When we think about the impact of the AIDS epidemic on Africans, our thoughts immediately go to Africa, our energy and resources go to supporting the AIDS responses in Africa. And those of us living in the diaspora are often overlooked, forgotten. As we know, AIDS does not discriminate, it is not a regional or geographic epidemic, AIDS is everywhere. It is in the far reaches of the world and it is here in this room. In the UK alone there are approximately 24,000 Africans living with HIV. And that is why I need to reiterate that this conference is indeed a necessary one. We need to draw attention to our people in the diaspora living with and affected by HIV. The epidemic has made an overwhelming, indelible impact on our countries and communities, an impact that each one of us in this room can attest to, otherwise we would not all be here today.

The magnitude of the epidemic globally is difficult to understand. The magnitude of the epidemic on African people is even more difficult to understand. The number of people newly infected each day is hard to comprehend as are the numbers of AIDS related deaths which have changed the way we organize our lives, our families, our young.

But, should you look closer at the statistics, you will see that the effort of every single one of us working on the AIDS response is reflected in these numbers. Because, the number of new infections around the world has fallen, the HIV prevalence is starting to stabilize or decline in a number of countries and there is progress on access to treatment. This year, we can see emerging, the first real signs of evidence that our efforts are starting to have a

positive impact in preventing more infections and ensuring people living with HIV lead longer, healthy and productive lives.

Although we should not stop our efforts to ensure the world appreciates the magnitude of this epidemic it should not be seen just in terms of numbers of infections and deaths - it is also evident in the vibrancy and energy of the response to AIDS and the mobilization of people and communities in response to the many challenges of this pandemic. That is why we are here today. We are the vibrancy and energy of the AIDS response.

I come to this conference wearing two hats: that of the Secretary General's Special Envoy on AIDS in Africa and Vice-Chair of the Global Fund. And it is wearing these two hats that I will talk about the intersecting issues of gender and AIDS.

The most recent data released by UNAIDS at the end of last year showed that 61% of HIV infected adults in sub-Saharan Africa are women. And it is on this point that I find, at times, a profound sense of disappointment. Why is it when it comes to women we are so slow to act?

Unequal relationships between men and women and societal norms of femininity and masculinity influence the AIDS epidemic; and particularly fuel the epidemic among women and girls.

And we are often complicit.

Am I wrong to say that in some of our cultures, a well brought up daughter is one who is submissive and obedient? Doesn't this well mannered daughter reflect well on her family? But doesn't this very same education in submissiveness and obedience create a dependency, which in turn disempowers our daughters?

Isn't it true that some of our cultures condemn divorce; and our societies are quick to denounce marriage separation, even a marriage with high risk and abuse? Evidence shows that the majority of new infections in women occur in the context of marriage or long term relationships. With this kind of information, isn't it dangerous to hide behind 'culture' to justify leading women to an early grave?

But gender disparities are not only associated with the spread of HIV, but also with its consequences. The world over – Africa, Asia, Europe – women and girls bear the disproportionate burden of responsibility for families affected by HIV.

As Special Envoy on AIDS, I have made it my priority to look at the space where AIDS and gender converge, and in doing so, I will work with governments, civil society, regional bodies and the UN to strengthen the rights of women and girls. I will focus on the drivers that underpin these fundamental issues of inequality and work to reform policy and legislation; speak out against the sensitive cultural practices that are harmful to women and girls; and advocate strongly against violence against women.

As Vice Chair of the Global Fund, I brought to the attention of the Global Fund, the need to implement mechanisms that address the needs of women and girls. The organization is now encouraging countries to take particular note of the vulnerabilities of women and girls in the fight against AIDS through a request for proposals that address gender issues in particular.

However, I think the most important point I would like to make is actually quite a simple one. My point is: we can change legislation and policy, we can speak out against those practices that are harmful to women and girls, we can talk about violence against women, and we can put a lot of resources towards eliminating the gender disparities. We can do all of this; but nothing, *nothing*, will change for women and girls unless we change our personal attitudes.

Change starts with you.

I wish you fruitful deliberations.

Thank you.