

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**United Nations High Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS
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STATEMENT BY

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**Statement to 2006 High Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS.
By Erik Solheim, Minister of International Development, Norway.**

HIV/AIDS is about sex, blood, and injecting drug use. It is about sexual assault, gender disparity and unjust power relations. We all know this, but we are still afraid of talking openly about it. Words are powerful - they define the world and reality. They can be used to promote change or to conserve existing power structures.

The HIV/AIDS field is burdened by taboos and prejudice, and we have created a HIV/AIDS discourse that excludes dangerous words. With our words, or lack of words, we try to create a world where sexism and sexual abuse, injecting drug use, blood and prostitution do not exist. A world where there is no pre-marital sex or homosexual relations, and a world where sexual relationships in marriage are safe. Risk behaviour is present in all societies and it is closely linked to the spread of HIV/AIDS. I believe that our fear of words has limited our success in the battle to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

We all know that an increasing percentage of the newly infected are women. We know that women in many countries do not enjoy the same rights as men and that the power relations between the two sexes are unequal in most countries. We know that a large proportion of the women in the world suffer from sexual abuse, and do not have control of their own sexuality. At the Conference in Beijing we pledge to make the world safer for women. Still we continue to keep quiet about discriminating practices.

We all know that Southern Africa is losing a large part of its young population due to HIV/AIDS. We know that youths are powerful advocates in the fight against HIV/AIDS, but still they are excluded. We know that many youths have unsafe sexual behaviour that exposes them and others to infectious diseases. This is a consequence of poverty, lack of education, lack of information, of stigma, marginalisation and of destructive cultural practices.

We all know that homosexuality exists and that men who have sex with men are victims of abuse and discrimination in many countries. Homosexuality is forbidden by law in several states. The banning of homosexuality causes more people to be infected. Little is done internationally to change national discriminating laws and to combat discriminating behaviour and attitudes. The spread of HIV/AIDS among men who have sex with men will not halt unless this intolerance is brought to an end.

We all know that a large part of the victims of HIV/AIDS are injecting drug users. Still many countries will not distribute clean needles to drug users. We must dare to accept the existence of injecting drug users and the need for information, treatment and care.

Many countries have national laws that discriminate against vulnerable groups, such as women, men who have sex with men, and people living with HIV/AIDS. And even in many countries where national law formally protects these groups; tradition and cultural practices contribute to upholding discrimination of vulnerable groups. We must dare to name these practices when we see them and to condemn them openly.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has during its 25 years killed more than 25 million people. Let us from this day start talking openly about HIV/AIDS and start acting on our talk.