



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

Human rights, women and children, and sexual minorities dominate discussion at African AIDS meeting

“Now More Than Ever: Targeting Zero,” was the theme of the 7-11 December International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA 2013), urging activists and policymakers not to lose sight of the goal of an AIDS-free generation.

Zambia’s first lady Christine Kaseba-Sata offered a keynote address that exhorted special attention be paid to women and young people in the fight against HIV/AIDS in the continent: two key population groups suffering from disproportionate rates of HIV infection.

“Africa must commit itself to ending practices that promote gender violence against women and girls if the goal of ending the AIDS scourge on the continent is to be achieved,” Dr Kaseba-Sata said. The availability of contraception supported by targeted outreach to adolescents and young people to explain the importance of safe sexual activity will be critical to the fight against AIDS; the continent cannot afford to ignore that young people are sexually active, she said, and must do more to protect them than condemn them for sexual behaviours.

Dr Kaseba-Sata called for an integration of sexual and reproductive health education into schools around Africa, allowing youths to make informed, rather than risky, decisions.

Other speakers acknowledged the silence that most often accompanies discussions of men who have sex with men and sexual minorities in Africa. Ignoring these populations, which also have disproportionately high infection rates for HIV, comes at a peril for countries and risks undermining the real and legitimate progress being made to beat back the scourge. Entrenched hostility to sexual minorities that is cloaked in legislation, religion or traditional values must be overcome with dialogue, compassion and understanding,

delegates were repeatedly told.

Among the most intimate of the opening remarks were those from Cyriaque Ako, a health activist in francophone West Africa including his native Cote d'Ivoire, who talked about the hostile prejudice he was confronted with on a near daily basis.

Gay men in Africa “need to resist in order to exist”, he said. Decriminalization of gay sex in the 38 countries in Africa where harsh penalties, including fines and jail time, are still meted out for homosexual behaviour, is one of the first and best ways to fight the spread of HIV on the continent. Decriminalization will also break the silence that prevents effective outreach to men who have sex with men, rendering many condom and safe sex promotion campaigns ineffective.

The Global Fund has outlined its priorities for funding in sub-Saharan Africa that make clear the importance of outreach to this key population, a position reiterated at ICASA by Mark Dybul, the Secretariat's executive director, at a workshop organized by the Women4GF lobby group.

“We are committed to ensuring that Global Fund money is used for programmes that focus on human rights in the fight against the three diseases. We believe that the rights of sexual minorities should be respected, as key populations hold the key to the effective fight against the pandemic,” Dybul said.

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