



On the Record: Against AIDS in Africa

Issue 6: Gender Youth and AIDS, January 14, 2001

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From the AP Editorial Desk: Girls at Risk

One of the most striking features of the AIDS crisis in Africa is the way it has zeroed in on women and girls. Out of the approximately 25 million Africans who were infected with HIV/AIDS at the end of 2001, 13.3 million were women. According to the UN, teenage girls face a far greater risk of infection than do boys. Put bluntly, girls are in the cross hairs of the AIDS pandemic.

This issue of 'On the Record' attempts to explain why. In a very general sense, it has to do with the role of women and girls in society, particularly rural areas. Girls are expected to accept without question the life that awaits them as wives and mothers, but boys are encouraged to be aggressive and confident.

The difference persists into adulthood. It is common for men to engage in extramarital relationships, and polygamy is also tolerated in some rural societies. But wives are often kept in the dark. This exposes husbands and wives -- not to mention the girlfriends -- to infection.

One AIDS victim, David, who is profiled in this issue might have infected four women in addition to himself. His wife is now dead. Worse, David knowingly infected her without telling

her. He is left clinging to life with two young children to care for and a terrible burden of guilt. So many lives have been ruined by the irresponsibility of this one man.

Such tragedies will surely persist as long as society discriminates against females of all ages -- as long as girls are forced to drop out of school earlier than boys and as long as women are economically dependent on their husbands.

Indeed, AIDS may be one of the best arguments for the empowerment of girls. Without the confidence that comes with education and knowledge, young women will not be able to defend themselves in situations that render them vulnerable to infection. What are these situations? It could be negotiating with sex partners over the use of a condom, or demanding the truth from an unfaithful husband. In both contexts, women are at a severe disadvantage.

All too often, society and culture are not on their side. Even in Uganda, where the government has launched an aggressive campaign of education and information, a new survey finds that rural families often blame the widow for the death of her husband - even though the widow is herself a helpless victim.

It will take time to eradicate such deep-rooted prejudice -- time and a concerted effort by governments. Meanwhile, girls will have to take matters into their own hands with help from other campaigners and networks like Youth Against AIDS.

How can this be done? Read the profile below of Itumeleng (Tumi) Thahane, YAA's dynamic representative in Botswana. Tumi is the epitome of self-confidence - and confidence of young women is the first line of defense against the menace of AIDS.

- This editorial was written by the Advocacy Project.

Letters from Zambia, Togo, Mali

Since the last issue before Christmas, YAA has received letters from the Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Uganda, United Kingdom, and Zambia, YAA staff are answering all correspondence. Write them at info@advocacynet.org

- From Patricia Littiya, Zambian National Broadcasting Corporation, Zambia

I am a Zambian female journalist aged 28. I am interested in joining (your) organization by helping in whatever possible to stop the scourge. Like everyone else all over the world especially Africa and in particular Zambia where I come from I have been affected by the Pandemic. Through my writing I try to help contribute in fighting HIV/AIDS. Could you please give details of how I can be active in the Organization or whom I should contact in Zambia? Best Regards, Patricia Littiya.

From Essodeyouna Gnakou, Togo

Salut les jeunes!

Je viens par cette présente vous saluer et remercier pour tout ce que vous faites pour la santé des jeunes en Afrique. En effet nous sommes très intéressés par vos activités, et nous souhaitons avoir d'amples informations et solliciter par la même occasion votre partenariat pour la réalisation de nos activités portant sur la sensibilisation et la conscientisation des jeunes de notre pays (TOGO) sur la réalité des IST-SIDA. Car actuellement le TOGO est dans le peloton de tête en Afrique de l'Ouest. Je vous écrit au nom de l'Association des Etudiants et Diplômés en Animation de Jeunesse et en Education Physique et Sportive (AED-AJEPS) du TOGO. Merci pour votre initiative. Meilleurs Voeux pour la nouvelle Année 2002 qui s'annonce.

From Salim Mohamed, Kenya

Jambo, thank you for all the materials you have been sending to me, and it really means a lot. I have been sharing the information with my colleagues at work. I work for an organisation called Mathare Youth Sports Association and we are the largest youth sports organisation in Africa. We work in a slum area and we use sports as a tool for community development. . .Once again thank you, Salim

YAA Website Featured by the Francois-Xavier Bagnoud Association

The YAA site has been chosen as one of the websites of the month by the Association Francois-Xavier Bagnoud (AFXB). The association has long advocated for a community-based approach to AIDS and the support of AIDS orphans. It also supports the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at the Harvard School of Public Health. To receive the AFXB health and human rights newsletter send an email message to: hhconference-request@fxb.org with the words Subscribe HH Conference as the message (subject can be left blank).

