



“Silabha”
The Report from Bangkok
by Fiona Otway
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The XV International AIDS Conference was held this year from July 11th – 16th in Bangkok, Thailand. What follows is a detailed report on my experience and my perspectives as a delegate. The short story is that the conference (my first) was an incredibly intense experience – overwhelming, frustrating, inspiring, enlightening, depressing, and eye-opening. I returned home loaded with information and ideas, which are already being put to good use on behalf of the Breaking the Silence project. If you’re interested in the rest of the story, read on... Yes, it’s long; but it was a very big conference, and this is just the beginning of what could be told.

HOW I GOT THERE

After a competitive, application-based selection process, I received an invitation to participate in the conference, representing Breaking the Silence in the first-ever Youth Activities Program. Through the Youth Activities Program, I received a partial scholarship, which was supplemented by a Washington State Arts Commission and National Endowment for the Arts professional development grant, and generous donations from some of you. Without this support, the experience never would have been possible!

MY ROLE

As part of my invitation to the conference, I was asked to present a report on AIDS in the Caribbean. Of course, I chose to highlight the impact of AIDS on youth and young-women in particular. I discussed some of the specific challenges to addressing AIDS in the Caribbean, including the need for increased education, gender equity, and structural interventions. I also discussed the powerful potential of using media education as a tool in HIV prevention. I talked about the power of putting young people behind video cameras and helping them gain access to a medium by which they can speak directly to their peers and have their voices heard in their communities.

After my presentation, which was unfortunately scheduled during the sparsely-attended pre-conference, I joined the masses as just another delegate navigating the hundreds of options for panels, poster presentations, skill-building workshops, film screenings, performances, etc. I primarily focused my attention

on the handful of discussions about behavior-change communication, evaluation of arts-based interventions, the film festival, prevention efforts in the Caribbean, and possible funding sources.

There was no shortage of activity. For the entire week, my day started at 7am and usually ended at 10pm. One more day, and I think I would have imploded with exhaustion and over-stimulation.

POWER OF MEDIA

Although I was obviously not able to attend every activity at the conference, I'm pretty sure I was one of the only ones there talking about putting young people behind video cameras as a strategy in HIV prevention. With the exception of one individual panelist, every single media discussion I attended focused on mass media campaigns created by adults for young people (or for other adults).

Of course, the question we're all asking is: "Are these media messages effective in creating behavior change?" It seems that the answer is yes; mass-media campaigns have been proven highly successful across the board. One statistic revealed that two-thirds of all young people around the world turn to the media *first* for information about sex and sexuality, before turning to friends or parents.

However, the study that was notably missing from all the media panels was a comparison between adult-produced media campaigns targeted at youth and youth-produced media campaigns targeted at youth. Which is more effective at stimulating behavior-change? All of the studies presented on the power of peer-leadership would seem to suggest the latter. I think you can guess my bias. I came away all the more convinced that Breaking the Silence is truly innovative.

Although there were some examples of youth-produced newspapers and magazines, youth-produced video was strikingly absent at the conference. I was extremely disappointed that there wasn't a single youth-produced film presented in the conference film festival. And I know they got at least one submission in that category.

SHOW ME THE MONEY!

Folks I spoke to were interested in Breaking the Silence. But not a soul had any new revelations about where to look for program funding. They were all searching too.

The mass media campaigns presented in panels relied heavily on celebrity clout, borrowed equipment from broadcast and commercial production companies, volunteer labor from professional actors, filmmakers, animators, and editors. All

of the mass media campaigns depended upon the willingness of local broadcasters to provide airtime free of charge. And none of these campaigns involved the intensive, hands-on life-skills training that is at the heart of Breaking the Silence -- therefore their expenses would be significantly lower.

I learned at the conference that the Global Fund, which is considered the largest pot of AIDS funding in the world, is more or less bankrupt (in large part due to the U.S. withholding promised funds). What chunks of money are being distributed through organizations like USAID or UNFPA are mostly funneled through national governments, or in the case of the Caribbean, regional coordinating bodies.

So if Breaking the Silence is going to get funding, it's the folks in the Caribbean who need to stand up and say they support what we're doing and then put the money on the table.

