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XVII International AIDS Conference Newsmaker Interviews: Zonibel Woods August 4, 2008

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JACKIE JUDD: Zonibel Woods, thank you for joining me.

ZONIBEL WOODS: Thank you. It is a pleasure to be here.

JACKIE JUDD: Two years ago, at the AIDS Conference in Toronto, the feminization of AIDS, in my view, had a very high profile. I think that was principally because of the speech that Melinda Gates gave at the opening ceremony. What is your expectation of the attention that issue will get here in Mexico City?

ZONIBEL WOODS: Well, I think the momentum around highlighting the feminization of the epidemic also came from thousands of women around the world who have been affected by the epidemic. So we saw from every region that there was a resounding call for governments, donors, policy makers, and HIV organizations themselves to start incorporating into their work a gender analysis to make sure that women were engaged in their organizations, at the table, in the delivery of services and, also most importantly in many ways, in the allocation of resources for the AIDS response.

Two years later, we see that we had a momentum in Toronto, but in many ways I think that momentum did not translate into specific action. So, I think now we are at a place where we are saying we had this call from leaders in the AIDS community, from women living with HIV, from youth activists also who were saying that young women are most

affected by this and disproportionately impacted. We heard from the grandmothers and we also heard from Melinda Gates who said that we really need to focus on women.

JACKIE JUDD: What action had you hoped would come out of Toronto, as a result of Toronto, that did not? What is your hope for Mexico City?

ZONIBEL WOODS: I think that Toronto was a turning point, in terms of our understanding of how HIV is affecting women and girls. What we hope will come out of Mexico is beyond that understanding, for people to go away with very specific ideas about what that can mean on the ground. So, what does it mean to address the intersection between violence against women and HIV? What are some of the things that are working well, and how can they be replicated, taken to scale, adapted to the realities of the different countries where the epidemic is being felt?

JACKIE JUDD: You are going to be speaking Friday at a plenary. What will you be talking about there? What will your call to action be?

ZONIBEL WOODS: I think very similar to what I have talked to you about just now. We want to make sure that the rhetoric is really translated into action. We see that there is progress and we welcome progress in different areas, particularly we have just heard of the call by the Ministers of Health from Latin America for sexuality education and sexual health education for young people in schools. There is a

greater commitment there. We want to make sure that where there are those commitments that there is an investment and that they do not stop at rhetoric.

And so I think in many ways what we hope to see at the end are some real and concrete ideas on where we can move forward.

JACKIE JUDD: I read where you have been quoted as saying that what you want to see when it comes to women and AIDS is a more integrated approach than what may currently exist. What do you mean by that?

ZONIBEL WOODS: Well, I think that when we talk about delivery of services that are HIV-specific, we would like to make sure that we look at the different impacts, whether they are prevention programs, treatment programs, care and support programs, that they look at the impact they are having on men and women, young people and older people, that we have some sort of desegregation. I think the first thing that we need is to get the facts right, get the evidence right about what is working and what is not. I think an integrated approach would also involve greater investments in sexual and reproductive health, given that it is women and young women that access those services.

Also an integrated approach would mean that when we look at prevention mother-to-child transmission or vertical transmission of HIV, we are also looking at sustained treatment for those women who are being given the intervention for the

prevention of vertical transmission. That means that women who are living with HIV should be receiving a variety of services, not just that one intervention, sustained treatment, counseling and support. There is a whole range of services that they need that are not yet available.

JACKIE JUDD: When you look around the world at the countries most impacted by AIDS, what country can you look at and say, this country is getting it right?

ZONIBEL WOODS: Wow—that is a very difficult question. We heard today at the opening ceremony, and I think it has been echoed by many other people, that there is not a single solution. We will not have a perfect biomedical solution. We will not make progress until we integrate human right and gender equality.

I think that there are places where there is hope. We have heard of some good examples where governments moved very quickly in their response, where they took on sort of some of the heavy and controversial issues around combating homophobia, around working with sex workers and people who use drugs. So, I think that there are many countries where there are good examples of courageous efforts. Even where we use those examples, such as Brazil, where they moved quickly to address the epidemic, particularly in these three groups—sex workers, people who use drugs and men who have sex with men—we are seeing new rising rates of infection among women, particularly young women. I think to some extent it is due to the fact that

we have focused on those groups without looking at how it affects female drug users, female sex users, and the partners of men who have sex with men. So, gender equality, even in the countries where we have had success, really needs to come hand-in-hand, particularly in countries that have moved forward and are now maybe seeing some rolling back because they have not acted on gender equality.

JACKIE JUDD: I have one final question, which will turn the corner a little bit. As you know, this is the first conference in Latin America. What impact do you think that has on this region as it moves forward?

ZONIBEL WOODS: Well, this is actually my region. I am from El Salvador, so it makes me very proud to be here in my region. I think that the impact it will have in the epidemic in how it is seen and the response is that we are talking about some issues that are obviously, again, controversial, particularly in this region. We are talking about issues of men who have sex with men, but generally issues of homophobia in our countries. We are talking sort of about the marginalization of many groups, and so I hope that the dialogue and the boundaries that are often pushed during these debates will actually have a very positive impact on how we continue to move forward in this region.

JACKIE JUDD: Thank you so much, Zonibel Woods of the Ford Foundation. I appreciate it.

ZONIBEL WOODS: Thank you very much.

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