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'IF WE WANT TO SAVE AFRICA, WE MUST SAVE AFRICA'S

WOMEN FIRST', SAYS SECRETARY-GENERAL

Following is the address by Secretary-General Kofi Annan on receiving an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Cape Town, delivered at Columbia University, New York, 9 December 2002:

I am deeply moved by the honour you have bestowed on me tonight. The University of Cape Town is not only a great institution of learning, and as such a natural ally of the United Nations. As a powerful symbol of South Africa's diversity and democracy, UCT is also an inspiration to the continent and to the world.

Today is all the more moving to me because I am surrounded by dear friends. I am honoured to be among Africans whose contributions to our continent have inspired several generations.

UCT Chancellor Graça Machel, if I could quote you here: "If we are really to develop any further as human beings, then we must now declare war on the causes of disempowerment: poverty and the lack of democracy in our world."

Graça, you are living proof that the lifeline of Africa is its women. And if Africa is to grow stronger, we need its women to remain strong.

For decades, we have known that the best way for Africa to thrive is to ensure that its women have the freedom, the power and the knowledge to take decisions affecting their own lives and those of their families and communities.

Africa's women have borne the brunt of caring for the young, the old, the sick and dying, the survival of households, the sustaining of livelihoods and sustaining of the cycle of life itself.

In the United Nations family, we have always known that our work for development depends on a successful partnership with the African farmer and her husband.

Study after study has shown that there is no effective development strategy in which women do not play a central role. When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier; they are better fed; their income, savings and reinvestment go up. And what is true of families is true of communities and, eventually, of whole countries.

Today, the lifeline that women in Southern Africa represent is being threatened by two mutually reinforcing emergencies: famine and AIDS. Many of you here tonight know this better than I do -- especially you, Graça. But it is vitally important that the rest of the world should know it, too.

More than 14 million people are now at risk of starvation in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. At the same time, all six of these predominantly agricultural societies are battling serious AIDS epidemics. This is no coincidence: AIDS and famine are directly linked.

Because of AIDS, farming skills are being lost, agricultural development efforts are declining, rural livelihoods are disintegrating, productive capacity to work the land is dropping and household earnings are shrinking, while the cost of caring for the ill is rising exponentially.

At the same time, AIDS is spreading dramatically and disproportionately among women. The Epidemic Update for 2002, released just two weeks ago, shows that for the first time, women make up 50 per cent of the global AIDS epidemic -- and in Africa that figure is now 58 per cent. Today, AIDS has a woman's face.

It is hard to imagine a more cruel or crippling combination than the current one. AIDS has already caused untold suffering by killing almost 2.5 million Africans this year alone, and leaving 11 million African children orphaned since the epidemic began. Now it is depriving these countries of their capacity to resist famine, by weakening exactly those mechanisms that enable populations to fight back -- the coping mechanisms provided by women.

Let us look back at famine in the age before AIDS: in all past famines for which we have data, women proved more resilient than men. Their survival rate was higher, and their coping mechanisms were stronger.

Women used their expert knowledge of alternative foods that can be found even in times of drought to feed their families.

As droughts came round once a decade or so, women who had experienced the last one or two droughts became particularly invaluable because of the expertise they passed on to younger women.

Women developed and nurtured social networks that helped societies to share out the burden.

And in the most fundamental human form of adaptation to famine, women were able to withstand the pangs of hunger and keep going, while ensuring the survival of their children.

But today, as AIDS is eroding the strength of Africa's women, it is eroding the skills, experience and networks that kept their families and communities going.

Even before falling ill, a woman will often have to care for a sick husband -- and the amount of time she has available for the tasks of planting, harvesting and marketing drops by up to 60 per cent.

When her husband dies, she is often deprived of credit, distribution networks, or land rights.

When she becomes ill, with her immune system compromised, battling through the pangs of hunger is no longer an option. She will fall sick and will be unable to work and care for her children.

When she dies, the household will risk collapsing completely, leaving orphans to fend for themselves. Her children -- especially girls -- will be taken out of school to work in the home or the farm. They will lack their mothers' skills to keep the family livelihood going. And, at the same time -- in the cruellest form of double burden -- these girls, deprived of an education, and of the confidence an education brings, will be even less able to protect themselves against AIDS.

Friends, the lifeline of these countries is indeed at risk of being severed. We must ensure this doesn't happen -- that the double burden the current crisis imposes on women does not break the very cycle of life. For Africa to survive, its women must survive.

Just as this crisis is different from famines of the past, we must look beyond our relief efforts of the past and see what needs to be done.

Just shipping in food is not enough. A comprehensive international effort is needed -- and let me add that, in this effort, there can be no place for the political manipulation of desperately needed food supplies. No African leader should ever stoop to such cynical exploitation of human misery.

Our effort will have to combine food assistance and new approaches to farming with treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS.

It will require integrated HIV and famine early-warning and analysis systems.

It will require new agricultural techniques, appropriate to a depleted workforce.

It will require a renewed effort to wipe out HIV-related stigma and silence, for in the world of AIDS, silence means death.

It will require innovative and large-scale responses to care and support for those most vulnerable -- especially orphans -- and special measures to enable children in AIDS-affected communities to stay in school. For young people to protect themselves against the epidemic, education is the most powerful weapon there is.

Above all, this new international effort must put women at the centre of our strategy to fight AIDS.

Examples show that there is hope, and there is reason to hope. The recent Epidemic Update shows that HIV infection rates in Uganda continue to decline. In South Africa, infection rates for women under 20 have started to decrease. That suggests prevention efforts are bearing fruit. In Zambia, HIV rates show signs of dropping among women in urban areas and younger women in rural areas. In Ethiopia, infection levels have fallen among young women in the centre of Addis Ababa.

We must build on those successes and replicate them elsewhere. That calls for leadership, partnership and imagination. And yes, it will require resources -- both from the international community and from the governments of Africa.

Graça, I have quoted you before on this, and I hope you will forgive me if I do so again: "If you can mobilize resources for war, why can't you mobilize resources for life?" And I have said this before, too: women not only have the right answers. They also ask the right questions.

That is why, in Africa, it is women who keep life going. And it is why, if we want to save Africa, we must save Africa's women first.

Thank you very much.

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