

**Hope during a critical time:** Empowering young women to lead the way

FALL 2020

# Grassroots



Young women are emerging as powerful peer leaders. They educate and advocate to prevent HIV transmission, counter stigma, and create better futures for people living with HIV. As part of an effective holistic response to HIV and AIDS in their communities, SLF partners – like MUJHU Young Generation Alive, in Uganda – empower youth with leadership skills, psychosocial supports, and access to information about their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Photo by Museruka Emmanuel.



*the Stephen Lewis*  
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# A message from the Executive Director

## Dear Friends,

Every week in sub-Saharan Africa, young women and girls account for almost 4500 new transmissions of HIV. During this same time frame, 1800 young men and boys newly acquire the virus. What does it say about our world that young women and girls are 2.5 times more likely to become HIV positive than their male peers?

It says we live in a world where girls are less valued than boys. They face violence, discrimination, barriers to education, and have limited income opportunities. And as a result, young women and girls have less control over their bodies, are subject to sexual coercion, and are pressured to marry at a young age. They are forced to make decisions based on survival, rather than on what's best for their health, education, and futures.

As writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has shared, "The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be, rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn't have the weight of gender expectations."

As a feminist organization, the Stephen Lewis Foundation is committed to acting in solidarity with activists in sub-Saharan Africa who demand a world where they can be their 'true individual selves'. We are committed to providing young women and girls with the resources they need to mobilize and support each other, and to lead change.

In this edition of Grassroots, you'll hear from two young women who are taking control of their lives and their bodies. They are working toward a different world; one where they determine their own value. These young women are inspiring change in their communities, and their activism is a critical part of the work required to turn the tide of HIV and AIDS.

We hope you are inspired by their vision and determination, too.

In solidarity,



**Meg French**

*Executive Director, Stephen Lewis Foundation*



# "I believe that we shall see a world that is safe for every young person."

## Youth-led responses to HIV.

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Aziwe Mkhungekwana from Blue Roof Life Space in South Africa, and Ruth Awori from MUJHU Young Generation Alive in Uganda, speak with Leah Teklemariam, SLF Director of Programs, following a screening of the documentary film, *Youth Championing Youth: HIV will not define me*. Photo by Neal Hicks.

**In this issue of Grassroots, we're sharing an excerpt of a conversation with two remarkable young leaders, Ruth Awori from MUJHU Young Generation Alive in Uganda, and Aziwe Mkhungekwana from Blue Roof Life Space in South Africa, and SLF Director of Programs, Leah Teklemariam. Their personal and candid exchange highlights how youth-led HIV treatment and prevention initiatives are raising awareness and promoting positive living and treatment adherence for children, adolescents, and young people across sub-Saharan Africa.**

**Leah: Thinking about your work with MUJHU and with Blue Roof, can you talk about the psychosocial programs and support that are most important for young people living with HIV?**

**Aziwe:** Blue Roof did an amazing thing. They changed the [Blue Roof] Life Space into also a youth-friendly space. You can just walk into Blue Roof coming from school – and maybe you're in grade nine and you're struggling to choose your subject – you just go to career guidance and you can see what is available, and learn more about a career. Or, you're a dancer, so you can just go dance. Obviously, it doesn't forget its focus on HIV. Blue Roof has had a huge impact in my life and it



## “The group supports young people who are going to be responsible in the communities, who are going to be vibrant, who are going to take up leadership to support their fellows as well.”

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has definitely shaped me. I got support from Blue Roof as soon as I was told my status. I call every nurse there “Mom.” They were there from day one. They supported and they counselled me, and definitely my mother, too. So, the support system I got from Blue Roof was from day one, and I’m still getting it, and from my fellow peers.

**Ruth:** From MUJHU I should say we look at a very comprehensive package, because we look at young people both infected and affected by HIV. So, we look at psychosocial support, not only for people who are living with HIV. We have meetings that we hold every month, where we do a lot of learning, sharing experiences, and, you know, sometimes it’s not about just class. Even if I just hear a story from Aziwe and think, *Oh, that’s what you’re dealing with and this is how you’re handling it*, it helps me also to cope with life. And then you also look at helping out young people who are not in our communities. So, we look at reaching those in, and out, of school. Both those who can make it to the facility and those who can’t. And then the other thing that you always look out for is engaging young people in different activities, including the fun bit of it, because we believe that being HIV positive does not take away the fun in your life does it?

**Aziwe:** No!

**Ruth:** So, we engage in different activities that are fun, but also bring up the abilities in us, like music, dance

and drama. We have sports. Sometimes we go touring around, so it gives you a life that you thought you had lost. It gives you that other picture of a life that you thought was only for people who are living without HIV. And then we also look at mentorship. I should say, each one of us is being mentored by someone, because we want to be. The group supports young people who are going to be responsible in the communities, who are going to be vibrant, who are going to take up leadership to support their fellows as well.

