



Women's Networking Zone | AIDS 2018 | Booth #524 | Global Village

Press release

Amsterdam revisited – 26 years on – back to the birthplace of the International Community of Women living with HIV: The Women's Networking Zone: standing on the shoulders of giants.

As the Women's Networking Zone (WNZ) opens at the 22nd International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam this week, it is a time both for sadness and for celebration. At the opening welcome on Monday evening (17:45-18:15), we will remember with deep sadness all the women and girls who have acquired HIV and died over the years from AIDS-related illness.

We will also celebrate the return to the birthplace of the International Community of Women living with HIV and AIDS, which was created in Amsterdam 22 years ago, in 1992, when a group of courageous women stormed the stage and claimed their rights to their voices in a hitherto all male conference. At the WNZ this week we remember how we all stand on the shoulders of those giants, some of whom are still alive and will join us at the opening. Thus this is a time both for sadness and celebration. Come join us! And meet some of those amazing first women activists.

Background:

Why sadness?

Sadness because, there are still 36.7 million people in the world with HIV, of whom 51% are female¹. Sadness because, as the conference banners at Amsterdam airport declare, there are still 1 million people a year dying from AIDS-related illnesses – even more than the 900,000 population of Amsterdam.

Sadness because, despite enormous concerted efforts over the years, there is still a gender blankness at the centre of the storm. This void continues to ignore or deny the immense inequalities of powerlessness and poverty, which make it so unsafe for women and girls to share that they are facing violence or have HIV with those around them.

Intimate partner violence increases women's and girls' vulnerability to acquiring HIV (and chlamydia, syphilis and gonorrhoea) by a factor of 1.5². In turn, many women and girls, once they acquire HIV, experience either first-time violence or increased violence from partners, family or community members. And for the first time, many women can experience structural violence in healthcare settings³, where they can find themselves vilified for having a disease.

¹ http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/20170720_Data_book_2017_en.pdf

² **Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence**, 2013, World Health Organization, the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, and the South African Medical Research Council. <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/en/index.html>

³ Orza et al 2015a. JIAS <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.7448/IAS.18.6.20285>

Women living with HIV also experience increased levels of mental ill-health⁴. Yet major policies and programs still fail to realise this vicious triangle of co-morbidities of HIV, VAW and mental health issues, which together conspire to limit women's access to life-saving anti-retroviral medication, for themselves - or for their children if they have them. This is in part because conventional healthcare does not deal easily with healthcare issues which can't be treated by pills. Violence against women and mental ill health are instead immense psycho-social issues which require a very different set of response skills from those normally taught in medical or nursing schools.

Thanks to this, far too many girls and women have died over the years, from AIDS-related illnesses, often through lacking the will power to keep going when so much seems to conspire against them.

Why celebration?

In coming back to Amsterdam, it is also an opportunity to celebrate the remarkable willpower and resilience of women living with HIV who, in 1992, stormed the main stage of the AIDS conference to declare that women too had – and have - a right to have their issues addressed at the conference; that women too were acquiring HIV and dying; - and that women too could be courageous activists.

The Women's Networking Zone in the free parallel conference, held in the Global Village, has been described as "where the real conference takes place". Started in 2000 as a "Women at Durban" parallel process, it is recognized as a hub for knowledge sharing, advocacy, and critical dialogues around emerging issues at International AIDS Conferences and other key HIV research and policy fora, including the IAS HIV Pathogenesis, Treatment, and Prevention Conference and ICASA.

The WNZ operates as a virtual and physical convening entity, utilizing collaborative, inclusive, and democratizing processes to establish an agenda of priority issues, build coalitions and networks, and capacitate, strengthen, and spotlight the leadership of women and young women living with and affected by HIV, thereby responding to Recommendation 3 of UNAIDS Agenda For Women, Girls, Gender Equality And HIV, to champion leadership for an enabling environment that promotes and protects women's and girls' human rights and their empowerment, in the context of HIV, through increased advocacy and capacity and adequate resources.

Come join us at the opening welcome, where some of the original women activists to storm the stage will join us to celebrate their courage and resilience. And join us in the many diverse sessions in a packed agenda, hosted by women's groups from around the world throughout the week. There is a special stream focusing on the rights of and issues faced by young women, to celebrate also a new generation of fierce dynamic activism. Whilst standing on the shoulders of giants, the next generation are also a powerful force for change.

⁴ Orza et al 2015b. JIAS. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.7448/IAS.18.6.20289>