

Ms Joyce Ouma, Y + Global Network. CCM representative of young people living with HIV. Kenya

Ms Ouma, as a young woman living with HIV in Kenya, you're at the forefront of the HIV fight. How can we leverage the lived experience of a young person living with HIV such as yourself to lead on promoting HIV prevention?

Good morning, good afternoon and Good evening

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to share my experience as a young woman living with HIV and explain how these experiences can be leveraged to improve HIV prevention programs.

It is five years since the last Political Declaration on HIV&AIDS. We have missed the global targets on HIV prevention among young women by a huge margin. Prompting the questions; Why? Why we are still failing? Why is the pace of progress still so slow, despite the advanced HIV prevention technologies and interventions we have at our disposal?

Recent data shows that 4500 young girls and women in Sub-Saharan Africa acquire HIV every week. This translates into about 27 girls acquiring HIV every hour, meaning that in the time it takes to finish this session, about 40 girls will have acquired HIV in my region. That is scary, isn't it?

Young women in all their diversity continue to encounter too many barriers when accessing HIV Prevention services:

- Some are not equipped with the knowledge or education they need to make informed choices.
- Others are not allowed to make autonomous decisions regarding their health because of their partners.
- Some cannot afford health services or commodities.
- Some are discouraged because of the stigmatizing attitudes of health care workers.
- Others are simply barred from accessing services because of laws and policies such as age of consent.

But the contrary is seen in HIV treatment programs. While HIV treatment programs are not perfect, they are recording better results.

Is it because I don't have any option but to take my medication?

In my experience, that's not the full picture. I adhere to my treatment for many reasons. Firstly, the HIV treatment, care, and support services I receive are FREE and available to everyone who needs them. I get my medication in bulk, and I only go to the facility every 3 months. I get psychosocial support through counseling and support groups. I receive services that are tailor-made to my needs delivered by peer-counselors on request. I can select SRHR services at my facility free of charge! But most importantly I receive these services in a stigma free environment, where everyone is trained and equipped on how to handle my needs. I may not get the latest treatment regimen, but all these factors help to me to remain virally suppressed.

I know I make living with HIV sound rosy, but it isn't. I am lucky. Even then, I still have to take a pill every day until better long-acting treatment options become available or until a cure is found.

The successes we have achieved on HIV treatment have been hard-won by a strong, community advocates. Even among young people, we have youth-led networks such as Y+ Global who are shaping the response for young people living with HIV in all their diversity globally, a clear indication that young people can lead the response. As a young woman living with HIV, I can represent my constituency in various decision-making platforms such as the Kenya CCM, and ensure that our issues are prioritized and funded.

We must learn from this and fund other peer and youth led projects such as the Her Voice Fund and RESILIENT, EMPOWERED, ADOLESCENT & YOUNG PEOPLE, also known as READY, and others which are supporting greater youth leadership in Sexual Reproductive Health and HIV.

HIV prevention and SRH services are critical to the lives of every young woman or girl; these services should be free, fully integrated, delivered at scale and tailored to meet holistic needs of young women.

New commodities and prevention technologies should be rolled out and made available to EVERY young woman. Having these tools will mean nothing if they don't get into the hands of young women like me and my friends?

Finally, I call on everyone attending the High-Level Meeting to recognize ethical youth leadership as non-negotiable in the HIV response, and to financially support youth-led programming and advocacy.

Thank you.