Introduction

As the global AIDS architecture shifts, the WNZ at AIDS 2014 comes at a pivotal moment for the women and HIV movement to proactively determine its future.

The Women’s Networking Zone (WNZ) at AIDS 2014 once again offered a community-focused forum running parallel to the International AIDS Conference, building on more than a decade of collaboration between HIV and gender groups. Since Women at Durban in 2000, the WNZ has provided an alternative, accessible and focused space for women’s organizing at the International AIDS Conference, creating an inclusive space for women to engage and open up new dialogues.

The Women’s Networking Zone is dedicated to the inclusion of women and girl in all of our diversity, and especially those living with HIV. It works to promote dialogue, forge new networks, raise the visibility of issues relating to HIV, and promote the exchange of experiences, abilities, and knowledge at the global level. The Women’s Networking Zone is an alternative space where community members, advocates, policy analysts, decision-makers, service providers, and researchers can share and learn together.

As we built on the momentum from AIDS2012 where “women’s rights turn the tide,” regional partners in Asia and regional partners in Southern Africa convened WNZs at ICASA and ICAAP respectively with ATHENA’s behind the scenes support. Women across Asia and the Pacific looked to this year’s WNZ to “claim our future” and have worked tirelessly since the last International AIDS Conference to bring this work to life, and carry forward the WNZs history of global-local partnerships. And now as we head to AIDS2016 in Durban, it is more important than ever that we revisit our history as a women and HIV movement – build strong alliances across movements – build new leadership – and set our agenda for the future.

The Women’s Networking Zone (WNZ) served as a hub for women’s organizing and advocacy at the 2014 International AIDS Conference in Melbourne, and for women-led dialogue and discussion globally through the live-streaming of all sessions (available at https://www.youtube.com/user/womensnetworkingzone/playlists).

With a spotlight on the leadership, innovation, and vision of women living with HIV from around the world, the WNZ opened on the Sunday that the main conference opened and had a day-long calendar of panels, networking events, and workshops throughout the week. As a “conference alongside the conference” with women’s human rights and women-led initiatives front and center, highlights included:

• Daily dialogues sessions featuring a panel of women living with HIV discussing key issues around the day’s theme
• A ‘Welcome to Women’ party supported by the Victorian Government Department of Health and featuring speeches by women living with HIV, political representatives and more
• An expert panel discussion on gender equality and the Global Fund
• Presentations on research advances including 'cure' research and microbicides trials, alongside a debate on how to engage women living with HIV meaningfully in HIV research.

Each day the WNZ programme was framed around a different theme, which was debated in the community dialogue and shaped the presentations and discussions to follow. This format allowed key issues to emerge and form the focus of ongoing dialogue. The themes and some key takeaways were as follows:

Monday: Access to ART and Health Services
Discussion centred on practical barriers including treatment stock outs and clinic inaccessibility, as well as the additional challenges in accessing services such as viral load testing.

Tuesday: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
Speakers at the community dialogue focussed on stigma and discrimination by health workers and the particular challenges of women living with HIV in contexts where they form a small proportion of the population of people living with HIV.

Wednesday: Discrimination and Violence
Multiple forms of discrimination and violence were discussed, with a focus on forced and coerced sterilisation and the advocacy and litigation efforts of advocates in Namibia.

Thursday: Criminalisation and Justice
Restrictive and oppressive laws, including criminalisation and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, laws criminalising people who use drugs and the impact of the criminalisation of HIV transmission were debated.

Historically, the WNZ has reached thousands of conference delegates and community members and did so again through the utilization of online media including live-streaming, an active social media presence on Twitter and Facebook, and a website that functioned as a platform to support the WNZ both in 2014 and moving forward - http://www.womensnetworkingzone.org/. In addition, materials available in hard copy supported the profile of the WNZ and directed a larger audience towards accessing the space and participating in sessions.

