

# Take the rights path to end AIDS. Quotes from leaders in the global HIV response

UNAIDS World AIDS Day report 2024, “Take the *rights* path to end AIDS”, includes guest essays from ten leaders in the global HIV response. You can read their essays in full in the report and online. In this short summary are some of the highlights from their essays.

## **Elton John:**

I know the feeling of shame and what it can do. As long as HIV is seen as a disease for the “others”, not so-called “decent people”, AIDS will not be beaten. Science, medicine and technology may be the “what” in ending AIDS, but inclusion, empathy and compassion are the “how”.

## **Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland:**

Ensuring that the fullness of human rights is achieved is a practical necessity crucial if we are to rid the world of the scourge of AIDS. Fulfilling the pledge to end AIDS as a public health threat is a political and financial choice. The time to choose the correct path is long overdue.

## **Adeeba Kamarulzaman, former President of the International AIDS Society:**

The evidence is clear. Without protecting everyone’s human rights, we will not be able to end AIDS as a public health threat.

## **The Most Revd Dr Thabo Makgoba, Archbishop of Cape Town:**

Every person is infinitely precious, and so we are called to respect and honour everyone. To treat anyone as less than this is blasphemous—“like spitting in the face of God”. Punitive discriminatory laws, such as those criminalizing LGBTQ+ people, push people away from lifesaving health care, and thus they kill. The path to victory in the HIV response is well marked. That path is marked “human rights”.

**Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights:**

Human rights are the crucial underpinning of public health. Placing human rights at the centre of the HIV response is the only way we will end the pandemic once and for all. Countries must remove punitive and discriminatory criminal laws, actively work to eradicate HIV-related stigma and discrimination, and protect women and girls and people from key populations from violence, harassment and abuse.

**Jeanne Gapiya-Niyonzima, Founder of ANSS, and the first person in Burundi to publicly announce that they were living with HIV:**

My heartbreak as a mother, and my anger at the violations of the rights of people living with HIV, gave rise to my lifetime of involvement in the HIV response. When my baby was diagnosed with HIV, the doctor told me to take him out of the hospital to die at home so that his hospital bed could be freed up for someone who could be saved. Later, another doctor removed my uterus to ensure I could never have another child. In church I challenged the priest who condemned as sinners all who had died of AIDS. I co-founded an NGO to fight for rights. We were the first association in Burundi to integrate the gay community into our work. As a heterosexual woman who has become a public figure, I accept to take risks to protect others, and I have a responsibility to do so. As someone whose human rights have repeatedly been violated, I understand that a human rights violation against anyone is an attack on the rights and health of all of humanity.

**Othoman Mellouk, Access to Diagnostics and Medicines Lead, International Treatment Preparedness Coalition:**

People, regardless of where they live, should never have to depend on the determination of a business to obtain the medicines they need to survive. Just as no one should be obstructed from access to lifesaving medicines because of their sexuality, no one should be excluded because of their nationality.

**Douglas Mendes, Former Belize appeal court judge and Trinidad and Tobago Law Association president:**

Our fundamental rights and freedoms, as outlined in the international human rights framework, are the essential for a healthy society in all regions of the world. When it comes to consenting adults, the state has no business in someone's bedroom, and its being there is harmful.

**Dr Tlaleng Mofokeng, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health:**

When people are denied their right to education, or their right to an adequate standard of living, they are in consequence denied their right to health. The realization of human rights and health depends on maintaining the fires of determination.

**Jerop Limo, Youth activist, Executive Director of the Ambassador for Youth and Adolescent Reproductive Health Programme (AYARHEP):**

My health depends on my rights. That's not a theory—it's my life. As young people, our message is this: our lives are on the line. Policy-makers owe it to all young people to do what it takes to protect our health by protecting our rights.