In the News:

Swazi King Violates His Own Law Against Under-Age Sex

The king of Swaziland has paid a fine -- the form of a cow -- for breaking his own law and marrying a 17 year-old girl.

Last September, in an effort to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS, King Mswati III reinstated a traditional chastity rite known as "umchwasho" that prohibits girls under the age of 18 from having sexual relations. Two months later, he violated his own ban by taking 17 year-old Notsetselelo Magongo as his ninth wife.

This act of hypocrisy by the 33 year-old king prompted a protest by 300 young women, who marched to the palace and laid down symbolic chastity belts. They then slaughtered and ate the cow.

South African Government Ordered to Provide Drugs for HIV-Infected Pregnant Women

The South African government has been ordered to make the antiretroviral drug, nevirapine, available to all HIV-positive pregnant women in state-run maternity clinics.

The order, which was handed down on December 14, 2001, by the Pretoria High Court, was hailed as a major breakthrough by the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). TAC had argued that the government's policy of only providing antiretrovirals at 18 pilot sites (health centers) was a form of discrimination against other women who give birth at other state-run clinics.

The government has appealed the order, arguing that the High Court exceeded its authority.

Nevirapine has been shown to stop the transmission of the virus from mothers to their unborn children in a significant number of cases. The manufacturer of the drug has reportedly even offered to make it freely available.

South Africa's president Thabo Mbeki has been widely criticized by AIDS activists for downplaying the impact of the epidemic and even casting doubt on the existence of the virus, even though more people are infected in South African than in any other country.

- For coverage of the South African controversy and TAC activities see [On the Record \(#4\)](#).

The Lonely Man

By John Kamau, Kenya

As we walk down an alley to his one-bedroom house, David Sira ignores the onlookers who gape at the two boils on his cheeks. Walking is painful, slow, and calculated because Sira also has a boil on his left thigh. "I am sorry you found me in a bad shape," he tells me as he supports himself with a walking stick.

Sira doesn't like the sympathetic stares he gets and doesn't hide his disgust either. "Such stares make me sick. I want to live my own life like an ordinary person," he tells me. But he can't. Although aged 30, Sira looks much older, thanks to the scattered patches of hair on his head. They are usually covered with a sombrero hat that he removes and puts on a small cabinet.

"If I could reverse the clock I would be more careful, but it is too late," he says, before invoking a Swahili language proverb that loosely translates, "you can not correct water that has poured to the ground."

It started out well. Sira came to Nairobi to live with an uncle and attend a computer college. He hoped to be a computer programmer. He took a diploma and got a good company job. "My life started on a very positive note. I had the money and a good car at 23," he says.

Sira had heard about HIV/AIDS at secondary school, and he remembers the billboards that portrayed frail people suffering from the scourge. Ironically, he even took part in staging a play on HIV/AIDS at the Kenya National Theatre in 1989. "It never occurred to me that I would be one of the unlucky people to catch the virus. None of us had seen anybody suffering from AIDS."

The year 1995 will always be a dark one for Sira. He fell ill with what he thought to be malaria, and a company doctor suggested that he give a blood sample. Nobody told Sira that his HIV status was also being tested and he never suspected anything.

"I took the test with confidence and continued with my work, although I was relatively weak. One month after the test I found a note on my desk asking me to see the general manager next morning at 9 a.m. I found the company doctor seated there with a blue file with my name. The two looked at me and asked me if I wanted to work there any more. I asked why and the manager took the file from the doctor and said, "Look at that." I looked at page one and there were the results of my test. That information was released to me in a crude style. I couldn't believe what the doctor was telling me and I asked him whether I am going to die and I heard somebody say "Yes!" I think it was the manager, I don't know who.."

To say Sira was shattered is an understatement. He walked out of his job, forgot to take a transport home -- he actually forgot his vehicle at the parking bay! -- and just walked the entire stretch of more than eight kilometers.

"I am not sure whether I met any people on the way, or how I was crossing the roads but somehow I got home and went straight to bed to die. I thought of suicide, but I never took any further step apart from buying a rope. I decided to take another test. It was positive also."