The WNZ@AIDS2014 was coordinated by Straight Arrows, ICW Global, WAP+, Positive Women’s Network South Africa, Positive Women Victoria, and ATHENA.
UN Women’s support

UN Women provided vital partnership to the WNZ. As partners in the women and HIV movement, UN Women’s support for the WNZ at AIDS 2014 was essential in supporting the success of the space and in achieving:

- Higher profile for the WNZ and visible attention to women, girls and gender equality, through a specialist ‘Women at AIDS 2014’ delegate guide, included in hard copy in the conference bags for all delegates, as well as additional materials including daily ‘programme postcards’ profiling the agenda of the WNZ.

- Printing of advocacy materials identifying the key priorities of regional partners developed through a working group and consultation process.

- Live-streaming and recording of the sessions through AV equipment to expand the reach of the forum and facilitate the engagement of women and men who were not able to fund their in-person participation.

- Providing partial scholarships, distributed by Straight Arrows, to support the conference participation of women living with HIV from Australia and the Asia Pacific region, especially younger women to support leadership development. This support enabled women who would otherwise have been unable to access the conference to both attend and participate actively in the Women’s Networking Zone. Scholarship participants supported the WNZ in various volunteer roles, including one young Australian woman who utilized her media and technology skills to support the audiovisual and live-stream management – thereby ensuring even wider participation in the WNZ was possible.

- Support the participation of a WNZ focal point and past lead community partner, which facilitated: historical context to women’s organizing; mentoring of young women advocates, and building of new leaders; linkages with other networking zones; and cross-movement dialogue and sharing.
ATHENA at AIDS 2014

The International AIDS Conference (IAC), held July 20-25th, 2014 in Melbourne, Australia again provided a vital platform for the ATHENA Network to connect women from across the globe to build leadership, partnerships and to advance our shared goals for the health, rights and quality of life for women and girls in all their diversity worldwide. With the financial support and invaluable partnership of Link Up and UN Women, ATHENA was able to continue global coordination of the Women’s Networking Zone, support the participation of two ATHENA team members, conduct a wide range of sessions and provide scholarships to young women leaders living with HIV from the Asia Pacific Region and Australia. Overall, the combined support enabled ATHENA to partner with amazing women and enhance the visibility of and advocacy for women’s rights, health and quality of life within the conference.

Women’s presence and leadership within the International AIDS Conference has historically been under-representative, and there is much still to achieve to ensure women are present, vocal and heard. Though AIDS 2014 demonstrated the progress our movement has made, there is ground to defend and more ground to be won. In this report, therefore, we acknowledge past achievements, demonstrate success and progress in this latest International AIDS Conference, and look to the future of utilising this global platform to promote gender equity and human rights.

Consistent with our historical engagement, our primary objectives during the International AIDS Conference in Melbourne (AIDS2014) were to effectively advocate for funding, programming, services and policies to promote and sustain gender equity, health and human rights for all women and girls. AIDS 2014 also provided a rich opportunity for ATHENA’s broad array of members, partners and allies, drawn from across regions and including women in all our diversity, to network, support each other’s work and conference contributions, catalyse ideas for partnership, push discussions forward and challenge the status quo.

AIDS 2014 saw an unprecedented level of women’s leadership at an International AIDS Conference, with an inspiring roster of women advocates delivering plenary sessions – many of whom ATHENA is proud to partner and collaborate with within our network. More, the Women’s Networking Zone again provided an essential space to foster the women’s rights movement within the HIV response – more urgent than ever as we see a broader climate of reduced funding for gender work and women’s networks. As the HIV policy arena shifts focus to the ‘end of AIDS’, it is more vital than ever that the rights of women living with and affected by HIV are recognised, and the voices of women heard at all levels. ATHENA’s ongoing commitment to international advocacy and raising key issues in global policy spaces like the International AIDS Conference continues to be an essential part of this process, and we are grateful to our partners and funders for their support to enable us to achieve this.

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1 Link Up funding enabled the participation of one ATHENA team member and supported activities including the dissemination of findings from the Link Up global consultation ATHENA led with GYCA, and participation and support for relevant panels and presentation.

