



World Chronicle

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“Women, AIDS and Violence”

A decade ago, in casual conversation, HIV / AIDS might have been referred to as a ‘gay man’s disease’. Today, we know that more than half the people living with HIV /AIDS are in fact women.

Why have women, who initially seemed to be peripheral to the AIDS pandemic, moved so rapidly to its epicentre? Can the spread of the virus be linked to violence against women, especially in conflict situations?

In this edition of World Chronicle, these questions are addressed with the help of Noeleen Heyzer, the Executive Director of the women’s fund at the United Nations – UNIFEM.

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ANNOUNCER: From the United Nations in New York, an unedited interview programme on global issues. This is **World Chronicle**. And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

JENKINS: Hello, I'm Tony Jenkins and this is **World Chronicle**.

A decade ago, in casual conversation, HIV/AIDS might have been referred to as a 'gay man's disease'. Today, we know that more than half the people living with HIV/AIDS are in fact women. Why have women, who initially seemed to be peripheral to the AIDS pandemic, moved so rapidly to its epicentre?

Our guest today is Noeleen Heyzer, the Executive Director of the Women's Fund at the United Nations – UNIFEM.

Ms. Heyzer, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

HEYZER: Thank you, Tony.

JENKINS: I want to start off by asking about this business about the shift in the demographics of AIDS. Why have we seen such a swift move in the direction of women?

HEYZER: First, let's look at the figures. In fact, in 1997 only 47% -- in other words it was below 50% -- of adults that were infected with HIV/AIDS were women and today it's 50%. And in fact, in sub-Saharan Africa, it's up to 58% and if you take a specific age group, teenage girls for example, it's five to six times more in terms of the infection rate when you compare the age group of boys. So what we are seeing is that women are getting more and more infected, but at a younger and younger age, and that is what we are talking about. And the reason for this is the issue of gender inequality. It is a difference in the use of power, it is in terms of power relationships and in this particular case, HIV/AIDS, you'll find that gender inequality is fatal. It's not just an issue of fairness, it's not even an issue of moral righteousness, it is fatal. That, in fact, to be born a girl could be a death sentence. And this is what we are talking about.

JENKINS: What you're basically saying is that women don't have the power to say no?

HEYZER: Women do not have the power to say no but also in terms of the situation of women, economically, in terms of culturally, in terms of educational, status of women, you need to look at why is it they can't say no. They can't say no because of their overall status, they can't say no because of the inter-linkages of poverty, because of the inter-linkages of violence to the epidemic, because of the situation that they find themselves in because of war. So there are many conditions that make it difficult for them to say no.

JENKINS: Joining us in the studio are, Sephora Rosario of *Asahi Shimbun* and Susannah Price of the *BBC*. Susie, do you want to jump in?

PRICE: Yes. I mean what do you think can actually be done particularly then to address this problem with the younger age group because it seems they're particularly vulnerable? They're forced into early marriages, they are disempowered. Do you think it's practical to try and work with them or do you think maybe you need to work with the men or with the government?