David Sira did not die. Six years later he is still alive, with two children - Nzuve, age four and Mwikali, age eight. But his wife is dead.

Sira recovered from the initial shock and gained weight, but he did not reveal his HIV status to anyone -- even his wife. "I knew from the word go that I had infected my wife. Or I infected her later on. I don't know because we never used any condoms," he says as he shakes his head. "It's terrible watching your innocent partner living with a virus without (her) knowing about it."

As soon as Sira knew of his HIV status, he stopped seeing his secret sexual partners -- he had three -- stopped drinking alcohol and started going to church. In his own words, he "became a loving husband." From 1997 to 1999 Sira enjoyed "very good health. I even forgot I had a virus and would wonder whether those results were right."

Still, he did not tell his wife. "I should have told my wife immediately," he now admits. The secret came out after she went down with a persistent cough that would not go away, a year after she gave birth to their second-born, Nzuve.

Sira thought that his wife would learn from the antenatal clinic. "She never did, as far as I know." Still, he knew the truth was about to be discovered, and he even feared that their son could be infected too. "I decided to break the sad news to my wife before she took any test after she was advised by a doctor to do so. I told her the truth. I did not want her to hear it from a third party. That was a mistake I regret up to this day. She just collapsed in shock and had to be taken to hospital."

Sira's darkest days had just begun. From the hospital bed his wife told anyone who would listen. "All our friends just bolted away. The landlord asked us to leave his house. She lost her job and my relatives severed all contacts with our family," says Sira.

Nursing a wife he had infected was the worst nightmare. "I saw her suffering, and there was nothing I could do to save her. My children always cried to see their mother in pain. I supported her to the end but when she died, I knew that I would soon follow, leaving our two children orphaned. Relatives openly told me to carry my own cross."

The only solace Sira has is that his wife forgave him. "Before she died, she called me and held my hand and asked that we pray together. I did the praying. After that she told me "nimekusamehe" (I have forgiven you). That is what gives me courage. At least she died with no grudge against me."

Sira is still reluctant to reveal how he got infected. "I was not faithful to my wife, that's all I can say. I developed relations with other young girls in the suburb and would go with them after some drinking spree. I guess that is how I contracted the disease, though I cannot tell which one infected me. But I do not want to blame anyone -- this is God's will and it has happened."

Like many other people living with HIV/AIDS, Sira went through a terrible denial stage. "I prayed to God to reverse the diagnosis, went to witchdoctors who told me my family has been bewitched by our in-laws. I almost believed that for two years."

At times Sira would meet one of his three former girl friends and would be astonished to think that he was HIV-positive. "They looked okay. This made me doubt the medical results and I went for a third diagnosis. But believe me it was the same. I was positive! I have never experienced a rough time like that. I stopped contacting witchdoctors and traditional seers."

Sira is not angry with the person who infected him. He has not had any more sexual contact -- apart from unprotected sex with his late wife -- since knowing his HIV status.

"I want the virus to be mine and mine alone. Spreading it to other people is the last thing I would do in my life. I would not even dream of using condoms -- that would be dangerous. I do not want to infect anyone else. I have decided to abstain as I wait for my day."

Watching Sira tell his story uninterrupted is to get the deeper thoughts that still race in his mind today.

He had always hoped to own a computer firm. Instead, last August he sold the last plot he had bought to meet his medical bills. He has invested a little money in a small food kiosk in the industrial area -- some six kilometers south of Nairobi.

"I am now living a very terrible life supported by drugs. The drugs prescribed to me by my doctor are very expensive. I have been in and out of the hospital seeking medical attention. And here I am. Look at my face. Recently, the doctor told me that I have developed a mild heart-

related disease, which he said is one of the worst symptoms of persons with HIV/AIDS. He has insisted that I take a balanced diet and use the drugs, which I have to buy frequently."

The picture of his wife still hangs on the wall, helping to fill the emptiness at home. His major task is to fight discrimination against his children. "At times their playmates intimidate them and laugh at them because they have no mother. It is bitter.painful," says Sira as he bites his lower lip. "Sometimes my son is so devastated that he stays indoors and refuses to go out and play. He is afraid of his playmates."

He continues: "My children were very much affected by the death of their mother. They used to ask me when she will come back to stay with them. They were still young to understand. I have now broken the sad news to them. My struggle now is to prepare them for any eventuality.. It is very painful to know that you will soon die. But we cannot avoid death: it is inevitable. It is even worse for us who have AIDS. We are already dead, only waiting for the day to come."

