

## **INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE IN CHILD LABOUR AND CHILD EXPLOITATION**

### **CHILD LABOUR and CHILD EXPLOITATION: HIV AND ITS IMPACT**

Thank you for honouring me with the opportunity to address you on the topic of Child Labour, Child Exploitation and the HIV epidemic.

I lift my hands and bow my head in asking for the benevolence of the leaders and trustees of this land, both present and past. I present my heart that the Spirit of the Almighty, the Great Spirit who is originator of life, light and leadership, may touch us all with humility and wisdom, as we seek to care for the children of the Great One.

Children are from God. Those that harm or cause children to stumble, do so at their own peril. Respecting not the children is not respecting the Creator. This includes those sending bombs to kill and maim innocent civilians in various countries, irrespective of religious or political persuasion and affiliation.

I am from KwaZulu-Natal, the province with the highest prevalence of HIV infection in South Africa. About 40 percent of women attending for antenatal care are living with the HI virus. About 26 percent of all adults are estimated to be infected. Most people in South Africa are affected by the HIV epidemic. The reproductive and productive segment of the population is being adversely affected. Women tend to be more affected than men. The latest data shows that the epidemic may be stabilising. However HIV related conditions are still the leading cause of death among pregnant and recently delivered women (about 25 percent). In the hospital where I work, the HIV prevalence is about 40 percent. Sometimes it is over 50 percent. The children born are faced with struggles for nutrition, disclosure, acceptance and communion.

One great tragedy of the HIV infection is that by the time the afflicted dies, all resources have been utilised to try and find a cure. The family savings have been exhausted, as various people promise to cure the

ailment at a price of course. The other tragedy is the stigma affecting the family. The children often have no running water, electricity or food.

It is the plight of these children that I shall present today.  
Left alone in the harsh cold world, with no one to call a parent

It was natural for society to care for her children. This may be the reason why older people spend so much time with children. We know that many grandparents are very protective of their grandchildren! The past and the future are connected. Caring for children is caring for the future. Some would dare say that caring for the children is caring for ourselves

I know not much of legal or political issues why governments will not care for the children in distress. What I know is that countries and society have sold their souls to material possessions and money. We fight anything that threatens our financial well-being. We go to war over things that are ours, and everything that we think should be ours also. We devise means to legitimise robbery and murder. Thus it is OK to invade other countries and declare war when those countries have not declared war on us. It is no wonder, because we have long declared war on our children.

When there is no peace within our souls  
There can be no peace without  
We declare war on our children, keeping them only as long as they are useful to us  
No wonder they in turn send us off to the old age homes as soon as we have outlived our material usefulness

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) articulates the rights that belong to children. I state that they “**belong**” to children, because society must recognise that the rights do not get accorded. The rights are children’s. Any attempt at not honouring these rights is robbery – taking away the rights without the consent of the children.

The blessing to a hungry person is food to fill the stomach. There is a saying among the commercial sex workers: “HIV will kill me in 10 or 5 years’ time; hunger will kill me tomorrow”!

Parents will take their children to beg on the streets. These children will often not enjoy the fruits of their labour.

While the example used is the children who have survived HIV, it may be any vulnerable child.

Who are the children who are vulnerable, whose situation is aggravated by HIV infection and AIDS? It is children of poor parents, sick parents especially the girl-child, marginalised parents, such as children of commercial sex workers and sellers of alcohol. It is also children of women who are itinerant hawkers of wares.

Poverty is underlying the trafficking of children and the perpetuation of child labour. There are often other factors that are operational in the family, such as family disputes and domestic violence.

Support for traumatic experience

Assumption of adult roles – the child-headed households

Physical implication – malnutrition

Effect on education and personal development

## MAGNITUDE

Orphans and vulnerable children – there are over 500 000 orphans in South Africa alone! The exact number is not known, as there is addition to the number every day. Children needing assistance is probably thrice that number. There are also equally pressing situations in the neighbouring countries. The true number of children bereft of either parent is not known. However the estimated number is frightening! By the time the children become orphans they have already endured so much.

