

Living on the frontline – When turning 34 becomes a major milestone

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This week, on the 5th of June, my dear friend Isabella Matambanadzo, or Bella as she likes to be called, turns 34. In an ideal world this is not a very significant milestone in anyone's life. It is not the much celebrated big Four-Zero. But for those of us "living on the frontline", of HIV and AIDS, this is a significant achievement. And for women in my country, Zimbabwe, turning 34 and living beyond that age is a big achievement. In 2006, Bella's and my country attained the distinction of being the country with the lowest life expectancy for women – outside of a war zone.

It is significant that as Bella celebrates this day, the Group of the 8 most industrialised countries will be gathering in Germany for their annual meeting. Universal access to care, treatment and support for people affected by HIV will I hope, be high on the agenda. I know thousands of activists will be there to push the issue. The President of the United States has announced that he is increasing resources to PEPFAR – his country's flagship funding mechanism for work on HIV. What that adds up to in real terms and in women's practical lives we are yet to see. But if previous PEPFAR experiences are anything to go by, there is not much to celebrate. Women younger than Bella will still be taught to cross their legs and abstain – a message which has been demonstrated time and time again is not adequate, particularly in the context of sexual violence. In a country like South Africa – where I live, how does a young woman faced with the very high levels of rape proudly proclaim, "I am abstaining!" And the girl living in a conflict zone, how does she practise abstinence and faithfulness? As for the thousands of sex workers – many of whom have been forced by sheer economic circumstance into the trade, they too will not benefit from new PEPFAR money – because PEPFAR clearly excludes them.

15 years ago, all a young woman had to worry about was an unwanted pregnancy. The worst that could happen was dying from a backstreet abortion. Our country's statistics on girls' education was one of the best. Literacy levels peaked in the 1990s at 80-85%. Health care was free, and we had health workers in every village. Contraception was widely available even at village through the village based distributors. Well, young girls still had to jump through many hoops to access these freebies because of the traditional attitudes of some of these workers. But still the situation was not as bleak as it is now.

For those of us who live and breathe HIV, the way we black women do in Southern Africa, finding the right words to talk about what we experience, and how we feel is often difficult. How does one respond to the question, "so how are things in Zimbabwe?" How does one respond without sounding rude by saying, "As long as we are walking?" The mere fact that I am now over 40, and my friend is jumping over the low bar of 34 is enough of an answer surely? It is not easy to "quantify" what the implications of HIV have been on our lives. If you are not living with HIV yourself, several members of your family will be. Half of your time is taken up with hospital visits, home based care, or working extra hard to get extra cash to support the sick, the orphans and grandparents. Girls as young as 10, are now heads of households, looking after siblings.

Older women hop from one funeral to the next. There is no longer any time to do one's own work and earn a livelihood. At the same time women worry about their own health, or their partners' sexual behaviour. Putting this into a donor project proposal feels too onerous a task. Answering too many questions to "justify" the need for resources is just too painful.

We have developed a whole new language to communicate about health and life. When a relative dies, and someone asks what she died of, the response is often, "same old same old", or, "zvakaoma" (loose translation, it is hard/awful/painful/is that a rhetorical question?). To strangers this is a form of denial, a failure to disclose. To those of us living it, everyone knows exactly what you mean and that is the end of that conversation. We say same old same old, the way some people say that when ordering their usual brand of beer. And we call that failure to disclose?

Our own governments and leaders have failed us miserably. While the G8 can pour in as many millions of dollars as they can, these will be wasted as long as women and girls are regarded as non persons with no entitlements to rights. In Swaziland King Mswati is still raking in new brides one day and the next, calling on his citizens to change their behaviour to curb HIV. In Zimbabwe our President set a "good example" by marrying a woman half his age. Other Presidents in the region's marital situations and dramas could make good soap operas. How these men expect their citizens to behave differently from them is seriously problematic.

While several countries in the region; Zimbabwe, Malawi, and most recently South Africa have passed laws on violence against women and on sexual offences, the implementation of these laws is far from satisfactory. Even though the President of South Africa will be at the G8 meeting, he is highly unlikely to even whisper anything about HIV and women's rights. The potent combination of negative attitudes towards women, lack of laws and policies, and blatant violations of women's rights, has seen women continue on the frontline of HIV and AIDS.

So what does one buy a friend on her 34th birthday? Perfume? Shoes? A bag? If one could buy more years I would buy you more years dear Miss Bells. But I can't. I could buy you microbicides if they were available at a chemist near me, but they are not yet. Research is still going on. I could buy you a five year supply of female condoms I guess. That might be useful. I will also get you lots of vitamin tablets. You need plenty of those to keep you going as you do a lot more political work to influence policy and political change in our country. That too is very useful. I don't have words of wisdom about what it means to be 34. All I know is that I am happy my friend you have jumped over what should be a very low bar, but it is a big jump. I am happy you are a feminist and you are an active member of a women's and social justice movements that continue to challenge the state of our nation and patriarchal policies.

I celebrate this milestone with you Miss Bells, and the work you have done and continue to do to make Zimbabwe the wonderful country that it should be.

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