

A Fork in the Road

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Every day, young pre-teenagers in the poorest countries care for their fathers or mothers or both as they suffer the last pains of AIDS in a dilapidated dwelling without the benefits of medicine and pain killers.

Children who need a parent's direction are turned into doctors, nurses, and caretakers. Orphaned, they will join the tens of millions of children in the ranks of AIDS orphans, conservatively estimated to reach 100 million by decade's end.

These children are not only victims of an escalating pandemic, but of governments' refusal to admit the extent of the pandemic and to acknowledge comprehensively all the roads of the transmission of HIV/AIDS.

One of these roads is hypocrisy, denial and dogmatism; the refusal to admit and to deal with sexual issues such as prostitution, bisexuality, homosexuality, young children having sexual intercourse, and with the very existence of AIDS in their countries.

China, frightened by the accelerating spread of HIV through tainted blood, is now attempting to lower the rate of HIV infection from 30% to 10% in five years. However, at the same time, it ignores the spider web of all other roads of transmission known ten years ago, silent and invisible roads that were ignored with such disastrous effects in Africa. Unregulated sale of not only blood but of human organs is the another path. We read in papers like The New York Times that China is one of the main sources of kidney trafficking worldwide. Recently, we also learned about the use in China of dirty needles spreading hepatitis, but that same practice also spreads AIDS.

We read in books, like Candy (Tang), banned in China, about the sexual promiscuity and drug habits that the Chinese author Mian Mian documents about youth rock groups in urban areas which accelerates also the spread of HIV/AIDS.

At the same time, the countryside of China as in India and Africa is crisscrossed by truck drivers. The roads of trucks are the roads of prostitution and those of drugs and those of AIDS.

The most silent invisible road is that of the violation of basic human rights. The AIDS pandemic is the best showcase of the inextricable link between health and human rights. Groups of people who have no access to education, basic health care or who suffer discrimination are where AIDS runs, spreads, kills as we so well saw in Henan Province where the poor donated blood and became infected with HIV.

Poverty, ignorance and neglect fuel the epidemic. Women who cannot have the right to demand that their HIV-infected husbands wear a condom are at risk as well as their future children.

What to do? In China, for instance? Take a different road than looking piecemeal at the consequences. Face the whole picture of the web of roads; follow the path of courage and cohesive fast action. Address all the roads of transmission of HIV/AIDS at the same time with a nation-wide plan of action emphasizing information and education, not just addressing them as they pop up occasionally like in Henan Province. Don't wait until AIDS robs hundreds of thousands more children of their parents, luring them into the ranks of child prostitutes, forced child labor and child soldiers, that UNICEF estimates to be more than 300,000 in worldwide conflicts.

Then, young children in developing countries will not have to care for their dying parents, will have enough to eat, go to school, and hopefully avoid themselves the infection of HIV/AIDS.