

**“It’s Time to Act”
A Technical Seminar on Women and AIDS**

Mary Fisher

Sponsored by
The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)
UNAIDS
Horizons Program

Washington DC
Thursday, December 2, 2004

Thank you so much for that kind introduction.

It’s an honor to be in the presence of such luminaries of AIDS research, care and advocacy, and a double honor to open this morning’s seminar with a few introductory remarks.

I must say at the beginning that I’m keenly aware of the enormous sacrifice that has been made by men to the cause that increasingly impacts women. This is more than a token comment; as women, we covet your continued work with us. Unless men of integrity speak to power structures lacking integrity, girls and women will continue to face a gravely darkened future. We need men as our partners if we are to make the changes so desperately needed. Therefore, I ask your forgiveness for speaking, this morning, almost exclusively to my fellow-women.

As an American woman – and a woman with AIDS – I treasure the expertise and wisdom my fellow-travelers bring with them. Geeta, Suzanne, Asunta and others have knowledge and gifts I do not have. My only strength is, in fact, captured in my identity: I am a woman, and a woman with AIDS. I’ve spent more than a dozen years walking with other pilgrims who have been found by the virus.

Some of what I’ve learned on the road to AIDS is painful: Stigma and discrimination are brutal and universal. Hypocrisy mars every level of every government response to AIDS. The world, including my own nation, dulls its response to AIDS by pandering to racism and moral judgmentalism. Global powerbrokers can accept 17 million distant orphans more readily than they can accept political challenges at home. These are painful confessions, especially for an American woman.

I recognize that, as a group, women with AIDS are branded by others more than we are defined by ourselves. We are not seasoned fighters who know how to battle societal judgments. When our cultures tell us that AIDS is a dirty illness belonging to dirty

people, we do not want to be identified as infected. We fear our families’ rejection and our communities’ isolation. Our fear keeps us from being tested, blocks us from seeking treatment and, ultimately, condemns us to a slow and inevitable death.

What we, who are women with AIDS, need most – and most urgently – is the redemption of our status as human beings and as women. We need other women to champion our cause until we gather enough strength and courage to champion it ourselves. We are desperate for leaders who will define women as strong, valued and worthy, no matter our HIV status. We need other women to help us shake off the aura of “victims” – as if we are feeble and passive objects – to become powerful ambassadors for compassion and healing.

We need a campaign for dignity as much as a crusade for intervention. It is dignity that inspires our courage and emboldens our speech. Dignity raises our faces that were lowered in shame; dignity straightens our backs when they have been beaten, and strengthens our character when we’ve been assaulted.

Language matters. It can be used to lift and inspire us, or to demean and break us. Language is the single most important weapon in the arsenal of those who abuse power, exceeding even the power of the fist and the gun. If powerful people tell us we are dirty, we feel unworthy. If they tell us we are societal problems, we feel guilt. If they tell us we are fallen women, evil women, useless women, then we have no ability to be women at all. The language of our culture defines us in ways we cannot define ourselves.

Silence is as potent as speech. If you have the power to lift us up and heal us, but say nothing about us, we know by your silence that we are not worthy. Silence as well as speech can build our hope or break our will, lead us to service or bring us to suicide.

So here we are, women (and men) gathered at least in part to commemorate World AIDS Day 2004. We are a quarter-century into an epidemic with no end in sight. Clearly it is, as the title of today’s gathering says, “Time to Act.”

We need to address issues of language. Language that has been used to cripple women around the globe can also be used to empower them. Media that carry streams of demeaning images and victimizing slogans can be employed, instead, to beam messages of education and encouragement. Where culture and language have been used to weaken girls and immobilize women, we have the capacity to signal an end to such violations.

How many women are in the global company of AIDS today? Perhaps 20, 25 million? Imagine the impact we could make if we, here, today committed to a campaign that taught these women to embrace service instead of shame: to nurture and care for others, including one another, rather than seeking refuge in undeserved shame. We could equip an army of compassion and healing whose ambition would be war against ignorance and illness. Believe it or not, we have the capacity to do this: We have the knowledge, we have the power and we have the influence – if only we will use it.

If we lack anything at all, it is leadership. I mean no offense to any of you who have devoted yourself to this cause. I’m already in your debt; I don’t want also to be in your “dog house.” But it’s true: What women with AIDS lack most is role models, heroines of courage, leadership.

Until women of stature and courage step to the head of this campaign, we will struggle and stammer with issues of powerlessness and futility. But when such women step forward they will be, at that instant, both our most important resource and our greatest heroes.

I’d never minimize the risk that comes with a leader’s role, especially for women in cultures where AIDS is despised (which is nearly every nation on earth). It is not easy, and it may not be immediately popular, to counter myths and challenge bigotry. A price may be paid by those courageous and wise enough to challenge injustice and champion the oppressed. But the cost of such leadership must be measured against the knowledge that we are begging for leadership against an evil like none we have ever known before.

Women bear children, and children in this epidemic are increasingly becoming orphans... who seek nurture from other women. Do we understand the rate at which we are creating orphans in this world?

- Since I said that I would like to cite a statistic, another child has been orphaned by AIDS.
- Since I began speaking this morning, forty children have been orphaned by AIDS.
- Since most of us brushed our teeth this morning, AIDS has created a crowd of orphans five times larger than are in this room. (550-650 individuals)

Near the close of his life, Dr. Martin Luther King said to all of us, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.”

I did not want to break my own silence and speak out in public 12 years ago. I still do not want to do it today. But it is, inescapably, time to act.

If we truly believe that life’s purpose is found in serving others, then those of us with power to speak must cry out for those driven into fearful silence. If we remain in comfortable silence, our children may never be forgiven. If we speak out – no matter the cost or opposition – we will never be forgotten by powerless pilgrims on the road to AIDS.

I am in a room full of heroes. To each of you, my thanks for your presence and for your courage. It’s time to act – and an honor to act with each of you.