## CHILDREN SURVIVE THE EPIDEMIC AND SUCCUMB TO HUMAN GREED

In many developing countries where the HIV epidemic is pronounced, children lose their right to parenting. They lose their right to education

and to security. They are forced into premature adulthood, parenthood and inordinate responsibility. They often have to be witnesses to their parents dying. Literally. There is no one to counsel them.

Countries with resources and policies of support face the challenge of identifying those vulnerable before they become desperate. Those that qualify for state assistance often have to share their meagre grants with members who are unemployed. Often the children feel compelled to share with the rest of the family. These days often this is the only place where the extended family network is in existence – to benefit from the children.

There are therefore many child-headed households, where the eldest member of the family is 12 or 13 years old. These children become parents long before their parents die. The tragedy of HIV is that AIDS disables the able-bodied parents, so that children have to start caring for the parents. The stigma associated with HIV means that relatives and friends of the family become few.

The oldest child will have to make sure the younger children get food,  
They get rest

They do their school work

They have clean clothes

There is cooked food

And if sick, she has to take them to hospital

No wonder many drop out of school

There are stories of children who are too young to understand – children who have stayed with the corpse of the mother for days, without knowing that the mother is dead; only knowing that Mama does not want to wake up.

Often the woman has been left by her husband, who blames her for the HIV infection. Sometimes the woman gets expelled by her extended

family, often chased away. It is always women who are said to bring the disease into the family. She and her children are therefore cast out.

Although the children are not infected with HIV, they are intimately affected by the virus. At school and in the playground (if they get the time to play), they are pointed out as the children from “that woman”. Thus the fate of the woman and that of her children are the same. When she dies, the children have to brave the grief and try the best they know how to make a life for themselves

The older child is then forced to seek employment. With little education and no skills, they become targets for unscrupulous persons who prey on their willingness to do anything to survive. Those looking for cheap labour will then identify these children, paying scant regard to the children’s rights.

They cannot organise to demand better working conditions and better wages

They are at risk of emotional and physical abuse

## **ALTERNATIVES FOR CHILDREN**

### **Agriculture**

In the rural areas this is the sector that utilises many children – working in the plantations and the fields. Often they work long hours with little rest. I remember when I about 8 years of age, I had to wake up at 5 in the morning, walk for 10 kilometres to work on a farm, harvesting oranges. The payment at the end of the day was a pocket of oranges. I could not carry the oranges so I ended with only half a pocket of oranges.

Next time you eat oranges, or bananas, or apples

Next time you drink some wine

Think of what labour went into that.

What alternatives have these children in order to survive?

## Other industries

Home industries are places where children are abused. This is done in the name of household chores

## Housework

This is no alternative.

*Consider the reality of Gugu, who is 14 years old. She has 3 siblings, the youngest being 4 years old. The mother is ill, hardly able to get out of bed, having been sent back from hospital, because she should be cared for at home – the home-based care programme that should be available at her place of residence. Gugu cannot pay attention at school, because she is tired. She didn't sleep last night, because her mother was coughing and feverish. She had to be up at 4 this morning to fetch water and prepare soft porridge for her mother and the younger children. They have no fixed source of income. Neighbours will give some corn meal sometimes. Neither Gugu nor her mother get a grant or assistance, because Gugu is not an orphan yet!*

*Only after the death of the mother do they receive a State grant, after months of trying with the help of the social worker. By the time this happens, Gugu is out of school, maybe already pregnant, from the neighbour who has been so "helpful" during the time of need, or from someone she hoped would keep the other men at bay. The other children may also stop going to school because there was no one counselling them about the stress of seeing their mother dying slowly, and the guilt that they were unable to help her when she needed help!*

Girls are often taken into households, to work as maids (there are very few female street children). The madams are usually very harsh towards these children.

They deprive them education and rest.

The children of the household often become the little lords, as the new arrival has to perform all the menial duties.

Sometimes she is seen as a threat to the place of the madam of the house

The husband may see a woman in her.