2 UN Women funding enabled the participation of one ATHENA team member, and supported a range of logistics and activities in the Women’s Networking Zone.
Women at AIDS 2014

International AIDS Conferences are characterised by ambitious treatment targets, new funding projections and unveiling of scientific progress. It is essential that these are complemented by recognising and addressing the needs of those affected, if real progress is to be achieved. Women must be at the centre of this response. It is therefore essential that women are leading and visible in setting the agenda. At AIDS 2014, the keynote plenary sessions and other events on the main conference programme boasted an impressive number of women leaders delivering significant and vital interventions that address the issues and push the envelope for women and for the HIV response. ATHENA celebrates all of the ATHENA members and allies who took centre stage at AIDS2014. In particular, the great achievement of advocates in securing meaningful places for women in plenary sessions, detailed below, is to be celebrated as a mark of real progress.

Opening Plenary: Ayu Oktariani, Indonesian Positive Woman's Network, YouthLEAD

"I am HIV-positive because of lack of information. What happened to me is common throughout our region and the world"
Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXL5TyBtjAw&sns=em, 42 minutes in.

Day 1 Plenary: Dr Lydia Mungherera, Mama's Club Uganda, GCWA, ATHENA Network

"I will not be using power point today as I will be speaking from my heart."
Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNlx2RYO6Yq&sns=em, 61 minutes in.

Day 2 Plenary: Jennifer Gatsi Mallet, Namibia Women's Health Network, ICW, ATHENA

"Gender inequality as a major social determinant of HIV transmission"
Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZ3o3-XVrdU&sns=em, at 38 minutes.

Day 3 Plenary: Daisy Nakato Namakula, Women’s Organization Network for Human Rights Advocacy (WONETHA)

"Rights-violating health programming is still funded and sex work is still criminalised"
Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOmaGbL7PBQ&feature=youtu.be, starting at 71 minutes.

Day 5 Plenary: L'Orangelis Thomas Negron, Ovaries of Steel, Latin-American and Caribbean Positive Youth Network, GCWA, ATHENA Network

"Reaching the end of AIDS impossible unless we break the taboos around sex"
Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDMZNtQjmkB, starting at 56 minutes.

Closing Plenary: Violet Banda

"As a young person living with HIV, I will go home to assure my fellow youth that yes there are people who care out there."
Session available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNATkRmlUpo&sns=em, starting at 18 minutes.
ATHENA and the Women’s Networking Zone

ATHENA has partnered with local and regional organisations and networks, dynamic women's rights leaders and a diverse array of allies to bring the Women's Networking Zone to the International AIDS Conference since 2000. The WNZ came alive in Durban, South Africa in response to the lack of attention, platforms or advocacy for women within the conference. Since its first inception at AIDS 2000, the WNZ has been a feature of every International AIDS Conference, as well as other regional conferences.

As well as focussing attention on women and providing a space for women’s advocacy and leadership, the WNZ also serves a vital function as a free and accessible space, providing a forum for wider engagement especially from local women, than the main conference, with its prohibitive registration fees, allows. The WNZ was conceived as and continues to be a free, accessible, open and welcoming space for women to build capacity, develop sustainable partnerships, bring issues impacting women out of isolation and showcase effective interventions. It is especially valuable as an inclusive space for women in all our diversity, including women living with HIV, women who do sex work, women with disabilities, women who are mothers, women from migrant communities, women who use drugs, women working within the HIV field, women who are researchers, women who are social scientists and more. The strength of the WNZ as an organising space lies in this diversity.

More than a decade later, as the global convener, ATHENA continues to partner with local and regional activists, networks and organisations to bring the WNZ to the International AIDS Conferences and a host of regional HIV conferences; providing a space for women in all our diversity to meet, exchange ideas, debate and build and rebuild our movement. As the WNZ has evolved, it has become an integral part of the International AIDS Conference offering a place for grassroots organising, international civil society advocacy, bio-medical research and policy to converge with scientist, medical providers, NGOs, youth groups and a rich myriad of women's health and rights allies to deliver panels, interactive sessions, informal dialogues and ad hoc meetings in a safe, inclusive women-centred environment. By providing a platform for exchange – including formal presentations through a full parallel conference programme, the WNZ provides a unique platform and space.