HEYZER: I think you need to look at the whole issue of HIV/AIDS in a holistic way and you need to look at it in terms of its prevention, in terms of protection, in terms of treatment. And I think the best way of telling the HIV/AIDS from a gender perspective is to look and to listen to the stories of women. And I've been in so many countries, either I seek them out or they seek me out and maybe I could tell some of the stories that have really impacted on me and which I carry around as I design programmes, or as I intervene as head of the Women's Fund of the UN. When I was in Rwanda I met up with women who are infected with HIV/AIDS because of war. It was in fact used in a very, very conscious way as a weapon of war so that these women were not killed off but they would be living dead. And these women came together after the war – both from the Tutsi side and the Hutu side -- they cried their tears and eventually decided that they had to get on with their lives because there were too many children that were left as orphans. And they felt that they didn't want to have them continuously to be orphans in a country where they hope there will be a future for the children of their country. And what they asked for was access to medicines but they had such difficulty even to get access to cheap drugs. And these were relatively young women. They reached their age group – their age group varied from about 50 to 60 to something like 15 – and all of them are asking for cheap and affordable drugs, not just for their own health. In fact, they wanted it so that they could take care of the orphans so that these were people who could grow into adulthood. They would not be orphaned a second time. And I think the issue of cheap drugs is extremely important from their case, but also they constantly addressed the issue of stigma; that they were pushed to the margins through no fault of theirs and there was no way in which they could be brought in to participate in the reconstruction of their country. Their story is a story that keeps repeating itself over and over again. We need to end stigma, we need to break the silence and we need to make sure that these women are brought back to the centre of decision-making in terms of their country, especially when it's a post-crisis country. I've heard the story in Bosnia, I've heard it in the Congo, and it repeats itself in terms of how do we make sure that women who live with HIV/AIDS have the right of decision-making in terms of the policies that govern their lives. So I would say that that is extremely important and that what they are really looking at is the ability to participate once more in the recreation of their nations, economically and socially. One of the things that we managed to do when I visited them was to

find what is it they were already creating and to give value to that because they were so undervalued in their own community. So I saw these beautiful baskets and when they told their stories I realized that this could be, in a way, created as a niche market in terms of what we call the peace baskets because that was a new way of building peace through the weaving of commonality across ethnic lines. And eventually they sold these baskets and were able to buy their medicine.

JENKINS: Was that their sole success? I mean, they were obviously looking for more than just to be able to sell baskets, this group in Rwanda? They were trying to change the way that society as a whole looked at them. Were they successful?

HEYZER: Yes, they were with a lot of help because this is where I think we need to look at how do we turn the situation around; moving women from the margins to the centre of the kind of decision-making of the reconstruction of countries. And it requires partnership, it requires leadership, and it requires a kind of commitment that we have not experienced before. It requires the coming together of the international community, of national leaders, of regional leaders, of the UN system, of NGOs, of the private sector, in order to make this happen. So what we did – as UNIFEM I can tell you how we ourselves intervened. First of all, is to change the legal framework. Women in that country for a long time did not own land.

JENKINS: You're talking about Rwanda at the moment?

HEYZER: Yes, exactly. But this is a story that can be repeated over and over again – the lack of inheritance – and as long as women do not inherit property, do not have the right to ownership of land, they are not going to come back to revitalize the agricultural sector. But once we are able to turn that legal framework around and they have the right of access to land, the right in order to own land, they were able to revitalize the agriculture sector. But equally important in a post-crisis country is the fact that the constitution changes. You have an opportunity to redesign a new constitution and there are also new institutions that are birthing. And we trained women to participate in elections and also to prepare the country to receive women as leaders, and that's extremely important. So today I'm able to say that actually Rwanda as a country has the highest percentage of women in parliament – 49%. More than Scandinavian countries.

JENKINS: Interesting. You often need a disaster to – I guess they say there's often a little bit of heaven in a disaster area. Sephora.

ROSARIO: You also spoke about the stigma of women living with AIDS and I'm wondering if the violence that these women incur, is that caused by AIDS or is that a consequence of their AIDS status?

HEYZER: You know, it is so interesting because if I look at the causes of this high infection rate of women and the causes of violence against women, these sit in the same base. They sit on the base of inequalities. Violence against women, there is a strong, strong link with the spread of HIV/AIDS and you can look at violence in different ways; violence because of war, violence because of trafficking, violence because of the home, of home-based violence and violence because of traditional practices. And when violence is used on women and girls what it means is that there's an under-valuation of the lives of women and girls. You also have a situation of imbalance in a power relationship, you have a situation where there's no escape. So that is the same fuel. The fuel that generates violence against women is the same fuel that also generates the spread of the epidemic.

JENKINS: So wanting to fight AIDS you have to fight violence? You have to fight them both at the same time?