Sometimes the girl-children are forced into prostitution.  
Sometimes not commercial sex workers, but forced to give sex in exchange of food, clothes and other essentials. They may be held as sex slaves by their employers.  
They may be forced into early marriages, with disastrous consequences.  
They will present in the hospital and the clinic with various conditions

*A few days ago, Hlengiwe, a 17 year old presented with septic abortion  
Having become pregnant with her first ever sexual experience.  
Staying with an uncle and aunt after her parents died  
She was afraid to tell them of the pregnancy  
The young man disappeared at the news of her pregnancy  
She went to a doctor who attempted termination of pregnancy  
She had to have a uterus removed because it had become gangrenous.  
Who was there to counsel and guide her?*

South Africa has laws that protect children  
But no society that protects children

### **HOW COULD WE RESPOND?**

I believe that those who guide the law reform in the countries are best situated to promote a child friendly society. Although indeed laws do not make a society! We need to mobilise so that countries are held accountable for the care of children in need.

Why is it that the countries that have a great challenge with regard to children's rights  
Have no qualms about the huge military spending that they incur?  
Many developing countries spend very little on children.  
They have no social security system for children  
Yet there are elaborate benefit schemes for their soldiers and the police

Most leaders pose with orphanage children when photo opportunities present, yet there is no government sponsored programme for the

comprehensive promotion of children's rights to security, education and parental guidance.

Many have adopted the sentiment that custodial care for children is no good. We leave children like Gugu to have to make decisions with limited resources and no financial experience! We believe that the children should be in the community, within the extended family network. We know now that the extended family network is more in memory than in reality. Materialism has replaced the community care that was a hallmark of many communities in developing countries. As stated before, the extended families now are mostly seen when there is something for them to benefit from. South Africa has a wonderful system of grants for orphans. However the children who have access to these grants have to support the extended families that descend on them at these times, and disappear until the next payout.

Are we not running the largest experiment of all time in the face of the HIV epidemic? We want to see how children are able to survive with very little support:

How do children cope with calamity without psychological help?

How do these children make budgets stretch in order to care for themselves and their siblings?

What impact do abandoned children have on society?

What proportion of children, having been born HIV negative, become infected with HIV and other condition?

How many "success stories" are told at the end because of the strong human spirit?

Unfortunately, when this is all said and done

It is children's lives that will have been ruined

They will have no second chance; their lives will have been destroyed forever

How do we justify leaving our children as they are, abandoned, simply because custodial care was not good during years gone by? What have we done to ensure that the areas of neglect have been addressed?

I appreciate the shortcomings identified in the state institutions here. This is not politically correct in some countries. Orphanages and special places for children are not considered an alternative to child care. However there is no viable alternative for these children. No amount of money, no amount of material resources, will substitute for concern, care and nurturing that communities can give. No money can tug a child into bed

No amount of money will tell the child "I love you"

Orphanages (or whatever name we may give them) will allow governments to monitor the care these children get. The facilities should be within the community, with communities having defined and definite roles in the care of the children.

How do we substitute PARENTS for those who have lost them through poverty, power (violence) and disease? There is no other system that will care for the children bereft of parents. What we need to do is to improve on the system, and have monitoring mechanisms to detect abuse. We just cannot afford to leave the children to their own capabilities and creativeness. Otherwise these governments are guilty of trafficking in children, by sending them into the hands of criminals who will exploit and abuse them

There are many children on the streets, called "street kids". But as Oliver Mtukudzi, the prophet musician from Zimbabwe has said, a street has never given birth to a child!

They are our children. We must care for them.

Children whose parents died of HIV are more likely to contract HIV because of the attendant conditions – poverty and lack of social support. Who will warn them?

Governments in the developing world seem paralysed by experiences of others. They are unable to be creative in terms of meeting the challenge of our times.

The international community, especially of Children's Rights Advocates, should monitor each country in terms of its response to children in need – orphans and other vulnerable children. The international donor and developmental agencies should be monitored also. It is not that countries do not have resources to provide for children. It is that many have yet to make the decision that these children deserve as much care as the adults in the country. After all, there is much money spent on war activities. The Committee for the Rights of the Child should include this indicator within its reporting requirement.

Unless we do something about these, we shall have a world where children will not know what rights are and therefore will not promote rights. Looking from the other side of the grave, we shall not be glad that we did not do enough, when we had the chance to make a difference!