



## International Women's Summit: Nairobi, Kenya 4 - 7 July 2007

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Over 1,800 women and men gathered in Nairobi last month, at the International Women's Summit, to discuss the impact of HIV & AIDS on women. The summit served as a platform for women and men, organisations, the private sector and Governments to engage and to network, and more importantly, to put forward pressing issues related to HIV & AIDS and women. The Summit was spearheaded by the YWCA, and placed a global focus on issues related to women and the HIV epidemic.

At the opening of the Summit, the former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson said, "I want to reach out to you to help us change how we understand human rights". Robinson said that this is because human rights are not understood at a grassroots level. She maintains that there are only certain rights understood by people, and specifically by women, at this level, such as rights to access water. The concept of 'women's rights' has been contested by some to harbour in it some discrimination towards men. With the development of gender equality, a focus on women was vital in order to bring about the necessary change in how women were previously viewed. The goal was to empower and develop women. This new focus brought about a more critical look at basic human rights. The main motivation behind the gender movement was the belief that women did not (and still do not, in many instances) enjoy basic human rights. A re-examination of these human rights was therefore essential, and with this, the concept of women's rights was born. It was argued that through this new movement, women should not become a 'special' group, but rather just a group with specific needs that must be addressed. Robinson's intention was for these "human rights" to be interpreted in a manner that would be meaningful to women at the grassroots level, because it is at this level that everyday women are faced with conditions in which their human rights are often abused. If women are not aware of their entitlement to these rights, they will continue to suffer.

In the context of HIV & AIDS, women's rights are regularly abused. This is because women are most often infected with HIV because of their subordinate positions within their relationship, their community, or within society at large. HIV & AIDS is often spread under violent conditions such as war, rape or genital mutilation, for example. Not only do these actual means of infection violate women's enjoyment of basic human rights - they remove the entitlement as well. The fact that they are unable to protect themselves from being infected with HIV additionally conflicts with a person's right to health. The logic behind Robinson's opening address is that if women are helped to become aware of, and understand their human rights, specifically in relation to HIV & AIDS, then they will be empowered to protect themselves from HIV infection. However, becoming aware of and understanding one's basic human rights is one thing; applying them is a very different story, especially in conditions that are not conducive to their application. Many scholars offer divergent views on addressing this issue. For example, it is believed that if women are economically independent, or are educated, then they will be empowered to make decisions for themselves. It stands to reason however, that knowing ones human rights must be the first step.

One of the most basic human's rights is the enjoyment of, and entitlement to sexual intercourse. Due to the fact that HIV is sexually transmitted, many women experience various challenges related to their sexual activity. Women are often worried about engaging in sexual intercourse

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with their partner, for fear of becoming infected. In some cases, where a woman is already infected, she will often be unable to enjoy sex. That forum at this month's Summit, which addressed "Positive Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights" was packed out. The discussion focused on bringing back, or revisiting concerns of the loss of enjoyment during sexual intercourse for those women living with HIV. Abstinence is not necessarily a desirable option for all. This is particularly true in cases where women are taking antiretrovirals (ARVs), as they are reported to increase libido. Nigerian activist, Rolake Odetoyinbo, of the "Positive Action for Treatment Action" said during the forum, "People with HIV must be at peace with their sexuality in order to protect themselves".

During her speech, the South African Deputy President and the head of the South African National AIDS Council, Phumzile Mlambo-Nkuka, emphasised the importance of monitoring the implementation of HIV & AIDS policies. She also vowed to become more involved in the monitoring and evaluation of policies in her own country. This is one strategy to ensure that HIV & AIDS policies are effective and relevant. The recognition of the importance to monitor and evaluate policy implementation also puts added pressure on Governments to ensure their success. Many Governments are often criticised for failure to monitor policies, and it is through the proper monitoring and evaluation of such policies that one can ensure the promotion and fulfilment of "Women's Rights".

Access to condoms in order to protect oneself from HIV infection is another crucial human right, especially on the African continent, where the epidemic continues to spread so rapidly. The steadily growing encouragement for women to use female condoms was evident at this month's Summit, despite the fact that female condoms are still not easily available in many countries across the continent. The female condom is also yet to become popular among women, and is therefore still to be viewed as an effective empowerment tool for women in protecting themselves against HIV infection and other STIs. It should be remembered however that there was, and perhaps still is, much resistance by men when male condoms started to be promoted as a safer sexual method of prevention. Will the promotion of female condoms continue to be met in the same vein? In the quest for women's sexual empowerment, the female condom has the potential to provide much assistance, but women must embrace the idea before it will be able to have any kind of significant impact.

One of the activities held during the Summit was the honouring of fourteen women from different countries who showed outstanding leadership in the area of HIV & AIDS. The President of Kenya, Mwai Kibaki and the President of the World YWCA, Monica Zetsche, were there to present the awards. Awards were presented according to different categories. The presentation recognised women's active involvement in changing the tide of HIV & AIDS and the stigma associated with the epidemic. The awards were divided into the following eight categories: 'Providing Access to Treatment', 'Care and Support', 'Addressing Gender Inequalities', 'Addressing Stigma and Discrimination', 'Innovative Leadership', 'Policy and Advocacy', 'AIDS Prevention Programmes' and 'The Life-Time Achievements'. These categories represent the many aspects of HIV, and all are crucial in the fight against the epidemic. The involvement in gender equality on the grassroots level is especially crucial, as gender equality should not only be perceived to benefit the few women in the higher levels of society. What is needed in Africa is a realisation of the importance of leadership, and also leadership that brings with it creative solutions to the challenges posed by HIV & AIDS.

Following the leadership stance that the YWCA took during the summit, one can only hope that the discussions that were had during these few days have brought forward thinking in emerging paradigms in HIV & AIDS and gender, and will now not only be understood, but implemented, monitored and evaluated.



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