

Commentary: It's time to break the silence

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Less than a year ago, during the Central American Congress on HIV/AIDS in Nicaragua, more than 100 adolescents stood before us saying that no one had ever talked to them about HIV and how to protect themselves against it.

That silence from their parents, their teachers, their spiritual leaders, and the other adults around them has fatal consequences. When the epidemic began some 25 years ago, few would have predicted that children and young people would turn out to be group most affected by the spread of the disease.

However, thousands of boys and girls--7,500 in 2007 alone—have been infected with the virus because their mothers were HIV-positive and transmitted it to them during pregnancy, labor, childbirth, or breast-feeding--a tragedy that could have been prevented with a simple test and appropriate treatment. Over 55,000 children under the age of 15 and 400,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 18 were living with HIV in 2007.

The number of AIDS orphans, moreover, has risen significantly in recent years. Being an orphan is only one aspect of AIDS' impact on children. Other boys and girls have become vulnerable because their parents are sick, because they are discriminated against because they have HIV+ family members, or because they themselves are living with HIV.

These days we have a unique opportunity to break the silence surrounding HIV/AIDS. Over 15,000 scientists, community leaders, doctors, and policy experts from around the world have come together in Mexico City to explore the critical issues and next steps to take in the global response to HIV during the XVII International AIDS Conference, the first to be held in Latin America. For the first time, the Region's ministers of education and health have met to discuss how to confront the pandemic in their countries and commit to making comprehensive sex education part of their primary education programs.

Preventing new infections is key to halting this pandemic. However, many children and adolescents continue to be denied their right of having access to information that will teach them how to protect themselves against HIV and to the necessary services for preventing it. A survey of young people from different countries in the Region revealed that only 4 out of 10 adolescents and young adults considered themselves well-informed about HIV.

Lack of information, added to the prevailing machismo in our societies and gender-based violence in the home, school, the workplace, and other social environments increases the risk of infection for adolescent girls and women.

Even today, only half of pregnant women in Latin America and the Caribbean are tested for HIV, and less than 36% of those who are HIV+ are offered services to prevent mother-to-child transmission of the virus.

Although the Region has witnessed considerable progress in the expansion of care and treatment for adults (62% of adults in need of treatment received ART in 2007), boys' and girls' access to care and treatment still lags behind— notwithstanding that HIV spreads faster and more aggressively among children than adults. Lack of access to antiretroviral therapy took the lives of 4,300 children under 15 in 2007.

Even so, there are reasons for optimism, since 16,571 boys and girls with HIV received antiretroviral therapy in 2007, compared with 10,628 in 2005—a 56% increase.

The eyes of the world are right now on our Region. The conference in Mexico is a historic milestone, and this attention obliges us to look the AIDS pandemic in the face. We, the adults, grew up in a world without HIV. Our children were born into a world where the virus is a reality, and they are demanding access to information, services, and opportunities to prevent the infection and live healthy lives.

The responsibility of governments to guarantee the rights and protection of their youngest citizens and promote actions for prevention, access to services, and treatment is critical and cannot be postponed if we are to halt the spread of HIV in Latin America and the Caribbean.

We ask President Calderón of Mexico, the host of this massive event, to convey to his colleagues the message that it is time to break the silence surrounding HIV/AIDS and meet the commitments of the Millennium Summit. The International AIDS Conference in Mexico marks the zero hour for Latin America and the Caribbean and its response to the AIDS pandemic. Let us undertake this responsibility with leadership, passion, and courage. Let us make our children's right to protect themselves a reality.

