

President Zuma's Leadership on AIDS: Where is the responsibility?

By *moderator*

Created 2010/02/24 - 10:18am

24 February, 2010 - 10:18 ? moderator

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President Zuma's leadership on AIDS needs some constructive scrutiny. However, we do not want to impose moral judgements on people, especially on their private matters. Many of the responses to the President's actions have been hysterical and self-righteous. But the President is not just any person. People look to him to set an example. In a country without a serious HIV epidemic, it might be arguable that his extra-marital affairs are for him and his family alone to resolve. But South Africa has the world's largest HIV epidemic. The President holds the highest office in South Africa and therefore there are high expectations of him, as a leader, as an elder and as a role model.

We come from an era of denialism and lack of leadership on AIDS. The new administration, in particular the President, the Chairperson of the South African National Aids Council (SANAC), Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe, and the Ministry of Health under the leadership of Dr Motsoaledi, have expressed their commitment to turning the tide on HIV/AIDS.

It is imperative that all leaders speak and act as a unit. Last year SANAC agreed on one message for AIDS in South Africa. The theme for World AIDS Day 2009 was 'I am responsible, We are responsible, South Africa is taking responsibility?'. This message signified a start of a new era on how South Africa, under the leadership of President Zuma, is going to tackle the epidemic. It was also chosen, among other reasons, to prevent HIV transmission that occurs through multiple concurrent sexual relationships. The message encourages individuals to reduce their number of sexual partners, for men and women to take responsibility by protecting themselves and others, and to encourage consistent and correct condom usage.

The reality is that South Africa faces extremely high HIV prevalence amongst young women (almost 1 in 3 who attend antenatal clinics are HIV positive).

Women's vulnerability to HIV manifest from their power status in their relationships and this exposes them to HIV transmission. Multiple concurrent partnerships increase the possibilities of HIV transmission, this is made even worse when condoms are not used. It is important to acknowledge that it is not by coincidence that most women who live with HIV are young and probably get infected from older men.

But the President's recent actions undermine all who are really trying to meet the prevention target of reducing HIV transmission by 50%. We urge the President to take leadership and responsibility for himself, for those around him and for South Africa. The message of responsibility ? agreed upon by civil society and government - applies to all of us including our highest leaders. South Africa must take responsibility and it starts with all of us as individuals.