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## **International HIV/AIDS Conference Offers Critical Strategies that Affect Women of Color Worldwide**

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In August 2006, the International AIDS Society, along with its co-organizers, the Global Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS, the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS, the International Council of AIDS Service Organizations, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS and the Canadian AIDS Society, hosted the XVI International AIDS Conference. The week-long conference took place in Toronto, Canada with over 20,000 participants, including health care providers, scientists, advocates, government representatives, as well as community and business leaders and people living with HIV/AIDS.

This past year's theme was "Time to Deliver," with an objective to revisit past commitments and emphasize the urgency of providing effective preventive and treatment strategies to communities worldwide. Community-building workshops, symposia, bridging sessions, and abstract discussions were conducted throughout the conference. SisterSong member-organization SisterLove Inc., one of the few HIV/AIDS organizations that work specifically with women of African descent, participated in the conference as part of a large delegation sponsored by the Los Angeles-based Black AIDS Institute. Dázon Dixon Diallo, founder of SisterLove Inc., felt that women's HIV/AIDS issues were finally garnering the proper attention at the conference. While attending "The International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS," which focused on global women of the south, Dixon Diallo heard countless remarks from other attendants about how African women's issues are now at the forefront of discussions – a feat she attributes to high-profiled figures and their interest in the pandemic. "Global leaders like UNAIDS Envoy Stephen Lewis, Bill & Melinda Gates, former President Bill Clinton, and Ministers of Health from Africa, Asia and Europe all drew attention to the plight of women and the urgency in putting the 'new' face to the epidemic – the face of the Black woman," she says.

The conference addressed a new preventive strategy that has the greatest potential for women of color. According to Dixon Diallo, one of the major strategies is the development of microbicides – a topical complex compound that can prevent the vaginal transmission of HIV. This is expected to be an affordable method of prevention available to women in high-risk areas and can be used hours before engaging in sexual intercourse. Researchers predict its availability in the next five to seven years. "This will be a tremendous opportunity for women to have total control over their decisions to practice risk reduction behaviors because they can apply a gel, film or foam with no one else's permission or consent," says Dixon Diallo. SisterLove participates in the Global Campaign for Microbicides Steering Committee by providing local support to advocates who are raising awareness about the advent of microbicides. "We have been engaged in educating communities of women and men about microbicides as an effort to increase advocacy for the necessary resources from government and corporate donors to fund the research and development of these critically needed compounds," Dixon Diallo explains. "Similarly, we conduct ongoing HIV vaccine education and support for our local vaccine and

microbicide research clinic in Atlanta. We also provide up-to-date information on the local clinical trials that are being conducted using some of these compounds, and on how women can be involved in the trials.”

Another preventive strategy is updating contraception methods like diaphragms and cervical caps for women whose options do not include condom usage. “One area of research that was heavily debated at the conference was the finding that, in East Africa, men who are circumcised are about 70% less likely to become infected with HIV than men who are not circumcised. As one can imagine this is a welcome new area of prevention research, and is also controversial because of its intersection with cultural traditions, community customs and men’s bodily integrity.” The newest preventive research is the prophylactic use of anti-retrovirals to prevent HIV transmission. Scientists are reviewing two types of products – Pre-exposure Prophylaxis and Post exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP and PEP). Dixon Diallo says that current Anti-Retroviral classes that treat people who are HIV-positive are being investigated for their safety and effectiveness in those who are not HIV-positive, but have a greater risk of contracting the virus. She says, “From a scientific and medical standpoint, these issues are critical because there are serious concerns for ongoing resistance buildup among people with HIV. Also, it raises questions for people who may seroconvert and their biological eligibility for treatment may be compromised.” She continues, “On the other hand, being able to take a ‘pill’ or ‘shot’ may greatly decrease the incidence of HIV in highest risk communities, especially for women of color who need options that do not require their partner’s permission or consent.” Dixon Diallo cited research and development of two new classes of drugs, which affect the life cycle of HIV once it enters the body, that are on the brink of FDA approval. While many infected people take an excessive amount of medication several times a day, pharmaceutical companies are working to reduce the amount of medication needed. There are drugs available now that can be taken once or twice a day with less side effects and the same potency. However, it is extremely expensive and unavailable to poor countries and communities. The conference did offer updates on research and development of a successful vaccine, stating its conception is still in the near future.

After the conference Dixon Diallo believes now more than ever in the importance of strengthening the reproductive justice movement. Not only does she call for women in powerful decision-making positions to be directly involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS, she also wants them to recognize that poverty, violence and lack of political expression and leadership are the epidemic’s allies. “Economic independence, political leadership, sexual and reproductive freedom, and full access to their human rights protections will go the furthest distance in helping curb the epidemic among women at greatest risk.” SisterLove continues its mission of HIV/AIDS education, prevention, advocacy and support, capacity building and sustainability with more support from its global community, which links them to millions of women of African descent around the world.