

THE BIBLE STORY THAT BECAME A CAMPAIGN: THE TAMAR CAMPAIGN IN SOUTH AFRICA (AND BEYOND)

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Introduction

The first time Tamar's story (2 Samuel 13:1-22) was used in a contextual Bible study was in 1996. Every two years the Institute for the Study of the Bible and Worker Ministry Project (ISB&WM) hosts a major workshop which brings together ordinary African Christians from churches, Christian organizations, Bible study groups, and all the projects the ISB&WM is associated with. The purpose of the workshop is to offer an opportunity to reflect theologically on a major issue confronting us in the South African context. After extensive consultation with churches, community organisations, and Bible study groups the theme for the 1996 workshop was chosen. The theme was "Women and the Bible in Southern Africa". The workshop was held at the Koinonia Conference Centre in Botha's Hill (near Pietermaritzburg) from the 23-27 September 1996. More than ninety women from all over the country attended; there were also guests from Kenya, Brazil, Malawi, Swaziland, and Lesotho.

The emphasis in the workshop, as in all the work of the ISB&WM, is on the voices of ordinary poor, working-class, and marginalised African Christians. Each participant is therefore encouraged to use their own language to express themselves; the workshop therefore took place using three languages: Zulu, Sotho, and English. In the workshop the ISB&WM also attempts to create a "safe space" where grassroots communities can speak for themselves (see West 2003 reprint).

The workshop was divided into three sub-themes: Women and Culture, Women and Violence, and Women and the Church. The theme for the third day was Women and Violence. The day started with devotions led by the Lesotho Women's Group. They read from 2 Samuel 13:12-18 and related the story to their own context. They emphasised that the laws of both the country and the church grant men all the privileges to prosecute, divorce, and excommunicate.

The devotion was followed by a Bible study based on the same passage, 2 Samuel 13:1-22, the rape of Tamar. The Bible study was facilitated by Gerald West and Gloria Plaatjie. The following questions were used to begin the Bible study.

1. What is the text about?
2. Who are the male characters and what is the role of each of them in the rape of Tamar?
3. What is Tamar's response throughout the story?
4. Where is God in this story?

There was plenty of discussion in plenary. In response to Question 1 the participants said that the text was about: domestic violence, the cunningness of men, guilt, power, the silencing of women, and the loss of dignity. When discussing Question 2 the plenary analysed the role that each male had played in the rape of Tamar. It was recognized that the actions of Jonadab, David, and the servant had made the rape possible. Amnon was the rapist, but the others were accomplices. Absalom's role was more ambiguous, he had given his sister a home, but he had also told her to be silent about the rape. When the plenary discussed Question 3 they noted that Tamar was an articulate, strong woman. She had argued and pleaded with her brother

Amnon, she had refused to be silent. The plenary felt that even though God was not directly mentioned in the text, that God had been with Tamar and that God would judge David, Amnon, and Jonadab. In the story, some said, God showed the weakness of men.

Following the plenary discussion, participants went back into small groups to discuss a range of other questions. The questions were:

5. In your own words retell the story of Tamar.
6. What effect or impact does the story of Tamar have on you as a Southern African woman?
7. How do society and the church react to a raped victim?
8. The media, NGOs, women's groups, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are advocating that women should break the culture of silence about violence against them. Do you find the legal system, the police, courts, hospitals, etc helpful when reporting a rape?
9. What message does the story of Tamar have for us?
10. In what way does the story of Tamar empower us?

Groups were able to choose the questions that they discussed. Women felt that the story of Tamar was empowering because it was a story in the Bible and therefore could be used in the church and community to break the silence surrounding rape and abuse. We must accept abuse as a reality, they said, and learn to listen to those who claim to have been abused, particularly our children. Women also felt that much more could be done by the legal system, police, hospitals, etc to support and protect women.

Because the ISB&WM realised that the Bible study would be a traumatic experience for many of the participants, they arranged for counsellors to be available. So after the Bible study Bev Haddad and Nhlanhla Mkhize from the Psychology Department at the University of Natal were available for counselling. Many women made use of this opportunity.

Later in the day there was a panel discussion which addressed the question of "Women's Rights and the New Constitution". Phumelele Ntombela-Nzimande from Natal Midlands Women's Coalition gave the historical background and subsequent developments of women's struggles in South Africa from as early as the 1950's to the present. She defined equality, challenged women to bring to life the Women's Charter, and encouraged women to support those women who were in prominent positions. Futhi Zikalala from the Centre of Criminal Justice at the University of Natal asserted that women must begin to question culture and religion. She challenged the inclusion of 'culture' in the South African constitution. Culture, she said, is the crystallisation of the opinions of those who oppress, those who advise, and those who just watch quietly. She urged that women organise themselves into support groups.

