



4 August 2014 - We have seen great advancements in the fight against HIV/AIDS in recent decades. Medical progress has changed the virus from being a death sentence to being an infection with which one can live a good and long life. According to global estimates from UNAIDS, related deaths have fallen in all age groups – largely due these life saving medicines. Despite this progress, one vital group has been overlooked: the youth.

Youth between 10-19 years of age is the only age group where morbidity rates have not decreased. Quite to the contrary, morbidity has risen with [50% in the past seven years](#) . HIV is the leading cause of death amongst adolescents in Africa. On a global scale, only traffic incidents cause more casualties.

“This is a moral injustice” said [UNAIDS](#) Executive Director Michel Sidibé in his opening speech at the [20th International AIDS Conference](#) which was recently held in Melbourne, Australia. “We must be brave enough to stop public hypocrisy on sex, and promote universal sexual and reproductive health, education and rights. Let us do this in memory of our colleagues who died en route to Melbourne and the millions who have died of AIDS-related illnesses and of the tens of millions of people living with HIV”.

Kate Gilmore, the Deputy Director of the United Nations Population Fund ([UNFPA](#)), stressed that state neglect of adolescents' sexual and reproductive rights have had serious consequences. "Governments seem to find the concept of 'sex' troublesome. The greatest killer of all is adults' silence, and their systematic cancelling-out, denying, of the human reality that the journey from childhood to adulthood is a journey of sexual and reproductive awakening and identity formation. Today we see that many adolescents are in a situation where they are old enough to become pregnant, but not old enough to get contraception; old enough to be married, but not old enough to take a HIV-test without consent from their parents."

Keren Dunaway Gonzalez, an 18 year old girl from Honduras, was one of the many adolescents at the conference that called for adolescents around the world to be given comprehensive sexual health and rights education.

"I have just graduated from high school in Honduras, without having had a single lesson in sexual health. After I found out that I have HIV, I was bullied and discriminated. It has been very difficult to overcome my fear of telling others about my HIV-status. But today I am raising my voice, so that other adolescents will not have to go through what I did."

Globally, there are 5,4 million adolescents aged 10-24 that live with HIV. Adolescents are thus the most vulnerable demographic group that is exposed to HIV transmission. This is largely due to lack of information and education, as well as limited access to health services. Within this group, there are yet some minorities that are further marginalized.

Young women, men that have sex with men, transgender individuals, persons that inject drugs, and sex workers are amongst those that are the most at risk. The stigma and discrimination that these adolescents experience, is universal. Furthermore, the human rights violations to which they are subjected, impedes the progressive fight against the HIV virus.

"The high number of transmissions and deaths amongst adolescents is not a question about poverty per se, it is about being powerless", Gilmore stated in one of her speeches at the conference. She iterated that is the poor access to information and services that is killing our youth. And as long as adults do not recognize that young people's rights are also human rights, our silence will cause their deaths.

