

SPEECH FOR MPOOLE KWELAGOBLE, MISS UNIVERSE
FOR THE CREATION OF THE WORLD BANK AIDS PREVENTION TRUST FUND
PRESENTED TO THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES BANKING COMMITTEE

I. Introduction

It is a privilege to be here today – not for myself personally – but because I have the opportunity to speak for those voices that have been silenced by AIDS.

As a native of Botswana, I have seen first-hand the terrible toll this pandemic has taken on my country: the loss of life...massive social and economic disruptions... an entire generation that has been robbed of its future.

I speak without exaggeration.

According to the World Health Organization, 25% of the adult population of Botswana is infected with HIV.

Over 43,000 people have already died. 28,000 children have been orphaned.

Right now, 40% of all pregnant women in Botswana are infected with HIV. A staggering 70% of their children will not live past the age of two because they will contract the disease from their mother during pregnancy or breast-feeding.

Simply put, AIDS is destroying my country...and much of the African continent.

I. The Roots of the Virus

The reason that the AIDS pandemic has spread so quickly across Botswana is a complicated one.

To start, it is a cultural taboo for women to ask men questions about their sex life, or even request that their partners use protective methods to stop the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Making this worse, our culture considers promiscuity a virtue. And poverty has driven many young women into the arms of disreputable men.

There are many other reasons, too.

A code of silence surrounds sex and HIV: parents feel embarrassed to talk openly with their children about sexual activity, and teenagers do not talk about this topic for fear of upsetting their elders. As a result, children grow up without a basic understanding of the facts of AIDS, and when they are confronted with challenges, they have no one to turn to for advice.

This lack of education about HIV is even worse in Botswana's countryside. For example, in rural areas, some people believe that individuals with AIDS are possessed, and that women with the disease are using witchcraft to put a curse on a man.

And when a woman becomes infected, there is such a terrible stigma attached to the disease, that it is likely that she will be disowned and abandoned by her family.

II. Botswana: A Beacon of Light

In this time of darkness, Botswana has emerged as a beacon of light for the sick and our neighboring nations.

Instead of denying our problems, the government of Botswana has shown courage and leadership by directly confronting this crisis.

Politicians and civic leaders are speaking out. Artists, musicians, and entertainers are working to raise awareness. There is a surge of activism and concern throughout our country.

Since my time is limited, I will just share with you a few noteworthy programs that are saving lives and giving us hope for a better tomorrow:

The Botswana-Harvard HIV Reference Laboratory: this state-of-the art facility is devoted to studying the HIV-1C sub-type along with methods to prevent the transmission of HIV from mother to child.

The Covenant between the Botswanan National Youth Council, the Ministry of Health, the Government, the AIDS STD Unit, churches and music groups: this educational initiative encourages teenagers to abstain from sex and alcohol, stay monogamous if they are in a relationship, and use protection.

The Community Home Based Care System: an outreach program for those who are terminally ill and want to stay with their families instead of in a hospital or hospice.

The Mpule Kwelagobe Children's Village – a haven for over 400 orphans and children whose parents have or had HIV/AIDS.

While I am proud of what we Motswanan's are accomplishing, the truth is that we stand at a pivotal moment in time. We need the support of the international community if we are to turn the tide in the war against AIDS, and make this disease nothing more than a sad and distant memory.

With the assistance of our sister nations like America, we can expand educational and behavioral modification programs.

We can make sure that pregnant women with the disease receive AZT so that they do not pass it down to their children.

We can fund important pilot programs that identify other promising drugs for pregnant women with HIV, like zidovudine and nevirapine, which in clinical trials, reduced the rate of transmission by 50% or more.

Perhaps most important of all, scientists can race faster toward finding a vaccine, which would strike at the roots of the virus, protecting the uninfected.

This is just the beginning of what we could do with the help of our friends around the world.

And once the pandemic was under control, Botswana could more fully join the family of nations.

III. The Gift of Hope

It is human nature to forget the trials of others...especially when those who are suffering are strangers on the other side of the world.

But I will never forget what I have seen: the children who have been orphaned...the women who have been abandoned...the funeral processions for lost loved ones.

I hope that you too will not forget what you have heard, and remember the plight of my people by making the World Bank AIDS Prevention Trust Fund a reality.

I pray that you will find it within your hearts to lend a helping hand to those who are trying to pick themselves up and build a new life.

By doing so you will give the greatest gift of all: the hope for a better tomorrow.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here today, and thank you for your concern.

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