ATHENA builds and works with partners to deliver a unique Women’s Networking Zone at each conference, with the leadership and insight of local partners ensuring the relevance and engagement of the local and regional community. Building on past success, the WNZ at AIDS 2014 delivered an exciting programme of panels and presentations – including abstract-led sessions delivered by a rich cadres of historical partners such as AVAC, the GCWA and ICW and welcomed sessions by new partners. Amongst the many highlights were the daily dialogue session convened by ICW that explored key thematic issues impacting women living with HIV, young women’s dialogues led by ATHENA and interactive panels with leading HIV researchers. This vibrant programming ensured the WNZ attracted significant audiences and engagement, supported by the informal organising space that the WNZ also offered that was home to a host of strategy sessions, collaboration meetings and membership meetings with UN Women, UNAIDS and a variety of women’s groups.
The WNZ Opening

Each WNZ is opened with a ceremony to welcome women and begin the amazing week of networking, partnership and innovative ideas for and by women. At AIDS 2014, ATHENA was excited to be invited to collaborate with local partners to in two opening activities for the Women's Networking Zone. The opening of the WNZ, held in the WNZ on Sunday July 20th, brought together a vibrant and energetic group of WNZ supporters led by the local organising partners ICW Global, Straight Arrows, ICWAP, WGNRR, Positive Women Victoria and also included long-time WNZ partners Salamander Trust, AIDS Legal Network, UN Women, Namibia Women's Health Network.

ATHENA member Ebony Johnson served as the Mistress of Ceremonies and opened with a spirited rallying cry for women’s rights, education, health, empowerment and unity. All in attendance joined in chanting affirmations with bold energy. As it is has always been that each WNZ honour and include the local traditions, the Opening began with a Welcome to Country from an indigenous Aboriginal leader as is customary at special events in Australia. The programme followed with greetings and inspiring remarks from WNZ organiser Rebecca Matheson of Straight Arrows and ICW Asia Pacific. Rebecca along with several other regional leaders shared their perspectives on the importance of including women living with HIV in SRHR and women’s rights organizing.

Next Beatrijs Janssen, from the Universal Access to Female Condoms Campaign, offered a brief tribute to colleagues lost in the tragic flight disaster before the Conference, and spoke about female condoms as an essential prevention tool that put choice in the hands of women. Inspiring youth leader and WNZ collaborator, Consolata Opiyo spoke passionately about the importance of mentorship and engagement of young women in HIV advocacy and organizing.

Ebony extended a special word of appreciation to all of the phenomenal women who came before to join in building the legacy of the WNZ and thanked current partners including, but not limited to, UN Women, Salamander Trust, World YWCA, AVAC, GCWA, Hothouse Designs, UNAIDS and the Victorian Department of health. Ebony then led all in a few more calls for women's rights, safe spaces and shared advocacy and welcomed long time HIV leader Bev Greet to cut the ribbon and officially declare the AIDS2014 WNZ open.
Mujeres Adelantes

*Mujeres Adelante* is a newsletter and a special joint edition series of the ALQ on women’s rights and HIV that grows out of a history of shared organizing around gender and human rights – and of mobilizing women – at the International AIDS Conference since Barcelona in 2002. *Mujeres Adelante* was the name of a collaboration between global advocates and a local HIV positive women’s organization in Barcelona to build a parallel conference embedded in the Barcelona community that would be free and open to the public.

*Mujeres Adelante*, the newsletter and journal, is jointly produced by the AIDS Legal Network and ATHENA which carries forward the dialogue, discussion, and debates from AIDS 2008 in Mexico City through the AIDS2012 in Washington D.C., and now to Melbourne in 2014.

*Mujeres Adelante* aims to:

1) make emerging themes and discussions at International AIDS Conferences and related global forums accessible to community stakeholders and in so doing, create mechanisms by which research, advocacy, and community meet.

2) mobilize around a ‘gender agenda’ and in so doing, place women’s rights and gender equality at the heart of the AIDS response; and,

3) create a platform whereby contentious, neglected, and emerging issues in the AIDS response can be identified, debated, and addressed.

*Mujeres Adelante* manifests the desire of diverse stakeholders in the AIDS response to create a shared voice and vision around gender equality and women’s rights; to bridge movements; to link sectors; and to create channels through which local and global meet as well as the passion of women from around the world to interpret, own, and advance a rights-based response to HIV and AIDS.

