

EDUCATION

It's time to promote human rights of African women

African women, including HIV-positive women, women's rights activists, feminists, scholars, professionals, community workers and policy makers who participated in the African Women Regional Consultation on Women's and Girls' Rights and HIV/AIDS in Africa in April, 2006, issued the Johannesburg Position on HIV/AIDS and Women and Girls' Rights in Africa

They expressed their concern that despite various interventions aimed at prevention, care, support and treatment of HIV and AIDS, the global pandemic continues to devastate the lives of African women and girls, "... in spite of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls, governments are yet to recognize the centrality of promoting and protecting

women and girls' human rights in all HIV and AIDS interventions," the statement reads.

It highlights the different forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls and contribute to their infection, such as rape, marital rape, domestic violence, trafficking, harmful customary and traditional practices, violence and torture during conflict, forced and early marriages.

"These forms of violence take place within homes, at work, in schools, in clinics and hospitals, at police stations and many other places, and they are continuing and increasing at an alarming rate, fuelling HIV infections amongst women and girls."

Patriarchal cultures must be
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challenged

The statement emphasizes that unequal power relations between women and men, and women's poverty and lack of access to land, property and other resources further increase women and girls' exposure to many dehumanizing cultural norms, beliefs and practices that undermine their emotional spiritual and psychological well-being, choices, agency, bodily integrity and self-esteem, and increase their vulnerability of HIV infection.

Concern is expressed about how little has been invested in securing women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights in the context of a pandemic that robs many women of their choices related to childbearing and rearing.

Women still carry the burden

Finally, the statement highlights that with limited knowledge, skills, resources, remuneration or other forms of state support, women and girls, and in particular, HIV-positive women, women living with AIDS and orphaned girls, become the backbone of community and family-based care and nursing systems.

African leaders fail to promote women's rights

The much-anticipated United Nations Special Session on HIV/AIDS (UNGASS), held in New York during May 2006, left AIDS activists outraged and disappointed with particular African leaders, who failed to commit themselves to areas of social change that the civil society coalition deemed were critical to ending the global epidemic.

According to media reports, more than 100 civil society organizations were forcefully removed from the venue for manifesting their indignation, as they voiced their demands and

chanted "Silence is Death!"

What concerned activists, even more was that some African countries, which had in May, 2006 endorsed a strong African common position, adopted by the African Union with clear targets and time-frames for fighting the epidemic in Africa, now refused to acknowledge its legitimacy. Instead, they rejected the inclusion of targets in the UNGASS Political Declaration.

What was left out

The issues that AIDS activists felt should have been included in the declaration are: Women's reproductive and sexual health and rights; targets for universal access to prevention, treatment and care such as ensuring access to treatment for 80% of all people living with HIV, worldwide by 2010; comprehensive prevention strategies for all vulnerable populations; and substitution therapy for intravenous drug users.

The call for action made at the UN Special Session, by Nkhensani Mavasa, Secretary-General of South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign, obviously fell on deaf ears, as did the Johannesburg Position on HIV/AIDS and Women and Girls' Rights in Africa, adopted by African women a few weeks earlier.

In her statement, Mavasa highlighted women's continuous vulnerability to HIV infection due to patriarchal cultures and practices. I am HIV-positive. Myself I have survived rape and other forms of abuse, I still live under the power of men and the institutions they run to perpetuate the oppression of women. That women constitute nearly 60% of the world's 40.3 million HIV-positive people must make us rage against women's oppression (and) violence against women which has been demonstrated to be directly linked to HIV infection. Among young people in Africa, women constitute 77% of

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African women's rights are not negotiable

Mavasa called on all African leaders to protect and promote the human rights of all people, especially of vulnerable groups, including girls and women, and stressed that the progressive language of the African common position must be retained, "We ask that you not fail us yet again... African people and African women deserve this."

She observed that in an atmosphere of human rights, where everyone's right to autonomy over their own bodies, protection, dignity and life is respected, the epidemic cannot succeed. "While in the past, we have hesitated, debated, restrained, our action failed to protect vulnerable groups, the epidemic has raged on.

A new global responses to the epidemic must build on what we have done and learnt. But it cannot aim for less than 100% truth, leadership accountability, universal access to prevention care, treatment and support," She concluded. ♀

By

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Culled from Sister Namibia Vol. 18 #3 July, 2006 Pages 12 & 13