HEYZER: You are fighting both at the same time and in fact if you fight both you need to look again at the whole structure of power relationships and gender inequality, be it in terms of access to education, to property, to the valuation of women's work, to the way recognition is given to women's lives.

JENKINS: I'm reminded of the transformation in the status of gay men, in developed societies primarily, where they were far more stigmatized before the AIDS crisis hit. They were blamed for the AIDS crisis and yet somehow they were able to turn that situation which you would have thought would have led to even more oppression against them into a weapon, if you like, to transform the way that society looks at them. And there are some people now who claim that our culture is completely infused with homosexual themes, and you see it on TV and what have you. In other words, the status of gays has totally changed as part of this battle against AIDS do you see the chance for the same sort of phenomenon in terms of women?

HEYZER: You know, a crisis is a very interesting kind of a situation. Let's say you – if I think of the Chinese character, a crisis has both danger and an opportunity. It has danger because if you don't handle it, it goes through a spiral, a downgrade spiral, and it creates greater stigma and greater destruction and fragmentation. But if you know how to deal with it and turn it into an opportunity in terms of mobilization, in terms of political will, in terms of allocation of the right kind of resources in the right areas, you can turn it around. But the difference is precisely the fact that you need to really look at power relationships again because you are talking about many women who do not have access to power, access to alliances, to networks and how do you use this opportunity of mobilization. And that is precisely it. But also the opportunity to open up their voices, spaces for their voices to be heard and for their voices

to be converted into action and into the right kind of commitment in terms of resource allocation.

PRICE: How much would that also involve the re-education of men? Maybe addressing the kind of culture you're seeing with the macho of culture, this whole power relationship? Do you think you can communicate that to men? How are you bringing in the men to the process?

HEYZER: You know, that is the really important missing part. It's almost like one hand clapping. You need two sides to create the impact. And I was recently in the Caribbean and I was speaking to young men and they were so interested in what I had to say because it's almost as though they didn't have this framework. And for them to re-think their own sexuality in new ways was a kind of liberation. I mean they said they didn't think of it in the way in which it was presented to them. So I think, especially in the work that we have been doing, we have been able to mobilize youth, we have been able to mobilize young men and also men of leadership positions to take this on as a critical issue. The most important issue is the breaking of silence, the coming together of a conversation that is honest and that's able to confront some of the most difficult issues that we have, but also the whole issue of stigma and discrimination of different social practices.

JENKINS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Noeleen Heyzer of UNIFEM, the United Nations Fund for Women.

We're talking about HIV/AIDS and how the spread of the virus can be linked to violence against women. Let's take a look now at this personal testimony from a group of women performers in Liberia, not about AIDS but about some of the effects of war on women's lives:

**VIDEO ROLL IN
(MUSIC)**

WOMAN #1: "Where I'm standing Pa, I miss you a lot. Because the way you were killed in my presence, it hurt me. They told me they cut off his two hands and started killing him from the back part of his neck. And today, we have no father. And he was the only one that our family was depending on."

WOMAN #2: "We cannot do anything for ourselves. Even my father was forced to carry a load from Voinjana to Guinea and he fell down and he broke his hand. Until now, my father is blind because of the war."

WOMAN #3: "I saw you. You raped my friend's daughter until she died because the girl was very small – a ten-year-old child."

WOMAN #4: “Why? I appeal to all Liberians to come together and build our country. Let’s stop this war. Look at my poor mother! She doesn’t have support now. I have to do everything for her. Why? Why? Why should it be so? I put myself in God’s hands. Here am I today. Father, I present myself into your hands now.”

VIDEO OUT

JENKINS: Obviously, that situation in West Africa is where we’ve seen some of the worst violence against women in recent years. I noticed in reading some of your recent speeches that you used a figure of one in three women around the world are subject to violence at some point in their lives. As a man I find that figure difficult to believe, how do you come up with a figure like that?

