

SPEECH

By: Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS

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Changing minds, changing hearts

Most Reverend Excellencies, fellow panellists, ladies and gentlemen, good morning. I want to start by expressing my thanks to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the organizing partners of this meeting for taking up this very important issue and for inviting me to speak about a subject that means so much to me—the intersection of faith, justice and the human right to a healthy life, irrespective of HIV status.

I am so grateful to Lyn and Natalie for sharing their stories of survival and the church's incomparable healing power in the community. They have reminded us of the urgency of our task. In pursuit of social justice and human dignity, we must move decisively from slogan to action. We have a lot to learn from grassroots activists and projects on the ground like yours, Lyn and Natalie.

As a father, husband and son, it makes me angry when I hear that one in three women around the world will be raped, beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. My responsibility as Executive Director of UNAIDS compels me to demand an end to all forms of violence against women and girls. In speaking out, I have been accused of going beyond our mandate, but for me, the issue remains clear: a woman or a girl forced into sex—whether through violence or coercion—cannot prevail against HIV.

Thirty years of progress, tempered by inequality

I say this at the moment we mark the 30th anniversary of AIDS in the world. From very dark beginnings, we have made incredible progress—most dramatically in the past five years.

At least 56 countries have stabilized or reduced their rates of new HIV infections—including 34 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. We have brought down the rate of mother-to-child transmission of HIV by 24% in the past five years.

UNAIDS' vision: Zero discrimination. Zero new HIV infections. Zero AIDS-related deaths.

In 15 of the most severely affected countries, the rate of new HIV infections among 15- to 24-year-olds has fallen by more than 25%, because these young people are adopting safer sexual practices.

Still, young women remain exceptionally vulnerable to HIV infection, with 22% of all new infections occurring in women age 15-24. Meanwhile, teenage pregnancy and unintended pregnancy puts them at risk of maternal ill-health and death. So it should be no surprise that AIDS remains the leading cause of death for women of reproductive age worldwide.

Gender inequality is both a cause and a consequence of HIV. In many societies, particularly those most affected by HIV, women and girls face unequal opportunities, discrimination, and human rights violations, including widespread violence inside and outside of the home. They are routinely denied information about their sexual and reproductive health, even in health care settings.

Women and girls living with HIV face social exclusion and a greater risk of violence. They fear coerced abortion and forced sterilization—because this happens too frequently—and so they do not seek out potentially life-saving information and health services, including prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, safe delivery care and contraception.

A new Agenda for women and girls

Clearly, any efforts to reduce HIV transmission must address the social, cultural and economic factors that increase women's and girls' vulnerability to HIV infection. This means giving women's and girls' access to education—including comprehensive sexuality education and accurate information on HIV. It means promoting women's economic empowerment, including the protection of their property and inheritance rights and equal access to employment. And it means speaking out against deep-seated societal beliefs and practices that diminish and endanger women and girls.

UNAIDS' answer is expressed in our Agenda for Women and Girls and HIV, now being rolled out across the globe. The Agenda successfully accelerates country-level action to transform the way we address gender inequality and the rights of women and girls through the HIV response, while building political momentum.

So far, action has been taken in about 60 countries, in partnership with governments, development partners, networks of women and girls living with HIV, women's rights groups and other civil society organizations. Building on existing initiatives, the Agenda aims to create a platform for women and girls—in particular those living with HIV—to spark social change.

The price of silence

I met a young woman last year in Lesotho. She was crying. She was pregnant, and had just received a positive HIV result. Her anguish was compounded because her husband was angry and about to throw her out—he had tested negative. He accused her of carrying a

baby that was not his. In fact, this young mother-to-be had been faithful to her husband all her married life. She had been raped before marriage and had been infected with HIV. That did not matter as he had been shamed in the eyes of his neighbours.

Her husband did not come to his attitude all alone—it came from the dark side of social mores. It came from generations of whispers from the community—and generations of silence from powerful leaders.

The church can not be silent about stigma. It cannot be silent about violence against women. The positive impact the faith community can to change attitudes, end stigma and empower the voiceless is incalculable.

I am pleased to see that your report is self-critical and challenges the church to act more decisively. I too have been challenging UNAIDS and others to do more. We cannot afford business as usual. So UNAIDS is joining with new partners to move beyond old paradigms and find new ways of addressing this epidemic. I believe we can build a new partnership with you, as faith leaders, to challenge sexual violence and gender inequality.

To be a partner for women and girls against violence and injustice, you do not have to be experts on human rights or gender. You do have to be committed to always asking in your daily work: “How can I better engage women and girls to understand what they need? How can I better support human rights, gender equality and an end to sexual and other forms of violence?” These answers should change your work and will enable churches to be more compassionate for the cause of women and girls.

Churches are already making a difference. Your report, and the women who spoke so movingly before me, give examples of churches outspokenly challenging the prevalence of sexual violence that has become endemic in communities today. Churches are equipping themselves with people who demonstrate compassion and care for those who have experienced sexual abuse.

A challenge to do more

There is more you can do.

Move beyond the caricature of males as perpetrators, and involve men and boys in addressing sexual violence. Men experience sexual violence too. The church can help these survivors and others turn the tide and respond in the opposite spirit, challenging the attitudes, values and behaviour stereotypes that lead to such violence. Engage men and boys in the change, especially regarding the socialization of young boys, who are often expected to be “macho” and physically aggressive.

Continue speaking out for justice for sexual violence survivors. But reach farther, to create a faith-led social movement demanding change and social justice. You have the moral authority to shift attitudes across communities. To change minds and to change hearts.

Shift the culture of shame and blame. Remind your communities that their wives and daughters—as well as sex workers, gays and lesbians, prisoners, migrants, street children, the homeless and people who use drugs—do not deserve to be raped. Challenge families and congregations to open their minds. To reach out in compassion and restore the dignity of those who suffer, and to reject the conflicting messages that survivors of sexual violence are both “innocent and guilty.”

Partner with women and girls living with HIV, women’s rights groups, and groups representing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The LGBT community is disproportionately victimized by violence, from homophobic beatings to the “corrective” rape of lesbians. I urge you to lead by example, demonstrating human rights and dignity for LGBT people. You need look no further than to the actions of His Excellency the Archbishop of Canterbury, who spoke out strongly against the bigotry that led to the murder of gay human rights activist David Kato in Uganda.

Engage with law enforcement and legal system to promote sensitivity and justice for victims and punishment for offenders. The law, law enforcement and access to justice must be marshalled to protect everyone, no matter who they are, how they live or who they love.

Create cultures of acceptance and safe places in churches for survivors and people at risk of violence. Set examples within the faith-based hospitals by providing services free from judgement and shame.

Finally, initiate hope. This is what today’s consultation is about: identifying the next steps—the innovative partnerships, the long term strategies, the critical events, the young leaders and activists. The movements that turn shame and despair into courage and confidence.

I would like to conclude by quoting the great Holocaust survivor Primo Levi, “If not now, when? If not me, who? If we know how to prevent torment and don’t do it, we become the tormentors.”

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UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, is an innovative United Nations partnership that leads and inspires the world in achieving universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. Learn more at unaids.org.