

Statement by Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, released at a satellite session: “Africa-Asia Interaction, lessons to be learned” at the XV International AIDS Conference, Bangkok, Monday, 12 July 2004

Yesterday, July 11th, at the opening of the Conference, UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, used the words “a terrifying pattern” to describe the toll that the pandemic has taken on the women of the world, and the women of Africa in particular. He was both scathing and unsparing in his characterization of male behaviour which has led to the carnage. In the process of his remarks, he talked particularly of the vulnerability of young women and girls in Africa, the 15-24 year-old age group, and then noted that on a world-wide basis, the numbers of women and girls in that age group represented nearly two-thirds of the total infected.

I am moved to point out that the just-released UNAIDS report has provided a definitive figure for Africa: young women and girls, 15-24, now constitute 75% of all those living with HIV/AIDS in that age group. It is unprecedented in the history of the pandemic, and it’s perhaps the most ominous warning of what is yet to come.

The UNAIDS report has a deeply disturbing statistical table in the appendix, indicating that in every single country in Africa for which data is available, women between the ages of 15 and 49 constitute over 50% of the infections. There are no exceptions. In fact, there’s only one country in all of Africa --- the Central African Republic --- which is below 55%, and it’s at 54!

Let me, for illustrative purposes provide, in alphabetical order, this Doomsday litany (recognizing that the report contains a range for the figures, but I am using the specific estimate).

Angola - 59%
Benin – 56%
Botswana – 58%
Burkina Faso – 56%
Burundi – 59%
Cameroon – 56%
CAR – 54%
Chad – 56%
Congo (Brazzaville) – 56%
Cote d’Ivoire – 57%
DRC - 57%
Djibouti – 56%
Eritrea – 56%
Ethiopia – 55%
Gabon – 58%
Gambia – 57%
Ghana – 56%
Guinea - 55%
Kenya – 65%
Lesotho – 57%
Liberia – 56%
Madagascar – 57%
Malawi – 59%
Mali – 57%
Mauritania – 57%

Mozambique – 56%
Namibia – 55%
Niger – 56%
Nigeria – 58%
Rwanda – 57%
Senegal – 56%
South Africa – 59%
Swaziland – 55%
Togo – 56%
Uganda – 60%
Tanzania – 56%
Zambia – 57%
Zimbabwe – 58%.

There are two remarkable and unsettling truths about these figures. In most such instances, there will be some countries that are high and some that are low. The astonishing sameness of the figures demonstrates the deeply-rooted and universal nature of the gender inequality. But even more, it demonstrates the potential for a further explosion of infection amongst the 15 to 24-year-old age group.

This is no alarmist rhetoric. There are already 4 million, 650 thousand young women and girls carrying the virus in Africa, increasing in numbers by well over a million a year. If the patterns of gender inequality intensify, as they seem to be doing in country after country, then the youth of Africa are walking on the edge of the chasm.

I don't believe that African leaders can possibly fully understand what's happening. If they did, they'd be howling from the rooftops and changing legislative policies at every turn.

Kofi Annan, during the course of his remarks, expressed concern at the continuing inadequacy of the political leadership in response to the pandemic. He's right.

Where are the laws that descend with draconian force on those who are guilty of rape and sexual violence? Where are the laws that deal with rape within marriage? Where are the laws in every country that enshrine property and inheritance for women? Where are the new laws that protect women from stigma and discrimination? Where are the laws that raise the age of marriage? Where are the laws that abolish school fees, so that children orphaned by AIDS, with due emphasis on girls, can go to school? Where are the laws, or the regulatory apparatus, which guarantees that young women and girls, HIV positive, will have access to treatment in numbers that reflect the female prevalence rates? Where are the laws that guarantee equality before the law for women in all matters economic and social?

In short, where are the laws which move decisively towards gender equality? No one disputes that there are profound changes in attitude and behaviour required. But that can take generations, and in the meantime, we're losing the women and girls of Africa. It's wildly past time for the political leadership to produce the legal framework which will give women a chance to resist the virus.

Let's never forget that we're talking, to a great extent, of adolescent girls. They're still defined as children under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They're young and innocent and vulnerable: they're just kids. It's a tragedy beyond tragedies that their lives are prematurely shortened.

These issues are raised, frontally, in report after report, UN meeting after meeting, international conference after conference (like this one), in the Millennium Development goals, in the UN Declaration of Commitment, in endless Africa Union resolutions, in a myriad of delegations, demonstrations, and importunings as women activists argue the case.

But the figures I've quoted give the lie to political responses. And whole societies are unraveling, as parts of Africa are depopulated of their women.