HEYZER: These are figures that have been used by the WHO and they did surveys and so these are estimates. It could even be worse. So in other words within a life cycle of women you do have a situation where one in three could be violated, and these are estimates....

JENKINS: That means one of you three sitting at the table here, in theory?

HEYZER: Yes, and I’m sure – anyway even we enter a classroom, you could imagine a classroom where one in three women or one of three girls would be violated during her lifetime.

JENKINS: Is it fair to say that it is worse in the developing world than it is in the developed world? In other words, am I and my colleagues, are we more civilized in our treatment of women?

HEYZER: You know, violence against women knows no culture, no barrier in terms of colour, ethnicity, wealth and so on. It cuts across. It is one of these practices against women that cut across all ethnicities and class as well but in some situations the level of violence is obviously worse. And I can think of the situation of war that we’ve just heard. I recently came back from the DRC and I have to say that the level of violence that has been used on women as a weapon of war by youth that have guns and youth that are under drugs, the transnational network of militias that goes from one village to another to literally use their power in order to violate women, that has now become a phenomena that you find in every conflict situation. In the same case, you look at the situation where women in Afghanistan were under the Taliban, the use of violence that forced them into their houses even though they occupied public spaces. So this is really a way of controlling women.

JENKINS: Sephora, you go first.

ROSARIO: Of course the violence that the women experienced during war is extreme and horrible but what about the violence in peacetime? If the violence was not there during

peacetime it's not necessarily they're at war? I mean is there not a link between the violence at peacetime or is that overlooked?

HEYZER: You know, what we accept in situations of peace is what we continue to accept in situations of war. In other words, there is a continuum. It's almost as though you expect that to happen. There is that expectation and it is time to say no and never again and not a minute more in terms of the way in which we accept violence against women as a phenomena of our communities, be it in schools, be it in our homes, and so on. But until we can stop it there we're not going to stop it in much the harder situation of trafficking, harder ways of controlling the use of violence with impunity. And this is precisely what many women are asking for; that we need to have an end to impunity in terms of the use of violence against women.

ROSARIO: Just to follow that up, in terms of impunity after wartime is over, a lot of these crimes against women are not prosecuted. What could be done to make sure that these crimes don't go on unpunished?

HEYZER: You know, it was precisely because women were able to mobilize that for the first time in the Rwanda case that the use of rape against women was seen as a war crime and a crime against humanity and could be prosecuted as such. And also because of the lobbying of the work of women that this issue has also now been put into the kind of statutes of the International Criminal Court, and that is a big breakthrough for many women. But what is of concern to me, based on what I have seen, is the fact that very often because many of the men have been so traumatized because of the conflict and because of the rape -- because rape of women is not just to violate women it is also to humiliate the men of the other side and to destroy the manhood of the other side -- so what happens is that this humiliation lives on after the war and it goes into the homes. So we need to be able to address this as an issue that affects both men and women and not just an issue that affects women.

PRICE: And how important do you think it is for the international community to recognize the seriousness of this? There were complaints, for example with the Taliban in Afghanistan, that really the world wasn't concerned about the oppression of women until after the event and then it was used as a justification. Do you think the international community is really recognizing that violence against women is a very serious crime?

HEYZER: There is growing awareness regarding this particular issue and I think the case in terms of the Taliban was a very good case in point where the media raised it to a level where people were able to recognize that in fact the security of women was the great indicator of the security of the nation, and that very often the participation of women in many of these communities help to keep them as moderate communities rather than allow the whole

community to go to such extreme levels. And definitely there was awareness but we need to move beyond awareness. In fact, recently we did several assessments of where we were in terms of states taking responsibility for the issue of violence against women and what we found was that there were good policies, good legal frameworks but not enough resources and commitments in terms of the implementation. And having said that I would like to look at another kind of violence that actually masquerades as care and let me link that....