"Now I have to strive hard to prove to my relatives that I can still make it even though they have neglected me. They believe that I am the beginning of all these problems. My in-laws have not spared me either. Every time they keep blaming me for taking away their daughter at a very tender age. They believe that my wayward behavior has cost them their daughter and that God should punish me more."

Sira has a few kind words for his elder sister. "She is the only person who helps me when the going is rough. She has promised to look after my children just in case." The sister runs the food kiosk that Sira has built and stays in a nearby suburb with Sira's two children. "It is no longer a bad dream to me, it is the thin line we all walk -- that I walked.."

So far Sira has not joined any society of people living with AIDS. As part of his own healing process, he occasionally meets people who have been infected. They exchange notes on how to survive. Two years ago he started reading books on counseling.

"I have been counseling most of my friends infected with the disease, and they have gained courage to overcome some of the problems that follow. We have somehow developed a way of appreciating each day in our lives. But the most devastating thing is that our colleagues are perishing day-by-day. I have buried two of my friends in the last two weeks. They died almost on the same day, and this has affected me very much."

Sira does not want to allow his photo to be taken, for fear that people might discriminate against his children even more. And that is why he is also reluctant to go public nationally..

"Let me suffer alone, but not my children," he says as I shake his hand and thank him for the interview. We spent the next two hours talking politics, economy, and the (September 11) bombings in America. As I stood to leave I could sense the loneliness that Sira lives in. "Don't even trust yourself," he reminds me as I bid him good-bye.

Dependence on Men Increases Risk to Women and Girls, Says UN

Women who are economically dependent upon men and who lack control over their own sexual lives are at greater risk from AIDS according to a major UN study.

The study was prepared by a group of experts who met in Windhoek, Namibia, in November 2000 under the auspices of the United Nations.

"A gendered understanding of HIV/AIDS suggests that it is women's and girls' relative lack of power over their bodies and their sexual lives, supported and reinforced by their social and economic inequality, that make them vulnerable in contracting and living with HIV/AIDS," says their report.

"Differing economic opportunities, roles, and expectations create divisions in society. These in turn have consequences for women's and men's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. For example, women's economic dependence on men seriously compromises their ability to negotiate protection and leave risky relationships. Gender norms of masculinity encourage men to seek multiple partners and participate in risk-related sexual activity."

- The full report is available in pdf form [here](#).

Victim of Polygamy

By James Odongo and Edris Kisambira
Uganda

Lydia Nabufuwufu, a 25 year-old Ugandan mother of five, was shattered when she learned that she was HIV-positive. She knew that her life would be shaped by the fact that one day she would succumb to the AIDS disease. "It scared me very much and I knew that death was on the way. From then on, I knew sickness would strike any time."

She was married off by her parents at the age of seventeen to a man with four other wives and concubines. It was a daunting task for a girl to manage four other fully grown women. She also bore five children, ranging in age from nine to one.

With tears streaming down her face, Nabufuwufu says that her husband held her in love and esteem, and that this provoked hatred from her co-wives. "My husband loved me so much and he always described me as a unique person. He always said I was an obedient person who followed his principles -- something he said my co-wives lacked."

Her moment was short-lived. Her co-wives were able to have her thrown out of the house, and she had the misfortune of losing her husband to AIDS while she was no longer living with him.

After she separated from her husband, Nabufuwufu found it hard to feed herself and her five children, and the combination of separation and stress produced an illness that rendered her helpless. A few months after leaving home she started to get terrible headaches, pains in her joints and stomach, and intermittent malaria.

Unknown to her, she had also conceived around the time that she left home. After four months, she suffered a miscarriage. "It became clear there was something wrong with me," she says. A few months later, her youngest child also fell sick. This made it harder for Nabufuwufu to travel the two kilometers from her home to the nearest health center.

The miscarriage prompted her to go for an HIV test in the Mukono AIDS Support Association. She then joined the association. Finally, she began to receive some support -- medical and otherwise. Even after being kicked out of her home and learning that her former husband was about to die, she held no grudges.

AIDS Widows 'At Threat' From Family Members, Says Uganda Survey

A new study of AIDS and discrimination in Uganda finds that family members in rural communities often deny food and care to the widows and children of relatives who die from HIV/AIDS, to the point of threatening their very survival.

