

**Speech by HE Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang -AU Goodwill  
Ambassador and Champion for the Improvement of Maternal and  
Child Health in Africa beyond 2015.  
On The Feminization of HIV and AIDS and its Links to Sexual and  
Gender Based Violence  
at  
The Sexual Offences Indaba  
18-20 May 2009.  
Emperor's Palace , Gauteng.**

**Programme Director,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.**

The issues of Sexual and Gender Based Violence as well as HIV and AIDS are very important because of the way they negatively affect the very fabric of our society. Some of the predisposing factors to both HIV infections and Gender based violence are similar.

Issues such as the Unequal status of women and girls in society, poverty and unemployment , illiteracy and the patriarchal society are some of the underlying predisposing factors to both violence and more risk to HIV infection. Such socio-cultural and economic shortcomings end up denying women full enjoyment of their human rights. Violence itself is a great risk factor to women and girls getting infected with HIV.

It has been observed that HIV and AIDS tend to affect more women. Statistics show that more women get infected partly because of their biological make up . According to UNAIDS the male to female spread of HIV infection is 4 times more efficient than the female to male infection .This unequal spread is also aggravated by the unequal gender relations which dis-empower the women and girls from negotiating safe sexual and reproductive practices and taking decisions with their own bodies. This exposes women to infection with HIV and if they attempt to demand safe sex they are sometimes sexually violated and physically abused. This implies that unless the issue of gender inequality is addressed through change of behavior of both boys and men , the violence that we see may not abate so easily. It is unfortunate that if young children grow up in an environment of violence they begin to accept it as normal behavior and then perpetuate it . It is critical therefore that the cycle of violence be broken through early grooming of children to know the correct behavior.

When relatives and family members are ill from AIDs or any other illnesses it is often the women and girls as primary care givers that care for the ill person. In fact the theme of the 53<sup>rd</sup> UN Commission on the Status of Women was on equal sharing of tasks between women and men as it relates to HIV and AIDs. Many women and girls have missed opportunities to develop themselves and live better lives because they are busy with caring for other members of the family. This results in them being dependent on their partners for their daily needs and survival .They are therefore put at great risk of being violated and abused. It is critical that sharing of

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responsibilities in the family should become the norm even before there is illness. There needs to be greater efforts at narrowing the gender disparities.

The disproportionate spread of HIV infections among women and girls is also a human rights issue. Many countries in the developing world do not have specific laws to empower women . Even those which have them have a challenge with enforcement. This is partly due to the difficulty in regulating and legislation human behavior. Some of the Socio -cultural beliefs still perpetuate harmful practices which demean women and girls .

It is necessary for all stake holders to take an active part in this moral regeneration to stop the violence against women and children and also reduce the risk of HIV infection among women.

The recent interest in collaboration to address the harmful practices such as the abduction and forced early marriages (UKUTHWALA) which still exist in some areas of this country is worth pursuing . In this regard one hopes that we shall not lose momentum in addressing this issue and protect girls so that they can develop in a healthy environment .

As a country we are proud that the Constitution has enshrined in it equality regardless of gender , race and class. There are good legislations and policies which safeguard the human rights of women . However there is still a challenge of harmful practices in some areas such as the high incidence of rape .The ongoing poverty and under development remains a strong catalyst to the negative behavior of sexual and gender based violence against women which continues to plague our country and continent .However we have to

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acknowledge the good work which has been done in safeguarding women's rights by the many organizations in the country and also the establishment of places of safety like the Thuthuzela Care centres .

On a bigger scale the issue of conflicts aggravates women's risk to the exposure to both violence and gender based violence . Peace and conflict resolutions are therefore critical to protect women and children from exposure to these social ills .

Finally I would like to say that my task as an AU Goodwill Ambassador and Champion for the Improvement of Maternal and Child Health in Africa will be naught if the issues of poverty ,violence ,gender disparities which expose women and girls to increased risk of HIV Infection are not addressed . It is in the interest of the whole of Africa that these issues are addressed in a holistic manner. A lot of advocacy is needed so that there can be change in behavior .Governments, civil society, the private sector , traditional leaders and faith based organizations all need to work together to stop this feminization of HIV and the Gender based violence in our society. If not addressed holistically, it continues to threaten our efforts at having a free , loving and empowering environment within which our women and children live./It also robs the country of their valuable contribution.

As Africa strives to achieve the Millennium Development Goals together with the rest of the world; let us speak out about some of the ills that threaten our society.

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I encourage us all here to be involved in one way or another in safeguarding the rights of women and allow them to enjoy freedom and good health which they deserve. Condoning the status quo with our silence will not help. Prevention strategies must address the wide range of gender inequalities that promote the dissemination of HIV.

Together we can free women and girls from the fear of violence and abuse as well as empower them with strategies to prevent infection with HIV. Let the men continue to take an active role in this campaign to empower women and girls.

I thank you.

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