Motlalepule Chabaku, Speaker of the Free State Parliament, argued that nobody is an expert on life. She reminded participants that God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Women, she said, should not strive to be like men, but should aim for higher standards. Women should be willing, she argued, to acknowledge their ignorance and limitations, and then seek after knowledge. She contended for the non-sexism of African Languages, the need to liberate the (English) Bible from sexist language and interpretations, and the need for women to have faith, courage and relentlessness.

The evening's devotions were conducted by the House of Studies for Worker Ministry. They read from Esther 4:13-16 and highlighted how women were exploited as objects of the king's sexual passions. They urged other women not to think of their own safety and comfort first, but to be willing to die for their neighbours.

This brief summary of day three of the Workshop shows how directly the story of Tamar relates to our South African context. The reverberations of Tamar's story have not stopped; she refuses to be silent.

A typical contextual Bible study on 2 Samuel 13:1-22

In workshops on the theme of violence against women, we in the ISB&WM usually work with 2 Samuel 13:1-22, a neglected and marginalised text which is found in few lectionaries and seldom publicly read (and never on a Sunday). Having made sure that counselors are available we work with the following framework.

2 Samuel 13:1-22 is read aloud to the group as a whole. After the text has been read a series of questions follow.

1. Read 2 Samuel 13:1-22 together again in small groups. Share with each other what you think the text is about.

Each small group is then asked to report back to the larger group. Each and every response to question one is summarized on newsprint. After the report back, the participants return to their small groups to discuss the following questions.

2. Who are the main characters in this story and what do we know about them?

3. What is the role of each of the male characters in the rape of Tamar?

4. How does Tamar respond throughout the story?

When the small groups have finished their discussion, and this takes considerable time, each group is invited to present a summary of their discussion. This is done in a variety of ways; if there is time, each group is asked to report on each question, but if time is a constraint then each group is asked to report on only one question. The full report, which the scribe of the group puts up on newsprint, is then displayed for everyone to read at some other time. The report backs can also be presented more creatively, by way of drama, poetry or song.

After this report back the smaller groups reconvene and discuss the following questions.

5. Are there women like Tamar in your church and/or community? Tell their story.

6. What is the theology of women who have been raped?

7. What resources are there in your area for survivors of rape?

Once again, the small groups present their report back to the plenary group. Creativity is particularly vital here, as often women find it difficult or are unable to articulate their responses. A drama or a drawing may be the only way in which some groups can report.

Finally, each small group comes together to formulate an action plan.

8. What will you now do in response to this Bible study?

The action plan is either reported to the plenary or presented on newsprint for other participants to study after the Bible study.

In our experience the effects of this Bible study are substantial. Women are amazed that such a text exists, are angry that they have never heard it read or preached, are relieved to discover that they are not alone, are empowered because the silence has been broken and their stories have been told. As one woman said, "If such a text exists in the Bible, how can we be silent about these things in the church?" How indeed!

The initial, opening question generates a host of responses as 'readers' share their early impressions of this seldom read text. Ordinary 'readers', whether literate or not, readily

engage with questions 2, 3 and 4, returning to the text again and again to find out as much as they can about each of the characters, missing nothing. They note the way in which Jonadab, a relative of Amnon's, attempts to draw himself nearer to the potential heir to the throne of David by identifying his restrained lust. Reminding Amnon that he is indeed "son of the king" (13:4) and thereby implying that he should have whatever he wants, Jonadab provides a plan for the rape of Tamar. The slow pace of the story, with the graphic description of the plan and then its execution, are also picked by ordinary 'readers' as they delve into 13:5-11. David, it seems to them, is somewhat irresponsible, unable to detect that Amnon's request is a ruse (13:6), and so he sends Tamar to be raped (13:7). (Some readers remember the earlier stories in 2 Samuel and comment on how often damage is done when David "sends".) Whatever restraint Amnon may have had now collapses as he premeditates the rape of his sister (13:9-14). Women 'readers', in particular, applaud the clear and careful way in which Tamar approaches her task and her defense. She trusts her brother and willingly serves him while he is sick; and even when she finds herself trapped, she argues articulately with him. First, she says a clear "No" (13:12), which should be enough. Second, she reminds him that he is her "brother" (13:12). Third, she makes it clear that she is not a willing participant and so names what he is doing, "forcing" her (13:12). Fourth, she reminds him of their cultural heritage and communal values, "for such a thing is not done in Israel" (13:12). Fifth, she declares his intentions to be vile and evil (13:12). Sixth, she appeals to what she hopes is some recognition of her situation, reminding him of the consequences of his actions for her (13:13). Seventh, she then turns the question on him, asking what the consequences of such an act on him will be (13:13). Eighth, she offers him a way out, at considerable cost to herself, suggesting that he speak to the king about marrying her (13:13). Alas, even this most articulate of all biblical women is not listened to, "and being stronger than she, he forced her and raped her" (13:14).