The survey was undertaken by the Uganda-based AIDS Support Organization (TASO) on behalf of the Joint UN Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). The report was based on in-depth interviews with 50 Ugandans and was published in August 2001 for the World Conference on Racism.

Approximately 500,000 Ugandans have died from HIV/AIDS, out of a population of 22 million. Although the government has stressed the link between discrimination and the disease, half of those interviewed reported having been "rejected" by their families. This surprised the research team because it cast doubt on the effectiveness of education.

Women are particularly affected. The report found that in-laws often blame widows for having "killed" their sons; as a result, the in-laws may drive the widows from family homes and even deny them food and health care. "This threatens the survival of widows and their children, particularly in rural communities."

In addition to causing abuse and distress, this intolerant behavior discourages people with AIDS from revealing their status and leads to a "climate of secrecy" about the disease, contributing to its transmission.

- The text of the report can be downloaded [here](#).

Challenging the Gender Stereotype: A Profile of YAA's Botswana representative

By Adam Frankel

Botswana

Itumeleng Thahane (Tumi to her friends) kept interrupting my group interview with volunteers at the Coping Centre for People Living with HIV/AIDS (COCEPWA) in Gaborone. She kept telling me what questions I should ask. I would have been annoyed if I weren't so intimidated by her assertiveness.

"Assertive" and "confident" are two words that Tumi uses to describe herself. You could also add: accomplished, determined, outspoken, articulate, and passionate.

As well as confounding the gender stereotype, these qualities stand Tumi in good stead. AIDS counseling is emotional, exhausting, and always challenging. And since it often means helping people rediscover their self-confidence, it demands a healthy self-confidence in the counselor.

Tumi attributes her self-confidence almost entirely to PACT, Peer Approach to Counseling and Training. Quite simply, she says, PACT taught me to believe in herself. "When I joined PACT, I thought that boys were the only ones who could speak in public," Tumi says. "I didn't think girls could say anything. I just thought that girls had to live life by the day and not have any plans, ambitions, or goals."

Tumi's activism is partly in response to a culture that teaches girls to keep quiet. Tumi grows excited and angry when talking about how she "had to bear the way boys were with girls." Boys would come and hit you, trip you, she says -- but the girls would not react! Girls, she says, are raised to be quiet and not to confront boys or stand up for themselves. Girls don't report a boy's behavior to the teacher for fear of being called a wimp.

But Tumi always admired boys' strength, she says. She admired the attitude that "If you fall, you get up and dust yourself off. But girls would always cry." At PACT, Tumi and other girls learned to be stronger and more assertive among themselves and with boys.

PACT is one of Botswana's most respected programs in the fight against AIDS. Its classes -- which are conducted in more than 20 schools around Gaborone -- help young people find confidence and self-esteem. Students participate in classes and make presentations each week on subjects ranging from teen-pregnancy to alcohol and drug abuse -- HIV/AIDS is integrated into many of the discussions.

And PACT helped Tumi realize that "boys will respect you if you give them a reason to respect you."

Do other girls resent her because she is outspoken and assertive? I asked. "I don't know," she says, throwing up her hands. "They'd know better than to tell me to my face."

Tumi also attributes her self-confidence to her mother, whom she calls her role model and an example she will try to follow when she has children. Her parents live separately, and her mother supports two daughters on a single income.

"My mother works a job she'd rather not be working, but because her daughters need to survive, she's held onto it for a long time, Tumi says. "My mother respects my independence. But I still have to adhere to her rules."

And Tumi is also quick to add how she has helped her mother. Her mother has learned to become more liberated, Tumi says, by having a daughter who talks to her so openly about sex --

a subject still taboo in Botswana and throughout Africa. Peer educators are encouraged to talk about sex and HIV/AIDS at home and with friends.

"Before I used to make a speech or a presentation," Tumi says, "people thought a boy would have done a better job. People would look at me as a girl, she says, they'd look at what I was wearing. But when I actually did it, people were impressed." In fact, one of her proudest accomplishments has been "making men listen."

Tumi completely rejects the Setswana cultural practice that teaches girls to keep quiet and that teaches boys not to take seriously the views of girls. But she embraces another cultural stereotype: the role of the girl as caregiver.

"As for a woman's role, I accept it because I'm going to be a mother someday," she says. "As much as people talk about women's liberation, if you teach boys how to wash clothes, cook, and iron-they'd never need a girl, would they?" she says.