**Leah:** Thank you. I could talk to you both all day. There is a very troubling statistic that over 6,000 young women contract HIV every week.\* HIV is still the leading cause of death of women between 15 and 49. It’s still such an issue for young women in particular. So, I’m just wondering if you could talk specifically about the challenges and the needs of young women, especially when it comes to preventing HIV, because the stakes are so high.

\*This interview was conducted before the new global numbers were released by UNAIDS in July 2020.

**Ruth:** It’s very high in girls and young women. One of the reasons is that these young women still need a lot of empowerment in voicing their reproductive health rights, because you’ll find that girls are engaged in sexual activities, but they don’t know how to negotiate safer sex. They’re exposed to risks. The other issue would be



Ruth Awori. Photo provided by MUJHU Care Limited, Uganda.



Aziwe Mkhungekwana. Photo provided by Blue Roof Life Space, South Africa.



Aziwe Mkhungekwana and Ruth Awori. Photo by Neal Hicks.

around the availability and accessibility of the preventive services for the young women. We are still in the communities where a young girl can't just walk into a facility and say, "I need a condom." The services may be there, but are they accessible for the young girls? Sometimes girls are sexually harassed. Are there services for these young people, like the drugs that they give someone who has been raped, to protect them from contracting the virus? We need to have these young people understand that these services are there for them, but also make the services youth friendly. I can't imagine walking into a facility and talking to an older person – I'll be afraid to ask for the service. Then, the other aspect that is really important is economic empowerment for the adults, and girls and young women. Some girls end up in sex work or commercial sex work, because they're desperate.... If they could have gotten a skill, a hands-on skill, they could have used it to get the money that they needed and still stay safe. So, we need to do a lot of economic empowerment for girls and young women if we are to protect them. We all have our role to play. These young people are in our hands and it's upon us to guide them the right way. They still need information. Because, I may be there enjoying my youth, thinking, *I'm just having fun*, when in an actual sense, I'm staking my own life.

**Leah:** You've just embodied why it's so important to have young people leading the way – how you're already providing such leadership, and you know what to do. We're all the best advocates for our own lives and you're demonstrating that. I just want to know, what do you see for the future? Where do you want to go? And how do you think we can get there?

**Aziwe:** I've already said, allow me to be the last child born HIV positive, and we can only do that through education, by allowing Ruth and myself and many other young people to educate other young people.



Aziwe Mkhungekwana. Photo provided by Blue Roof Life Space, South Africa.

**Ruth:** Yeah. In addition to that, we also need safe spaces for those who are living with HIV. So, I want to see a space that is safe for young people to access the services, to enjoy equal rights just like anyone else. We would also like to see a world where people have changed perceptions of people living with HIV. We all have different roles to play in this house. Some of us are good at communication. Some of us have the funds. Some of us have that information that you can give out to young people. We are in places where we are ready to influence. We are in places where we can take action. So, it's about all of us playing our different roles at different levels. We know this is more like a chain. It's not complete when it's not together. So, we all have different roles to play, and if we join hands, I believe that we shall see a world that is safe for every young person.

**Aziwe:** Preach sister.

# Behind the Statistics:

## HIV's Disproportionate Impact on Women and Girls

**“Women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa continue to be the most affected and accounted for 59% of all new HIV infections in the region in 2019, with 4500 adolescent girls and young women between 15 and 24 years old becoming infected with HIV every week.”**

UNAIDS press release,  
July 6, 2020

**W**e know that women and adolescent girls are disproportionately affected by HIV in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2019, 24% of all new HIV transmissions in the region occurred among women and girls aged 15 to 24 years old, making them more than twice as likely to acquire HIV than their male peers of the same age. Activists, community leaders, and scholars have been sounding the alarm bells about the impact of HIV and AIDS on women and girls for decades, but mainstream interventions are still failing to address the underlying inequalities and inequities that continue to drive the pandemic.

These drivers are found at the intersections of sexual and gender-based violence, sexual coercion, and limited social and economic opportunities. HIV prevention initiatives and education will have limited impact without support that combines interventions to address gender inequity, and empowers women and girls to exercise choice about their sexual lives and prevent HIV transmission.

At the SLF, we continue to increase our support for integrated, holistic programming that addresses the root causes of sexual and gender-based violence, and HIV's disproportionate impact on women and girls. Our partners are working to address the specific needs of women and adolescent girls, empowering them to demand their rights, access gender-responsive healthcare, become leaders in their communities, and live with economic and sexual autonomy.

### The Power of Monthly Donors

**“One of the things I most value about the SLF is its constant, ongoing commitment to the partners in sub-Saharan Africa. For me, the idea of monthly giving is my way to share in this commitment.”**

*– Theresa Randles, Grandmothers of Steel*

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Monthly contributions are the heart of the Foundation's work, providing the security that's required to plan into the future in a consistent and thoughtful way. Your sustained monthly support is invaluable and enables our grassroots partners to help turn the tide of HIV and AIDS. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, your contributions also help to safeguard the progress already made against AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Become a monthly donor by visiting our website at [www.stephenlewisfoundation.org/ways-to-give/make-a-monthly-gift](http://www.stephenlewisfoundation.org/ways-to-give/make-a-monthly-gift).