DRUGS EVERYWHERE!

To my surprise, the majority of the high-profile speeches at the conference were dominated by discussion of drugs for treatment of HIV/AIDS, with much less attention given to the root causes for the spreading pandemic.

When I walked through the sponsors exhibit (a big room with booths for commercial exhibitors giving away brochures, keychains, other toys), the focus on drugs started to make more sense. The fanciest booths -- complete with portable waterfalls, track lighting, wooden benches, enormous LCD screens, and free snacks for weary delegates -- were all rented by big for-profit pharmaceutical companies.

The severity and magnitude of the AIDS pandemic is unfathomable and drugs are much needed to alleviate unnecessary human suffering. The right to life, after all, is one of our basic human rights no matter where we live in the world. How do we make revolutionary, life-prolonging drugs available to the millions upon millions of people need them, who are by easy majority the poorest people in the world? Despite all of our scientific breakthroughs, the answer is that right now we cannot. The need exceeds our capacity to deliver.

WHAT ABOUT PREVENTION?

In an interview with the Seattle Post Intelligencer, Dr. Helene Gayle (head of AIDS programs for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the incoming president of the International AIDS Society, which organized the Bangkok conference) noted that: "[M]ore than 5 million people will become newly infected this year and that without a serious boost in prevention efforts, drug-based

treatment programs will be in the same position as people who frantically try to bail water from a sinking boat. 'We need to make sure we're striking the correct balance on both prevention and treatment,' she said." I applaud her statement, but I felt this perspective was largely unspoken at the conference.

Like a breath of fresh air, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's speech during the opening ceremony was one exception, adding much-needed emphasis that drugs alone will not stop the pandemic. "AIDS is far more than a health crisis," he clarified. "It is a threat to development itself... We are not doing nearly well enough." He added that empowering women and girls is a top priority if the fight against HIV and AIDS is to be won. He called for girls' education, job opportunities, as well as full access to practical means for girls to protect themselves against the virus. "[We need] stronger leadership at every level," he said, in order to break "the deadly wall of silence that continues to surround the epidemic." Sadly, in his discussion of leadership, Annan failed to mention the importance of involving youth leaders in the fight against AIDS.

YOUTH REPRESENTATION

Over and over and over again at the conference, we heard the dismal statistic announced that over half of all new HIV infections around the world are among youth. In the Caribbean, we know additionally that AIDS is now the leading cause of death for young people.

Would you believe that this conference was the first in its 15-year history to formally include a youth delegation?! 20,000 people from around the world attended the conference and yet only 250 youth (up to age to 30) were formally included among the delegates as part of the "Youth Activities Program". (Of these, only 100 "youth" delegates, including me, received full or partial scholarships covering airfare, hotel, and the hefty conference registration fee). Using these numbers, some simple math reveals that youth had just over 1 percent representation at the conference. Youth account for over 50 percent of all new HIV cases and a mere 1 percent of delegates at the largest AIDS conference in the world. What's wrong with this picture?

FINAL THOUGHTS

There is so much more I could write about -- the protests, the creative shenanigans of activists, the incredible, inspiring youth leaders from all over Africa, the connection between radical education and HIV-prevention (Mary Creue's fantastic lecture), the politics of funding, the power of young people as consumers, the battles for authenticity, the surprising animosity between some artists/cultural workers and scientists, the praiseworthy regional leadership of the Caribbean, the responsibility Americans ought to feel for the AIDS crisis abroad,

the shame I felt as a delegate from the USA (George Bush was absolutely vilified at the conference), the tears, the hope, and all the work that needs to be done. I'll save it for the next time you and I can sit down and have a conversation. Thanks for reading.

Sincerely,

fiona

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“HIV/AIDS is a crisis, but it's also a challenge and an opportunity. HIV/AIDS will probably always be with us. But let me tell you something, we are able to deal with it, and deal with many other issues. We can achieve what we ultimately want to achieve, which is all of us living in peace and harmony and happily. I think we should embrace this opportunity to do the right thing.” Dr. Stephen King, Chief Medical Officer, St. Lucia