

Celebrity AIDS Advocates 'a Distraction'

The attendance of celebrity advocates like Bill Clinton, Richard Gere and Bill Gates has led many delegates at the International AIDS Conference to feel marginalised.

The 2006 International AIDS Conference in Toronto is now nearing an end. After a week of discussions, lectures, symposiums, press conferences and vociferous protests, much is being said about the presence of high profile celebrity speakers.

Last week, Stephen Lewis the United Nations Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa said "celebrity leadership is admirable but what is really needed is political leadership".

Clinton and Gates

We have had keynote speeches from Bill Clinton, Bill and Melinda Gates and seminars with the actor Richard Gere, but politicians have been largely conspicuous by their absence. Yesterday, Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland, lamented the absence of European political leaders at the conference.

Scandinavian royal families are here, but not their politicians. It may well be that had they been here the media might have had something else to concentrate on. The real issues may well have come to the fore more often.

It can be said without any doubt that the celebrities have managed to attract attention to the global pandemic that is AIDS. The media are here in their thousands to hear them speak.

However there is a feeling amongst some delegates that the celebrities have also served to distract many commentators and media representatives from assessing the real business of the conference, the need to dramatically scale up the response to AIDS and to deliver on promises already made, especially for vulnerable groups, and children.

Sideshow

It is natural that the media should be attracted to the already famous. Their readers and viewers demand a daily diet of celebrity. But at a conference as globally important as this it should also be remembered that the issues at stake are matters of life and death. Many delegates believe that the real purpose of the conference has become somewhat of a sideshow for the media.

A press conference involving Bill Gates and Steven Lewis was so popular with the press pack that there wasn't room to breath in the confines of the Media Centre. Richard Gere attracted an equally large number.

Frika Chia Iskander, a young woman living with HIV in Indonesia and also a Keynote Speaker at the Opening Ceremony, gave a press conference yesterday, and there were plenty of spare seats. The question is how much does celebrity presence add to the battle against the pandemic, other than to highlight that it is happening? Do we really need an actor to tell the world of a situation that is now in its twenty fifth year?

"Stardust"

One notable critic of the cult of celebrity, as witnessed at this conference, has been Mark Heywood, the Senior Researcher and Head of the AIDS Law Project in South Africa. He was interviewed for Canadian radio this morning and said that the celebrities have been a total distraction and that even the star dust that they sprinkle is absolutely unrelated to the lives of impoverished South Africans living in townships and rural areas and who are struggling to survive in the face of AIDS.

About this article

This article was written by Headliners reporters Ciaran McFarlane, 16, and Lyra McKee, 16, who attended the International AIDS Conference in Toronto and was published on [BBC Blast](#).

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