

## *Speech*

# **United Nations PATH/Global Campaign for Microbicides Giving Women Power Over AIDS Reception**

*Paula Bock, The Seattle Times  
United Nations, 2 June 2005*

Thank you. Thank you for being here. It's an honor to share this exhibit and this evening with all of you. It's an honor to tell the story of Ruth Njawara Chimuenenji.

I first met Ruth in a dusty township in Zimbabwe. It was one of those days when the sky was white haze and outside the heat parched the laundry stiff to the clothesline, but inside Ruth's house, it was strangely cool and dark, just one bare bulb dangling and the cinderblock walls leaching their dampness.

Ruth was in bed, her two small children huddled by her head, her mother perched on scruffy blankets by her feet. I sat on the mattress edge by Ruth's hips. By then, Ruth was so skinny, all five of us fit on her narrow plank bed, no problem.

For two weeks, Ruth had been very sick. Running stomach. Headache. Horrible cough. She was 24. Her husband had died two years earlier from AIDS and tuberculosis. Her in-laws accused Ruth of killing him with witchcraft. The truth? Ruth's husband, a truck driver, had many girlfriends before and during his marriage. It was he who infected Ruth.

For too many women around the world, that's life.

It's also death.

In sub-Saharan Africa, 13.3 million women are infected with the AIDS virus—13.3 million—that's all the people in my hometown of Seattle, PLUS everyone in Stockholm, Sweden, the homeland of Mrs. Nane Annan, PLUS everyone in Kumasi, Ghana where UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan grew up PLUS all the people in St. Paul, MN where he attended college, PLUS all the people in Geneva, PLUS everyone in Paris PLUS every soul here in New York City.

13.3 million women, many of them mothers, virtually none with access to life-prolonging drugs, most without ANY medical care at all.

13.3 million women like Ruth.

When a woman married to a truck driver dies of AIDS leaving two small children to be cared for by grandparents, the story is at least partly political.

Politics is all about power. Ruth had very little power. She was like most women in the

world. Can't say no if their husbands want sex, can't stop him from sleeping around, can't insist he use a condom. Worse, once infected, women in many communities are stigmatized.

Despite the stigma, Ruth and her family agreed to share their story and daily life with photographer Betty Udesen and me, invited us to sit on their floor mats, to eat their mealy meal, to talk "girl talk" because Ruth wanted all of you to think of African women as sisters, mothers, daughters, friends. Not as statistics in the newspaper.

As journalists, that's so important to us: Helping people understand that these statistics are other PEOPLE. People with dignity and dreams. People like Ruth, who had a lovely smile. Ruth could have been any of us: She enjoyed poetry, church music, and kept a daily journal. She sold used clothes and vegetables to feed her family. She worried about her children.

At the time, Tafadzwa was almost 4, small for his age, with mischievous eyes and perpetually drippy nose. Martha, was almost 6. She wore her hair different everyday... twists, braids, elaborate swirls on her small sweet head. She loved flowered dresses, playing pebble games, circling through endless rounds of ring-around-the-rosie until she was so dizzy she collapsed on the ground giggling... then bounced up again.. I'm a bunny, *hop, hop*; a chicken, *flap, flap*; a warthog, *snort, snort*.

You know. That enchanted age when anything seems possible.

And that's just the problem. Ruth worried most about what would happen to Martha.

"I wish my daughter would grow up to be a big girl, get a proper education and get married to a husband who will take care of her," Ruth told us. "Not like what happened to me."

And then, Ruth looks up, and she uses the only power she really has. It is a tremendous and terrible power. The power of dying mother. She can barely gather enough air in her lungs to push out much sound. She whispers: WHO WILL TAKE CARE OF MY CHILDREN?

I'm sitting there, on the edge of her bed, typing away on my tiny keyboard.: W-H-O W-I-L-L Take Care of My Children?

I'm a writer, not a doctor, but really, I'm an idiot, because I have no idea that at that very moment Ruth was dying.

In my mind I'm thinking: OK, she's in bed for a few days, a temporary setback like the ones described to us by other women living with HIV... and she's going to feel better tomorrow and Betty and I are going to hang out with her family for the rest of the month and we'll learn how to cook sadza and see how Ruth's mom gives a bath and watch Ruth cuddling her children and selling vegetables in the market, and bonding with the women

in her HIV support group. ...

But now, looking back, I realize, Ruth probably knew: This was it. She was dying. And she would USE her last breaths.

*Who will take care of my children?*

Ruth was poor and she was dying. She had no say in sexual politics, no presence in geopolitics, no control over her own health. But that doesn't mean Ruth was weak. Ruth was strong. She was smart. She got her message to me. And she got her message to YOU.

There. Now we all know. We know about Ruth. We know about the 13.3 million women just like Ruth. We know what's coming, some dark night, a child is going to wake up and call out, Mama? . . . Mama?!! ...MAMA!!!!

(PAUSE)

No Mama.

**13 million nights like that.**

So many children asking: Where is Mama? When will Mama come back? Why did Mama leave? What happened to Mama?

How do we answer? Where do we go from here? What to do?

As a mother, thinking about this, hearing the children crying out in the night, I feel very sad.

As a journalist, I have questions: What is being done? What's going to make a difference? When? Where? How much does it cost? Who is paying? Who is NOT ponying up? What are the holdups? Who will benefit? Who is being left out. Why? Why not?

As a human being, I am grateful many of you are working on microbicides, on medicines, on a vaccine, on teen sex education, on women's economic empowerment, on changing men's irresponsible behaviors. Thank you...but please, HURRY!

Soon is not fast enough. Time is running out for Ruth's daughter Martha, who is 7. In 5 years, Martha will be 12, and then, 13, and her hips and breasts will swell, and she'll have her mother's lovely smile, and she'll be at that age. You know the age. That beautiful, tender age that's supposed to be the START of life for young women, not the end.

I ASKED RUTH what happens, in her culture, when people leave this life. "Maybe they stay around awhile," she told me. "Like a spirit you hear in your sleep as if a voice is talking to you."

But her mom, who was always nearby, who bathed Ruth in her dying days and now cares for Ruth's children, disagreed. She told Ruth, "When you die, you die. That's it. You don't come back."

The very next day, Ruth died.

Last year, in sub-Saharan Africa, 2.2 million people died of AIDS. Most were women.

I hope, maybe, this story is a way for Ruth to stay around awhile, a spirit to help us all understand what it means to be a woman with AIDS in Africa.

After it was published on World AIDS day, hundreds of Seattle Times' readers wrote and called and cried and sent support to various AIDS and orphan organizations. One reader took Ruth's words to heart: *Who Will Take Care of My Children?* went to Zimbabwe and took them under her wing. Let us be thankful for ordinary people who care.

And thankful for the Seattle Times, a family-owned community newspaper that does not have a large travel budget but cared enough to seek out and publish Ruth's story.

Thanks to Global Campaign, PATH, the UN and everyone who worked so hard to make this exhibit reality. And thanks to photojournalist Betty Udesen whose talent, vision and heart are in the pictures you'll see tonight.

FINALLY, let us remember someone who is not here with us tonight ... but maybe she is.

Thank you, Ruth. For sharing your life.