# Financial Overview 2019-2020

## Programs

We are deeply committed to getting the vast majority of our revenue to the community-based organizations with whom we work. Between 2003 and 2020 the Stephen Lewis Foundation disbursed and committed a cumulative \$130.7 million in program spending, including direct support to over 1800 initiatives with 325 community-based organizations in 15 African countries. In our most recent Fiscal Year 2019-2020, over \$7.9 million was spent in supporting the work of our partners, representing 76% of total expenses for the year. To read more about our work with African partners, please visit: [stephenlewisfoundation.org](http://stephenlewisfoundation.org).

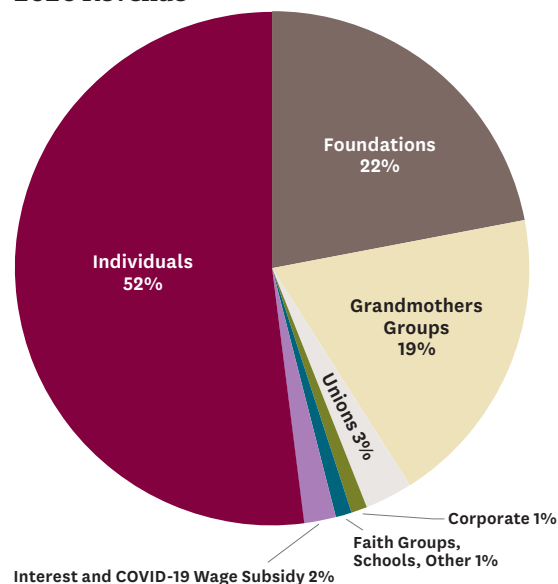
## Administration

Administration is essential to the success of every charitable organization. At the Foundation, costs associated with day-to-day operations and expenditures ensure that we are accountable for how funds are being allocated. We are committed to keeping these administrative costs low while also ensuring that the Foundation is strong and sustainable, and that we manage the gifts of our donors and the support of our partners in a deeply responsible way. In Fiscal Year 2019-2020, our administrative costs were 12% of our total spending. For more information, please visit: [stephenlewisfoundation.org/who-we-are/financials](http://stephenlewisfoundation.org/who-we-are/financials).

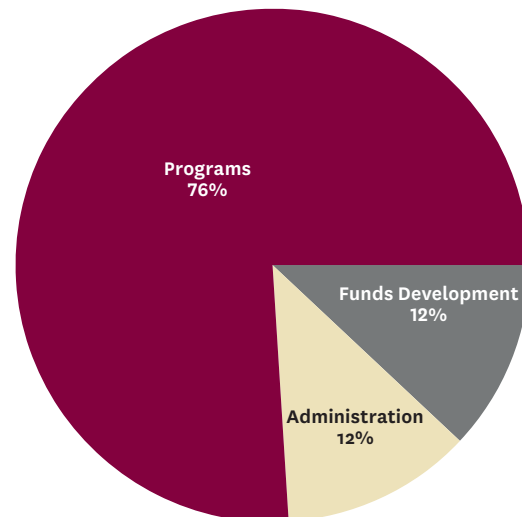
## Funds Development

In order to continue to support the innovative programming developed by our African partners, the Foundation has strengthened our fundraising capacity to engage supporters through a variety of recognizable initiatives, such as special events that feature the voices and work of our partners, and by encouraging monthly donations. This past year, our fundraising costs were 12% of total spending.

## Where our support comes from: 2020 Revenue



## Where your money goes: 2020 Expenses



The Foundation's fiscal year runs from July 1 to June 30. For a copy of the Foundation's full audited financial statements and the link to our annual Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) charity returns, please visit: [stephenlewisfoundation.org/who-we-are/financials](http://stephenlewisfoundation.org/who-we-are/financials).



The SLF is proud to be accredited by the Imagine Canada Standards Program. Accredited organizations demonstrate excellence and leadership in five key areas: board governance, financial accountability and transparency, fundraising, staff management, and volunteer involvement.



# It's time to order your holiday tribute cards

The holiday season is nearly here. With it comes a welcome opportunity to reconnect, share holiday cheer, and act in global solidarity. This year, consider making donations and sending beautiful printed cards or e-cards to your family, friends and colleagues. Simply donate online and send e-cards for easy and immediate delivery. We could also send you cards to personalize and deliver yourself, or mail cards on your behalf. Your contributions will have meaningful and tangible impact for our grassroots partners and their communities.



## Order your holiday cards today

[stephenlewisfoundation.org/holidays](http://stephenlewisfoundation.org/holidays)

\*Printed cards may not be exactly as pictured.



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