JENKINS: Like the Taliban for example saying that women are safer at home, is that this whole thing you're talking about?

HEYZER: It is very interesting because it's precisely this. It's actually home care but home care in the context of HIV/AIDS. And I would like to link this to what I've seen and this, again it comes from the voices of women and women with whom I've interacted – in this particular case in the Southern African countries. We had a meeting of women, positive women's networks and women who are providing care to the home and on the surface of it care and home care sounds like a great strategy in terms of providing love and care to people who are dying. But what it means is that the women are pulled out of the productive sector. They are providing this care without any support because they are using their lives to fill the gaps of the inability....

JENKINS: You remind me of a story. You talked about a woman and 24 buckets of water, can you tell us that story again briefly?

HEYZER: All right. Because the thing is that in many of these countries the state is too indebted or too poor to provide a proper health care system and when there is a deficit and when there is a cut in the budgets of the state, the first thing that gets cut will be health care and in terms of the education. So when you have a situation where people are dying and need intensive care it falls into the burden of – on the shoulders of women. And when you ask women what does it take to take care of one AIDS patient they said 24 buckets of water in terms of the cleaning, in terms of the diarrhoea, in terms of what it takes and that is very, very labour intensive. In other words, what it involves is the commitment of time, the commitment of life. You find...

JENKINS: Because often these women are having to go out – I seem to remember this water, it's not as if they could just turn on the tap. They had to go and draw the water from a well, or carry it from a river nearby and it would take forever to bring these 24 buckets of water which goes back to what you're saying before about how these women are then pulled out of the fields. They can't be productive in terms of agriculture, which has contributed to the famine problems in Africa.

HEYZER: That is absolutely true Tony because what it is – and it is even worse because here we are as an international community saying that we want to bring the whole community together to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, which is to halve the world's absolute poverty body by the year 2013.

JENKINS: Let me butt in because it seems to me you've done very well in identifying what the problem is and you've done quite well in getting people, internationally, to accept what you're saying. But in terms of actually taking action, as a result of this understanding, and moving forward how is that going? I mean presumably you need to do something in terms of legislation but also in terms of educating men, how's that going?

HEYZER: Well, in terms of educating men – but even more I think you need to really put the resources where the resources are needed. For example, in this health care area in order to reduce the health care burden of women you need to invest; you need to invest so that the countries can in fact take on the responsibility of caring for the sick and the dying. You need to make sure that the girls are still kept in school because what happens is that when the mothers are pulled out of the productive sector to take care of the sick and the dying then they pull their daughters out of school. Their work has got to be paid. You need to be able to support what it takes to take care of the sick and the dying because what happens is that if you listen to the stories of women they say that first of all when they can't pay for the services they convert their savings, and eventually their assets, into bedpans, into bandages and eventually into funerals and coffins and funerals and graves.

ROSARIO: And then they're left to fend off for themselves, are they not?

HEYZER: And they die alone.

PRICE: So is part of this about getting women involved in policy-making? I mean they're presumably the ones who can point this out?

HEYZER: This is exactly it. And you need to get the right kind of women into the policy spaces where decisions are made regarding the right kind of policies and also in terms of resource allocation. And what we are saying is that we need to strengthen the networks of women, of positive women living with HIV/AIDS, as well as those that are taking care of the sick and the dying, and to hear their voices and their solutions part of the solutions. And I think increasingly we have seen, even in situations of war, that women are not just the victims, they are also part of your solution and you need to include that in order to get an action that will work.

JENKINS: Well, it's a vast subject but that's a very good note to end on because unfortunately we're out of time.

Ms. Heyzer, thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been the head of UNIFEM, Noeleen Heyzer. She was interviewed by, Sephora Rosario of *Asahi Shimbun*, and Susannah Price of the *BBC*.

I'm Tony Jenkins, thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

ANNOUNCER: Electronic transcripts of this programme may be obtained free of charge by contacting World Chronicle at the address on your screen:

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