And even after the rape she does not remain silent, arguing with Amnon again, this time urging him not to abandon her to the consequences of rape on her own (13:16). But the male ego again refuses to hear, and she is forcefully (again) removed (13:16-17).

Tamar's public acknowledgment of the rape (13:19) is met with mixed reactions by women 'readers' as they both applaud her decision 'to go public' and worry at the cost of such a public statement in a patriarchal society. They find some comfort in Absalom's offer of sanctuary, but reject his silencing of her (13:20). Finally, they are appalled by David's empty anger, and his impulse to protect his son (13:21).

Clearly, each of the male characters, whether it be David, Amnon, Jonadab, the servants, or Absalom, plays a role in the rape of Tamar, though their roles are different. This is how many men it takes to rape a woman!

The point of view of the narrator is interesting, with most 'readers' commenting that this 'male character' (presuming the narrator to be a male) is surprisingly sympathetic to the concerns of women. They are grateful that he names rape for what it is: a violent assault on a woman (13:14). They are amazed by how articulate Tamar is and find many of her arguments convincing. They especially like the fact that she finds aspects of her cultural and religious heritage potentially liberating, even if they are often used to oppress and dominate. Most of all they are astounded that such a text exists in the Bible, for they find it a remarkable resource with which to raise and discuss rape in their own contexts.

Questions 5, 6, and 7 provide plenty of opportunity for precisely such discussions, with many women finding "sacred space" to share the unshareable. They quickly discover that they are not alone, and soon the 'David's', 'Amnons', 'Jonadabs', 'servants', and 'Absaloms' in their own experiences are named. Clearly professional counseling is required in many such situations, and it is irresponsible to proceed without it.

Question 8 provides an opportunity ‘to do something about it’, and groups come up with wonderfully creative actions plans, whether to compose a liturgy for their local church or to challenge the local police station to provide resources for the survivors of rape.

Implicit in the Bible study as outlined above are all the elements of the contextual Bible study process (West 1993, 2000). The Bible study begins and ends with what can be called “community consciousness” questions. Questions 1, 5, 6, 7, and 8 draw on the readings and resources of the local community group. By using small groups and writing up all responses the contributions of all participants are affirmed. Habitually, responses to question 1 elicit the public transcript; participants offer interpretations they have received and which they feel are safe to proclaim publicly. They know what they are expected to believe about the Bible. However, there are usually some responses which are more ambiguous and which potentially provide space for more authentic interpretations – interpretations that articulate something of their experiential/ ‘working’ theologies. If the group becomes a safe place, if there are resources to articulate what is often incipient and inchoate, and if there are resonance with others in the group, then gradually elements of ‘working’, ‘lived’ faith may be more overtly and vigorously voiced and owned.

Clustered in between the community consciousness questions are a series of what might be called “critical consciousness” questions. These questions are the contribution of the socially engaged biblical scholar, and provide resources for repeated returns to the text and more careful and close ‘reading’. In this example, the critical consciousness questions draw on literary modes of interpretation, posing questions about characters, plot, setting, etc. Such structured and systematic questions are not usually in the repertoire of ordinary ‘readers’, though once asked, the questions are readily grasped and appropriated. The advantage of using questions which draw on literary modes of interpretation is that they do not require any input from the socially engaged biblical scholar (‘the expert’). The questions are contribution enough, and ordinary ‘readers’ make of them what they will. However, in many instances ordinary ‘readers’ want access to resources that are only available to the ‘trained’ reader. So, for example, participants may want to know the significance of Tamar tearing her clothing. In such cases, the socially engaged biblical scholar may offer socio-historical resources in response to this question, choosing to do this, preferably and where possible, by drawing on parallels in the participants’ own socio-historical context.

In our experience literary-type questions almost always lead into socio-historical-type questions; this is important, because it indicates the need ordinary ‘readers’ have to locate faith in real concrete contexts. But by beginning with literary-type questions and by allowing socio-historical-type questions to emerge from the participants, the powerful presence of the biblical scholar is held in check. Equally importantly, by waiting for the questions to arise from the participants, we can be sure that we are answering questions of interest to them rather than questions of interest to us biblical scholars (on which the industry of biblical scholarship is based).

