

Mujeres Adelante

Daily newsletter on women's rights and HIV – Mexico City 2008

In Focus...

Ida Susser, Zana Stein and Marion Stevens

Child survival and reproduction in social context

Linda Richter's plenary on Wednesday demonstrated that a healthy mother is what is necessary for a healthy childhood. Richter reframed the question of child survival from a narrow focus on AIDS orphans to a broader understanding of the need to support poor families in the age of AIDS.

Families, Richter stated, are the best place for children to grow up and must be supported and strengthened. She pointed out that, far from neglecting children, families have stretched their efforts far beyond their resources to care for children with AIDS. A Botswana study documented that families spent 25% of their household budgets on each sick child. Because of this commitment to their children, families forego education and even food.

Orphanages are not the answer. According to Richter, they cost ten times as much to raise each child and in addition, children lose emotional and kin support and do not survive as well as they do in families.

To address these overall challenges, Richter called for renewed programs of *social protection*. She demonstrated clearly what has been a centerpiece of many

critiques since the 1980s structural adjustment programs, that without a strong government investment in the support of poor families and their children, we will not be able to address the needs of children in the AIDS epidemic.

By the end of Richter's presentation, it was obvious why our efforts through NGOs and microfinance, well-intentioned and crucial for minimal survival at the moment, cannot possibly make up for well-directed public investment in entitlements and social welfare for the population.

We might wonder however why Richter, throughout her presentation and handouts, never addressed the issues of women and mothers, or broke down her analysis of families by gender. She talks of poverty, but we all know that it is women who are the poorest all over the world.

In a panel, *Impact of AIDS on Human Development: Reproduction in Social Context*, organized by ATHENA members with the help of ICW and the WYWCA, where over 500 people crowded into a session room, P Kousalya, an Indian widow who found that she was HIV positive when her husband died seven months after their marriage,

noted that, in India and elsewhere, many widows are both victimized and impoverished. After their husband dies they may be exposed to family violence and, while their boy children may be taken away from them, their daughters are left to share their mother's poverty. However, like Kousalya herself, widows have begun to form strong and supportive networks, to go out to work and to speak for themselves.

We know that girl children have significantly different survival rates than boy children. In a picture shown by Anna Coutsoudis, in her paper on breastfeeding, we saw a mother with twins, where the hospital had recommended she breastfeed the boy and formula feed the girl. The boy thrived while the baby girl, clearly malnourished in the photo, died the following day.

Coutsoudis main point, sharply illustrated by the same photograph, was that breastfeeding promotes child survival. In countries with an infant mortality rate higher than 25 per 1000, exclusive breastfeeding saves babies' lives in the long term. Replacement feeding may eliminate the transmission of HIV only to increase the rates of death from diarrhea and other diseases.

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Coutsoudis called for a return to the normalization of exclusive breastfeeding, widely practiced in most of the world before the commercialization of formula and baby cereals. She recommended that women in poor countries could exclusively breastfeed, with support for expressing milk and saving it when they worked, even quickly boiling it to kill the virus. She suggested that, in light of all the advantages of breastfeeding, women in middle income countries should be allowed the option to nurse their babies using similar methods.

In the opening paper on this panel, Marion Stevens called for treatment guidelines for women of reproductive age. In reviewing how vertical transmission programs aimed to treat mothers and their unborn, she showed how this has prized treatment for preventing transmission to children over treatment for mothers. At the same time, she outlined how there needs to be more explicit clarity on contraceptive options, and to affirm women's right to a choice to a healthy pregnancy or a choice to terminate a pregnancy. Given that some 50% of pregnancies are unplanned, she suggested that there is a need for greater engagement of these issues, and noted how current prevention activities are negative, not life affirming and essentially

controlling. In being specific, she highlighted treatment regimens and how, first line options of Evafirenz and Tenofovir are contra-indicated in pregnancy, and that a common response of health workers is to tell women not to get pregnant – noting that this was reminiscent of population control. Even if we don't have all the answers, she argued that it was important to start working towards guidelines for women of reproductive age, and map out the continuum of care, options and question marks.

Following Stevens' thoughtful and detailed discussion, Gracia Violetta Ross powerfully described her own experiences, which dramatically highlighted the very themes Stevens had raised. As an

HIV positive woman from Bolivia, 31 years of age, Ross wants very much to have her own children. As a member of ICW, she is a highly informed and educated global activist and spokesperson for people living with HIV, and as she noted, expected to be a model of behavior. Expecting widespread condemnation, she courageously announced that she wanted a baby, just like any other woman, and was having unprotected sex in the effort to conceive. In a discussion afterwards, Ross noted that she had explored every avenue and that since her viral load was undetectable, she felt that she was doing the right thing.

Give females control

A group of about 50 women's rights activists gathered on Wednesday morning in front of the Media Centre to demand female condoms.

Interviewed by the media, Fiona Nicholson, TVEP, South Africa, pointed out that the failure to provide female condoms is nothing less than a human rights violation. Demanding explanations, she said:

... We know the HIV pandemic is a feminised pandemic, we know that women are more at risk of HIV infection, and we know that female condoms do prevent the risk of HIV infection. So, someone needs to explain why female condoms are not available. Someone needs to explain why women are denied their right to use female condoms.

Using the tune of John Lennon's song 'Give peace a chance', everyone joined into lyrics of the *Female Condom Song* and singing 'all we are saying, give females control; all we are saying, give condoms a chance'.

Supported by Dance4Life, the singing, dancing and chanting continued, a female condom demonstration took place, and the halls of the conference centre were, for a short while, filled with the question 'where are the female condom?...

