

# UN SPECIAL ENVOY ON AIDS

International Day Against Violence Against Women Day

25 November 2007

Statement

for immediate release

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In the days leading up to the International Day Against Violence Against Women I have been reflecting on exactly what 'violence' in the violence against women means. The more I thought about the subject, the more I realized that violence now has many shapes and colours, it has transcended the violence of physical, sexual and psychological assault, touched down on political and economic harm and now moved into the space of complicity by silence.

We need not look further than the recent epidemiological data released this week by UNAIDS, it illustrates that approximately 60% of HIV infected adults in sub-Saharan Africa are women. This information, I am aware, is not new – women in our region have for many years been what has been coined 'the face of the epidemic' - but what this new data has done is brought home the realization that nothing, nothing has changed for women.

The HIV estimates in Africa have shown a leveling off and in some instances, a decline and this is hopeful news. But the situation of women has not changed.

And so I ask, when it comes to women, why are we so slow to act?

With statistics such as these, we are facing a critical emergency, we are rapidly moving towards an Africa without women. Allowing this to happen is violence against women. You may not conduct a physical assault, but being silent is being complicit and non-action is now a violent act.

I have made a personal stand not to be complicit or be a silent aider of any form of violence against women. Strengthening the rights of women and girls is a priority area for me during my tenure as the UN Special Envoy on AIDS in Africa.

I have decided to move beyond the lip service of discussions on the empowerment of women and work closely with governments and legal groups, lobbying them, to make sure that legislation and policy is reformed to actually support the empowerment of women.

However, as we know, we can change policy and legislation, but nothing will change unless we change our cultural practices and our personal attitudes that support this violence against women.

For example, am I wrong to say that in some of our cultures here in Africa, 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?

Another example, am I wrong in saying that some of our cultures here in Africa 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, it is a violent act to hide behind 'culture' to justify leading our women to an early grave.

This is why in my tenure as the UN Special Envoy on AIDS, I will talk publicly and honestly about the cultural practices that are harmful to women. We need to break the silence on this. We need to ask ourselves about the kind of legacy we will leave for our daughters and granddaughters, unless we stand-up to some of these harmful practices, all they will inherit is a certain death before they have actually lived.

Again I ask, when it comes to women, why are we so slow to act?

It is still astounding that over 25 years into the HIV epidemic, and in the context of sexual relations, for the most part a woman is still made dependent on her

male sexual partner to protect herself. The statistics show that time has run out, women need products, now, that they can control – without negotiation and with discretion - to protect themselves against HIV. More political commitment and resources need to go to the research agenda around women controlled HIV prevention products, like microbicides.

The needs and the rights of women need to move from the empty discussions in the margins and given the necessary resources, attention and action the urgency requires. However, absolutely nothing will change for women unless men and boys are involved and educated towards an understanding of equality – this will help them understand, better, the advantages of true gender equality.

Today, the International Day Against Violence Against Women and the first day of the 16 days of activism against gender violence, I ask that non-action is included in the definition of violence. It is our collective responsibility to take a stand against violence against women, remaining silent means we are complicit in the violence and we are therefore an obstacle.

I conclude by asking again, when it comes to women, why are we so slow to act?