It sounds a bit far-fetched when Tumi says, "the role of the girl is to take care of the house." Perhaps that's because in Tumi's case, the role of the girl also includes being a dedicated youth activist. "I just get upset when women's views are oppressed and they can't speak their mind," Tumi pleads.

But, she adds, "I'm not a feminist in any way." Tumi's activism is consistent with her belief in the role of women. When Tumi counsels a friend who has been sexually abused -- or a young girl living with HIV -- she believes she's fulfilling the girl child's role as caregiver. She does it proudly.

Miss Nigeria Earns New Fans With Her AIDS Work

Vien Bemigho Tetsola, who was crowned the forty-fourth Miss Nigeria beauty queen last year, has inspired young Nigerians by leading a national campaign against AIDS. She began her work while in office by speaking out against the disease and even helped to set up a foundation that has channeled large sums of money to people living with AIDS.

Impressed by her work, two youth campaigners, Berkly Akora and James Dupre, have established a National Youth Service Corps Project called the Vien Club. The project works with young teenagers in three secondary schools in Lagos State and recently received permission to expand the program into more public schools.

Traditional Customs Spread AIDS Among Women in Nigeria and Senegal

During his visits to Nigeria and Senegal for YAA, Leo Metcalf found that even beauty treatment is contributing to the spread of AIDS. In this article, he draws on contributions from two journalists who have worked with YAA: Ibrahima Ndiaya from Senegal and Tony Adesemoye in Nigeria.

AIDS is not only transmitted through sex. In Nigeria, it can also be carried by the small hairdressing and beauty saloons. According to Olabisi Olateru-Olagbegi, who heads the Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON), there is a practice called getting "Ogoteeth," in which a woman gets her teeth filed so as to create a gap at the front. This is seen as attractive in some tribes. But the file is often not cleaned and is likely to draw blood. This can spread the HIV virus.

Biodun Babs-Fashola, a 19 year-old AIDS campaigner, also believes that traditional practices among women increase the risk of infection.

She explains: "Polygamy still puts women at risk of HIV infection, as do tribal marks. Wife inheritance is still common in some parts of Nigeria. Then there is this practice of 'Uzi' that is still common in the eastern part of Nigeria. All these should be addressed." (Uzi, she explains, is a cultural practice that allows young girls to be married off to much older men.)

"Women are still at the receiving end here; men marry many wives; women are not to be heard ... I always tell girls that we have to break this cycle. We need to be vocal," she added.

Biodun is on the staff of the Nigeria Youth AIDS Program (NYAP), a youth-focused nongovernmental organization based in Lagos. She is also a volunteer counselor for the Nigerian HIV/AIDS hotline, a project of Youth Empowerment Foundation (YEF).

As part of her job, Biodun runs a project that sets up clubs in secondary schools in and around Surulere. The clubs have formed themselves into cooperatives, encourage savings among members, and generate funds through drama performances. This allows them to assist members who are face financial difficulties, helping them reject drugs or sex work.

Biodun says she hopes to have reached five million youths with life skills education before she clocks 25. Thereafter, she will focus on "other issues of general public interest."

In Senegal, AIDS campaigners warn that tattooing also involves a risk of blood contamination -- and hence spreads the HIV virus. I visited one nutritional center for women in Dakar and spoke with Mme. Thiake, who has worked there since 1999.

Mme. Thiake says that the same cutting instruments may be re-used in tattooing several people -- and that this contaminates blood. Pediatric instruments are often not washed properly or sterilized. Giving birth, receiving injections, and other activities must also be reconsidered in the light of AIDS. "Obviously, there are taboos against addressing sexuality with women," she says. "Being shy, they seldom discuss it. Much tact must be used to encourage people to talk."

Although she recognizes that the disease has not yet devastated Senegal, Mme. Thiake argues strongly for more prevention, particularly with women. Her argument is that most women are illiterate, and some don't know how the AIDS disease is transmitted. She also feels that educational efforts should be aimed at women whose husbands are abroad. Studies show that they are particularly vulnerable to infection.

The nutritional center aims to promote feeding underweight babies with maize flour, beans, sugar, and green beans. But for Mme. Thiaké, women must also take it upon themselves to escape from poverty. One way is to work together to form cooperatives, which are also known as "Groups of Economic Interest." These provide access to credit and income-generating activities.

Mme. Thiaké also feels that education should be extended to include these people, and not just target youth. Adults, religious guides, husbands -- all must join the campaign.