

# VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINES: JESSICA HORN

AN INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA HORN, SLF FIELD REPRESENTATIVE BASED IN SIERRA LEONE

**SLF:** What strikes you most in your work as a field representative?

**JH:** When you go to visit community groups, you're bearing witness both to the suffering that's there but also to the tremendous efforts of people to actually tackle that suffering and to make something positive of it.

One of the things that I love to do when meeting with community groups in Africa is to explain that the money is actually primarily raised by people like Canadian grandmothers. People often can't believe it and they say "What!?" They usually have to translate into their local language because people are saying "What? Grandmothers?!" It's fantastic, because I feel as though it changes the dynamic. People often imagine that money comes from some government or some really wealthy individual somewhere. So I think it's very empowering for them to realize that it is individuals and groups of women in Canada who are actually funding a lot of what they do.

**SLF:** What are some of the greatest needs in the communities you visit?

**JH:** I think one of the most crucial needs in the communities I've visited is access to basic, quality, respectful services. Even in places where there's been a lot of investment by foreign donors in supporting HIV/AIDS infrastructure, you go to the outskirts of the capital city and you see people who can't even go to a basic health care centre and find painkillers, or even a nurse. People need to be able to go to services where they get quality counselling and care.

One thing that community activism does is to address the needs of people in their everyday lives.



Individuals and people in communities are rising up to say, "We need a change, we can't wait 15 years until it goes through all the bureaucracy to happen, we want it now." That is why I think that it is critical to invest in community level mobilizing. It's an act of solidarity — it's respectful of the work that people are already doing to rise up and try and change the conditions that they live in.

**SLF:** What do you see as the role of women in the response to HIV and AIDS?

**JH:** African women, like any women, are varied — some are passive, some are activists, but actually quite a lot have the sense of commitment to changing the situation of people in their own families and communities. They have a sense of responsibility to actually step up and transform their societies.

I think it's a testament to something visionary about the Stephen Lewis Foundation that, right from the start, women were placed at the centre.

I think what you find in a lot of organizations that are trying to lead a response to HIV and AIDS is that they've forgotten women and then they try to add it on after the fact. Of course that doesn't work, because what it means is that you're not beginning from the point of understanding that HIV and AIDS is spread along the fault lines of gender and inequality. So the Foundation is really investing in a serious way in women's energy and women's activism around HIV and AIDS, including the issue of violence against women. I think this is really critical and is a massive contribution to this cause.

© Liz Marshall / SLF