



fail to use condoms consistently with their partners. A survey of 1 700 teachers revealed that 12.7% of them were HIV-positive.

Last year more than 4 000 teachers died from HIV and AIDS-related diseases, 80% of whom were younger

than 45. Shisana said that if ART was provided to 60% of those who needed it, teacher deaths could be reduced by 18% by 2010. She estimates that 23 500 teachers living with HIV have a CD4 cell count below 350.

The national education department

was studying her recommendations and would release an integrated report on the demand and supply of teachers at the end of this month.

Chris Bateman

HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC – A LEGACY OF CONQUEST AND MISTRUST



Dr Mamphela Ramphele, former Director of the World Bank and former life partner of the security police-murdered Black Consciousness hero Steve Biko.

towards explaining why we've fallen so far behind in the battle.

This is the view of leading social thinker Dr Mamphela Ramphele, former Director of the World Bank and former life partner of the security police-murdered Black Consciousness hero Steve Biko.

Addressing the closing plenary of the second national AIDS conference in Durban last month, Ramphele cited the initial furor created by the government having questioned HIV/AIDS causality. In a speech entitled 'HIV/AIDS: the mirror in South Africa's face', Ramphele said that just like Brazil, South Africa had the depth of scientific know-how and economic resources to deal a mortal blow to the disease. However, unlike Brazil, which unambiguously tackled the pandemic early on, South Africa continued to give out confusing messages and advice to people already overwhelmed by the trauma of the disease.

Elaborating on her theory, she added: 'Our scientists were largely white, urban based and outside the policy-making domain of government...we have a serious problem of mistrust that prevents us from acknowledging our problems and using our resources to address them.'

She said that 'adding insult to injury', the same racist system had over centuries in many parts of the world stigmatised black male sexuality as 'dangerous and driven by

uncontrollable lust'. 'Unless we acknowledge the pain of those so stigmatised, we are unlikely to overcome our mistrust and build a better life for all.'

'Transcend the past'

Those wounded by the past however needed to transcend it and take ownership of shaping a 'future of dignity' for all.

In what is to become a feature of the bi-annual South African AIDS conference – the Nkosi Johnson Memorial Lecture – Ramphele made an impassioned plea for a return to living the values enshrined in the African social system of *ubuntu* and the governance principles of *batho pele* (people first).

Unlike Brazil, which unambiguously tackled the pandemic early on, South Africa continued to give out confusing messages and advice to people already overwhelmed by the trauma of the disease.

As a mirror in the face of South African society, HIV/AIDS had 'forced us to examine the contours of our face as it really is, and not as we would like to see it'. Like any face, it bore the scars of the past, the impact of the current realities and indications of how the future was likely to take shape.

Mistrust of the racist system that denied the majority of South Africans scientific literacy and proficiency has constrained evidence-based policy making on HIV/AIDS and goes a long way



Cruelly, there were 'just too many' chickens coming home to roost on our fragile democratic edifice, and the country had been 'dealt too bad a hand by history'. The foundations were built on conquest that undermined the structure and socio-economic fabric of indigenous people, constraining their ability to adapt and evolve to modernity.

Saving pride costs lives

Adhering to cultural and customary practices that might be in conflict with the values of science in areas where universally accepted practices saved lives 'might be seen as the only way to protect and defend the dignity of a wounded people'. The migrant labour system was a major contributor to the size and shape of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and turned men into conduits of the infection to their families.

With the struggle and brutal suppression of the liberation movement forcing many into exile and making them vulnerable to the virus in many 'frontline' states, it was a 'cruel irony' that returning heroes became conduits of the deadly virus.

Finally, the illegitimacy of the apartheid state made it unwilling or unable to tackle the HIV/AIDS epidemic in its infancy in the 1980s.

'Missed the boat'

Poorer countries such as Senegal had implemented a comprehensive care and treatment programme when their infection rates were low, containing the spread to less than 3% to date.

'Apartheid was an expensive experiment,' she observed. Overcoming this legacy of inequality and the weak implementation capacity of government machinery at all levels, denial of training and experience in the past and a failure to acknowledge and correct deficits since 1994 left South Africans feeble when it came to dealing with the gap between constitutional ideals and actual practices. Young people led harrowing lives, fending for themselves

after the deaths of their mothers from HIV/AIDS while heroic grandmothers parented their orphaned grandchildren as still others walked the lonely streets in search of love and care.

Loss of *ubuntu*

'Why the deafening silence from the rest of us? Where is the *ubuntu* in the face of more than 5 million South Africans living with HIV/AIDS under the cloud of stigma? Where is *ubuntu* when many of the 300 000 people who died in 2004 from AIDS did so without the comfort of loved ones because they felt shame?' she asked.

'Where is the ubuntu when children are sexually assaulted by their fathers and other close relatives... when babies are raped in the vain hope of cleansing infected men?'

Nearly 1 000 people in the prime of their lives died miserable deaths daily and caregivers of orphans and vulnerable children were unable to access child support grants because of uncaring and corrupt officials.

'Where is the *ubuntu* when children are sexually assaulted by their fathers and other close relatives...when babies are raped in the vain hope of cleansing infected men?'

The quality of South African society would be judged by how we treated the most vulnerable among us and 'we are not at the moment doing well on that score'.

Ramphela called for leadership from government and captains of industry in talking about sex, as did President Museveni of Uganda.

Dangerous customary practices such as polygamy, inheriting widows, non-sterile initiation rites, unprotected sex and multiple sexual partners had to be stopped.

Scientists also needed to 'stand up more often and say no to those bent on misleading the public'.

'How can we allow the confusion between the role of specific treatment with antiretrovirals and the benefits of good nutrition and supplementary nutritional agents such as vitamins? It sounds so medieval!'

End denialism

It was time to end denialism, transcend the past and build a better future, with the President and his cabinet leading the charge. Men needed to be educated about the difference between manhood and male dominance while a 'critical mass' of citizens needed the confidence to demand their rights, thus enabling a human rights culture to flourish.

Accountability of public officials needed better enforcement and penalties were needed for law enforcers who, after training and incentives, failed to address 'the epidemic of violence against women and children'. Only then could South Africa call itself a civilised country and honour the memory of a brave 11-year-old HIV/AIDS activist called Nkosi Johnson who publicly called for an end to stigmatisation at the International HIV/AIDS conference 5 years ago.

Chris Bateman