

Lewis joins global effort against 'war on women'

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According to Lewis, gender inequality is the root of a lot of evil perpetrated against women around the globe in what he calls a "war on women."

The leading humanitarian was the guest speaker Wednesday night at King's Christian Collegiate at the \$Million or More Oakville (\$MOMO) Out for Africa fundraiser.

Lewis outlined to the crowd of several hundred his involvement in what he called "a high-level panel" working to establish such a women's advocacy agency that would "be able to intervene in ways we've never seen up to now."

The rights of women — 52 per cent of the world's population — are slow to be established.

"It's slow. It's painful," said Lewis describing the female population as so vulnerable, yet very strong.

While there is this war on women being fought across the globe — in countries exhibiting issues from child brides, honour killings, sexual assault and domestic violence — Lewis is involved in assisting women in Africa where he said injustices against women are exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The virus — spread in a culture where women have no right to refuse sex — has created 12 million orphans now being raised primarily by their grandmothers. Without any rights, women are facing forced victimization to the deadly virus — as are their children.

Grandmothers are burying their own children, caring for their grandchildren and farming or otherwise earning a meager living to support the family. They are also volunteering to care for the ill — or as Lewis called it "conscripted labour."

As well-funded global organizations pour billions into medications to address HIV/AIDS, the Stephen Lewis Foundation is receiving donations to fund grassroots projects at the community level in sub-Saharan African countries.

The effort, sparked by Lewis witnessing the carnage and misery caused by HIV/AIDS during his travels in Africa, runs true to Lewis' roots in the NDP.

In 1970, he became leader of the Ontario New Democratic Party, during which time he became leader of the Official Opposition.

He is the former UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa and chair of the Stephen Lewis Foundation in Canada.



SOUL OF THE PEOPLE: The \$Million or More Oakville (\$MOMO) Out for Africa fundraiser that featured special guest Stephen Lewis also featured a performance by Soul Influence members, from left, Simba Nyawiri, Uitsile Ndlovu and Brian Mapaoga.



Stephen Lewis, regarded by *Time* magazine as one of the world's 100 most influential people, is throwing his clout behind the formation of a global agency to tackle gender inequality.

He is on the board of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative and a professor in Global Health at McMaster University.

From 1984 to 1988, he was Canada's Ambassador to the UN, and, from 2001 to 2006, he was the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa. From 1995 to 1999, he was Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF.

Lewis is also author of the bestseller *Race Against Time*.

His foundation's grassroots projects assist women, through stipends for work or micro-loans for establishing businesses, to become self sufficient.

"By being their voice, he is their means of hope," said Ann Mulvale, co-chair of the \$MOMO campaign, which aims to raise \$1 million, or more, in Oakville by Dec. 1 (World AIDS Day) for the Stephen Lewis Foundation.

While \$MOMO has not yet reached its target — and may not, given the current economic climate — it is spreading awareness and has called on, and been answered by, grassroots groups here at home, which have organized fundraisers.

Soul Influence, a trio of singers from Zimbabwe, preceded Lewis on stage. He noted that in a continent of many countries where no one generality fits, as each has its own culture, customs, language and more, music is a common denominator.

No matter where you go in Africa, you will find people singing, while washing dishes, working the fields and more. It is entertainment and an escape from myriad issues, noted one of the Soul Influence performers.

When it comes to treatment, the pandemic is staying a step, if not leaps, ahead as Lewis indicated for every person put into treatment, two to three new infections surface.

"We're still frantically trying to catch up with the virus," said Lewis, noting its prevalence remains constant, if not on the rise, in countries outside Africa, too.

Lewis said 33 million people worldwide have HIV/AIDS — 23 million of them in Africa.

At the root of fighting back, Lewis points to gender inequality as a hindrance.

"The male sense of entitlement, both within the home and outside, is absolutely staggering," said Lewis.

The consequence to women in Africa is a disproportionate infection rate — young women in Africa are infected at a rate of 75 to 80 per cent of new infections.

Lewis recalled a hospital in Mozambique where women were on floors and several to a bed.

"I was standing at the door of the ward and looking at the carnage and thinking, they are all so young. How can so many people, women and girls, be so incredibly expendable? It's all rooted in the question of equality," he said.

Lewis noted the inappropriateness of treating HIV/AIDS-positive infants, but not their mothers who are instead vilified. It has only been since the orphan population has escalated that treatment of mothers entered into the picture, he said.

With women the farmers in Africa, and food in constant shortage, not to mention a major economic means on the continent, efforts to sustain the agricultural industry are paramount.

Lewis, who joked "grandmothers in bulk are scary, it's not something you want to invite on a daily basis," wasted no time lauding the strength of grandmothers in Africa — and the Canadian grandmothers who go to bat for their counterparts a world away.

Lewis' appearance in Oakville several years ago spawned oomama, a local grandmothers in support of African grandmothers group.

For more information about \$MOMO or the Stephen Lewis Foundation, visit millionmoreslf@sympatico.ca