ATHENA was delighted to again partner with ALN to deliver three AIDS 2014 edition of Mujeres Adelante. The journal was printed and distributed in hard copy at the conference, with all copies of each edition handed out. It was also sent out through the ATHENA listserv, and widely shared on social media.


Key articles included extensive coverage of the daily dialogue sessions in the WNZ, reporting of research presented in the main conference including on gender-based violence and on harm reduction services for women and interviews with activists and leaders across the women's rights and HIV movement.
Reaching beyond the conference

The International AIDS Conference is a vital space, which is sadly inaccessible to many. Expense, visas and other challenges prevent many from attending, and ATHENA is therefore committed to ensuring the dissemination of information and discussion from the conference as widely as possible. For AIDS 2014, ATHENA used Twitter, as well as our listserv, to share and disseminate key messages, links and information widely through our Network. Twitter provided a great tool to reach also a wider audience, not necessarily part of the HIV movement itself.

Further, thanks to the financial support of UN Women, ATHENA was able to support local partners to develop an effective audiovisual programme at the WNZ – led by a skilled young woman leader who developed a live-stream and video sharing programme to ensure the WNZ programming was available to anyone in the world with an internet connection. The videos remain publically available as a lasting resource, and will also be disseminated through WNZ conference hubs. The videos can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/user/womensnetworkingzone/playlists

This is a particularly valuable step as it ensures that both those who attended the conference but whose schedules did not allow them to participate in the WNZ fully, and the many people who were unable to attend, are able to access the WNZ presentations and debates in future. Further, it ensures that the WNZ space continues to build on past debate and experience as it evolves to its next iteration in Durban.

Social media including Facebook and Twitter were used in preparation for and during the conference to build a wide and diverse social movement around the WNZ. Photos, key messages and other content were widely shared, and the tools were also used by a media working group formed by WNZ volunteers and organising partners to reach out to traditional media.

The WNZ website, http://www.womensnetworkingzone.org/, offers a lasting portal for information and resources around the WNZ. Developed using pre-existing resources and enhanced with additional materials, it is now available as an ongoing tool to be further developed for future Women’s Networking Zones.
Evaluation of the WNZ

Monitoring data was gathered through the use of tools such as audience and presenter surveys, to support an evaluation of the WNZ. This process is ongoing and a full monitoring and evaluation report is being developed by the WNZ partners for publication in September or October 2014. Some highlights from the monitoring data are included below to give an indication of the results.

Feedback from the visitor survey indicated 43% of respondents were visiting the WNZ for the first time in 2014. Asked what they gained from visiting the WNZ, 74% described gaining important insights into issues affecting women living with HIV and 24% gained new tools to use in their work. 72% had a highly positive or positive impression of the WNZ. Comments shared included:

- Environment was appealing, inviting and relaxed. Diverse panel presenting when I walked by. (Female medical professional, Australia)
- It is home to me. (Female activist and NGO worker from Kenya living with HIV)
- At least the WNZ is our platform to raise our issues. (Female activist and researcher from Namibia living with HIV)
- Fantastic to see women in action. (Female medical professional and NGO worker from Australia)
- Eloquent women = strength. (Female medical professional from Australia)
- Great that we have positive women’s support. We must ensure other key partners are involved. (Female NGO worker and activist from Papua New Guinea living with HIV)
Looking forward to Durban

In 2016 the International AIDS Conference heads to Durban, South Africa – and in so doing provides a homecoming for the WNZ. The WNZ will again provide women from across the globe a vital opportunity to convene to share best practices, research and innovation, and to ensure that women’s rights are at the forefront of the HIV response.

"I have found a home in the Women’s Networking Zone since my first International AIDS Conference in Mexico in 2008. It has become a safe place. A place where I can build my skills, share the work led by women in my community. Most dear to my heart, I can be HIV positive without penalty, shame or question. I can connect to women like me from all over all over the world who are HIV positive, advocates and also in need of a safe place. But, I can also connect with women who are HIV negative and there is no difference made. The Women's Networking zone is a terrific space for all women from everywhere to come create change together!!"

Anonymous, ATHENA Network