

## World World Theme: Women, Girls & HIV/Aids

## Greatest Challenge of Our Times

By EVANS ONGWAE

iving with HIV/Aids is one of the greatest challenges of our times — at home, in social gatherings and institutions and at the workplace. In the world of work, it presents a moral dilemma to employers on the hiring or retaining of the best professionals but who may be infected with HIV/Aids virus.

The good news is that, employment discrimination on account of one's HIV/Aids status



may soon be history as more employers acknowledge the pandemic's persistence. HIV/aids is expected to be with us for a long time and employers will have to get used to hiring highly qualified people who are living with the condition.

While some firms have taken the bull by the horns, others are are still wishing the problem away and do

not employ people living with HIV/Aids. Some do not even hesitate to fire loyal and effective employees on learning that they are HIV positive.

This is in total disregard of the International Labour Organisation's 1958 decree that no person should be discriminated against in employment.

The 2,500-member Federation of Kenya



File Photos

This year's World Aids Day focuses on women and girls. The day is annually commemorated around the world to review the progress made in the battle against the killer and the challenges posed by the scourge.

Employers (FKE) says employment screening should be in compliance with the ILO's C111 Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958. The convention was drafted long before HIV/Aids entered the scene but is

explicit on the issue of discrimination.

However, the principles of the ILO Code of Practice on HIV/Aids developed in the year 2001 reiterate that there shouldn't be any discrimination and that pre-employment screening should not be based on HIV/Aids, according to FKE Executive Director, Mr. Gershon Konditi.

Says the document: "HIV/Aids screening should not be required of job applicants or persons in employment and testing for HIV should not be carried out at the workplace except as specified in this code."

It adds that, "There should be no discrimination or stigmatisation of workers on the basis of real or perceived HIV status."

The National Aids Control Council (NACC) Public Relations Officer, Mr. Abel Nyagwa, says people should not be discriminated against in employment just because they are HIV positive. "People living with HIV/Aids need money for treatment and for their families' needs. All Kenyans have the right to be employed," he says.

Mr. Nyagwa notes that, although the council is against such discrimination, there is currently no law to back this stand. That is why passing of the HIV/Aids Prevention and Control Bill 2003 by Parliament would be highly welcome by the council. Among other issues, the Bill opposes discrimination of people living with HIV/Aids in regard to employment, insurance and other services.

Already, some firms have made efforts to discourage pre-testing for HIV when recruiting staff. Some have gone on to develop policy that specifically states how they relate with people living with HIV/Aids.

Mr. Francis Ndiuki, Aga Khan Hospital, Nairobi's human resource manager says the institution does not discriminate against people living with HIV/Aids. Unless a prospective, eligible employee is very sick that he or she cannot perform assigned duties, the hospital would have no problems recruiting the person.

For members of staff who get infected while at work, the hospital supports them with anti-retrovirals. "We encourage

others to accept their status and do provide counselling and extra sick-offs to them."

He, however, says the biggest challenge is in knowing the point at which a person should leave service when the disease reaches serious levels.

At the Retirement Benefits Authority, a statutory body, efforts are made to make the life of current and prospective employees living with HIV/Aids comfortable.

Board Secretary, Mr. Stephen Malowa says the authority does not discriminate against people living with HIV/Aids. "although we do medical tests for people we intend to recruit, all we ask the doctor whether the person is fit to do what is expected of them," he says. "we don't go into the details of what a person could be suffering from."

RBA caters for the management of HIV/Aids for its staff through a medical scheme that takes care of in-patient and out-patient treatment. "We have provided extra cover for

outpatient care so that they can obtain anti-retrovirals," says Mr. Malowa, adding that the authority generally pay extra premiums for chronic medical conditions that insurance firms do not ordinarily cover.

Mr. Malowa says, although RBA is not a profit-making organisation and has small staff, private enterprises with hundreds of employees should strive to provide medical care for their employees irrespective of their HIV status. He contends that, as ARVs become fairly affordable, it would be much easier to manage opportunistic infections and HIV positive employees can be productive for many years.



## $DS\underline{W}$



## Marking World Aids Day

DSW emphasizes the need for greater reflection and attention to be placed on our society's most vulnerable single mothers, female-headed houses (FHH), orphaned, abandoned, abused, unjustifiably victimised young girls infected and affected by the disease

Nairobi/Hannover, 1st December 2004.
In her aggressive fight to control the spread of HIV/AIDS and advocate for the basic respect of human rights and dignity for all DSW marks World Aids Day by reaching out to the most marginalized, almost "forgotten" yet most indispensable asset of our society today: the Youth, in particular the young women and girls! We take this opportunity to also show our support of the day by recognizing the importance of the 16 days of Activism on Violence Against Women, appropriately allied to World Aids Day this year.

Day this year.

As the epidemic continues to take its destructive toll, it has not stalled in attacking our nations most valuable resource. Out of Kenya's population an estimate 1 million people are infected with the virus. Out of these 20% are youth with the prevalence rate being even higher for girls at 24%.

This constitutes a huge chunk of the country's most active resource and has left young people weak to excel within their own dynamic individual human capacity.

DSW's main mission encompasses working towards a sustainable development of the world's population. DSW works to achieve this by improving the sexual and reproductive health needs of youth, primarily through DSW's 'trade marked' "Youth 2 Youth" information delivery network.

DS<u>W</u> has reached out to over 60,000 youth in Kenya directly through youth to youth activities this year.

Through the provision of greater and far-reaching advocacy, dissemination of Information, Education material on HIV/AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD's), greater access to health centers, correct use of contraceptive methods, information on better nutritional standards, the benefits of accessing VCT services and Home Based Care (HBC) initiatives the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate could be brought down at an even greater reduced rate. Acknowledging that these represent more direct measures aimed at curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS and assisting those already infected and affected, other more vocational and empowering methods are also employed by DSW. These include support towards creative and "youth friendly" Income Generating initiatives especially for vulnerable young women and girls, and measures that help raise self-esteem, confidence, integrity and respect for and amongst the infected and affected. Our projects reach out to youth within the various slums in Nairobi and in more rural environs of Western, Nyanza, Coastal and Central provinces. In Tanzania we have Youth 2 Youth initiatives in the minefields of Arusha and in the coastal regions of Dar-es salaam.

DSW is committed to playing an aggressive role in the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STI's. It is our hope that the DSW's Youth 2 Youth Initiatives will generate a nation wide spill over effect in passing on the crucial messages of sexual and reproductive health needs, hence contributing to a better informed, healthier, responsible and economically active generation of youth.

Country Director, Lynette Injette Ochola stresses on the fundamental question: "Why allow our young people to die of HIV/AIDS when we can provide them with life saving ammunition that will enable them to manage and protect their own live?"

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Enlightment is one of the ways to keep the spread of HIV/Aids in check.