

Women, HIV & AIDS and Abject Poverty
Extra-Ordinary Measures Called for to Harness the
HIV & AIDS Catastrophe in Africa

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It was not an easy feat for Mrs. Nane Annan and all of us to negotiate our way in Kiambiu slums of Kenya while visiting an outreach initiative of women living with HIV & AIDS supported by Kenya Network of Women Living with AIDS (KENWA). We had to walk in almost single file, as there was no road. We now and again jumped over running dirty water flowing easily between the muddy huts. We were visiting a family infected and affected by HIV & AIDS. KENWA has received support from a number of organisation including the UN and especially World Health Organisation. Also present on this visit was the UN Resident Coordinator, Mr Paul Andre dela Porte; and the WHO Country Representative, Dr Peter Eriki, as well as the Kenya Minister of Health, Hon Charity Ngilu among other officials and organisations.

We crawled into this dark hut with no windows. Inside was almost total darkness although it was only 10 o'clock in the morning. Lying at the corner with barely enough blankets to cover her self was a 35 year old women dying of AIDS. She had lost her husband a year ago. At her age and with nothing, she was left to care for her five children. A coughing 4 year old boy, whose future one dared not even think about, peeped behind her. Nobody could ask where the other children where for the trauma on her face was too much for any parent.

Standing there in full solidarity and deep-seated compassion and empathy was Esther, a young woman in her twenties living positively with HIV. A mother of two and a single parent, she gave her life to helping others. With her heart, empty hands and support from KENWA, she stands for hours in this dark gloomy hut, surrounded by abject poverty and despair, but trudging on with the hope that WE, Africa, and the world will transcend this tragedy one day. Only if this pandemic could be dealt with as a real emergency for which it is!

Hon Charity Ngilu, the Minister of Health of Kenya reached out. She asked about availability of drugs, services and food. Nothing was said to be available in the neighbourhood, nor affordable especially to this family. She encouraged, provided information, and counselled. A new resolve showed on her face. WE must invest more in addressing poverty, halting the spread of HIV, helping the infected and the caregivers. Allocating more resources to HIV & AIDS programs and to addressing gender inequalities and status of women in society, was the stark message we immediately understood, although nobody verbalised it. I could almost touch the pain in the house and the commitment of all to do something extraordinary and immediately. Mrs Nane Annan, drawing the best she is, her humility, her compassion and her understanding; was a tower of hope to all.

The testimony shared by young men who is living positively with HIV and nurtured by his neighbours in the slums, equally reinforced the expected roles of women and importance of social relations. His family abandoned him when he declared his status. He declared to a multitude of over 200 people, that without KENWA support he would have died by now. Medicine, nutrition, support and hope were the key ingredients keeping him on. The orphans sang their hearts out, with innocence and a dream of a positive future, but equally knowing that there today was a daily struggle. All who were there left each in deep thought, in search of creative actions to address the cycle of abject poverty, discrimination, HIV & AIDS, orphans. But all were energized by the power of sharing shown by people living with AIDS to each other and to humanity.

As the Bangkok Conference on AIDS opens, this is the time to generate even greater political commitment and especially to recognise that HIV & AIDS is a humanitarian and catastrophic emergency. Government and the global partners MUST allocate more and more resource to addressing the plight of Africa's women, children and the poor especially in the face of abject poverty, HIV & AIDS and marginalisation. The world, and Africa, can make substantive progress in achievement the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) only if substantive progress is made in addressing HIV & AIDS and improving the status of women.

The Kiambiu visit reconfirmed the centrality of nutrition to care. Even in the absence of medicine, the basic minimum that is a right to all as a meal. "I get a plate of porridge from KENWA and this helps me spend the day." Nutrition therefore must be a core element of the Voluntary Counselling and Treatment package. In fact this VCT must be re-named VCT+N, as an affirmation of the importance of nutrition. Governments and people, especially in Africa must therefore invest in household food security, in addition to medicine as a key to addressing HIV & AIDS. The centrality of women in provision of household food is common cause, and as it is a known fact that community and home based care is in essence "woman based care."

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