Critical consciousness questions facilitate a more careful and close reading of the text than is usually the case among ordinary ‘readers’. They give the text a voice, and in so doing open up potential lines of connection with faith trajectories in the biblical tradition that have been neglected or suppressed. Women discover, to return to our example, that they are not alone, that their terror can be found in the Bible, and while this “text of terror” (Trible 1984) perhaps offers little comfort, it does at least acknowledge the reality of their experience.

The concluding community consciousness questions (5, 6, 7, and 8) ground the Bible study firmly in the life of the participants. In responding to these questions, community consciousness and critical consciousness fuse and fashion faith interpretations (Patte 1995) that make sense and which are an expression of the ‘lived’, ‘working’ theologies of ordinary believers. Whether or how these incipient and inchoate faith interpretations are articulated

depends on how safe the contextual Bible study process is. In safe places women who have been touched by Tamar tell their stories, help and hold the pain of their sisters, and plan for the transformation of their churches and communities. Unfortunately, not all Bible study groups are safe, and so some women may remain silent, waiting still. But the potential is there, implicit within the contextual Bible study process and this text for the articulation, owning, and acting out of those interpretations and theologies that ordinary 'readers' of the Bible live by.

The beginning of the Tamar Campaign

Since that workshop in 1996 we have continued to use the text of 2 Samuel 13:1-22 in contextual Bible studies. Contextual Bible study is a form of Bible study in which ordinary people are given the opportunity to speak for themselves about how they hear God speaking to them through the Bible. Biblically trained scholars enter into a partnership with ordinary (often illiterate or semi-literate) Bible 'readers', each bringing their resources to a contextual interpretation of the Bible (see West 1993, 2000). Because our context continues to be shaped by violence against women and children, we have continued to use the story of Tamar in our contextual Bible studies.

Bible studies on this text are a common feature of the work of the Women and Gender Programme of the ISB&WM. At the end of the 1996 workshop the ISB&WM was challenged to appoint someone who would work alongside women, so we began immediately to raise funds. Towards the end of 1998 we were able to appoint Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela as the Coordinator of our Women and Gender Programme. Since her appointment Tamar's story has been used in many Bible studies to create space for women (and men) to break the silence about abuse in many varied contexts.

One of the sites in which we used this Bible study was the Uniting Reformed Church in Hammarsdale, a semi-rural community near Pietermaritzburg. The ISB&WM was invited to conduct a two-day workshop with young people and the lay leaders of this church in 1999. Staff from the ISB&WM, including Gerald West and Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela (and some visitors from Dan Church Aid), facilitated a Bible study on the first day using the story of Tamar. Violence against women and children was one of the contextual concerns among church members. There was large number of young people present, particularly young women. We were also fortunate to have the minister of the congregation with us, and he joined us in the contextual Bible study.

We divided the local participants into small groups on the basis of age and gender. So we had a group for older men (including the minister), a group for older women, a group for young men, and two groups for young women. Our visitors from Dan Church Aid were placed in group on their own. While the participants worked together in small groups on the Bible study questions (similar to those above and below), the ISB&WM staff observed and enabled the process of mutual sharing to take place.

When it came to the report back from groups, each group's representative gave a summary of what the group had discussed. This took place for each of the questions, including question 8: "What will you now do in response to this Bible study?" This question helps groups to formulate an action plan, assisting them to move beyond the Bible study into their actual context. Each group reported what they had planned, and there were many exciting and challenging ideas. However, when we tried to conclude the workshop, one of the groups interrupted us and insisted that there was still one small group to report. We checked, but it seemed to us that we had covered all the groups. No, we were told, all the groups had not reported, for the group of ISB&WM staff had not reported on their action plan. Initially we thought they were joking with us, but they were serious. We then pointed out that our action plan was to do contextual Bible studies when churches and communities invited us to work

with them. No, we were told, this is not what they meant. They wanted to know what specifically we planned to do in response to this particular Bible study!

When we realised how serious this group of young women were, we met together and gave serious thought to their challenging question. The result is the Tamar Campaign! We committed ourselves there and then to initiating a regional (and perhaps national) campaign in which we would commemorate Tamar and her story.

The rest is history, as they say. We launched the Tamar Campaign the very next year, in 2000, with the aim of encouraging the churches to speak out against violence against women and children and with the related aim of supporting survivors of violence.

The Tamar Campaign

Like any birth, we had great dreams, but the practicality of getting it all started was not as easy as we thought. The demands of the young people who had challenged us were still ringing in our ears. We first had to decide exactly what the aims of a campaign like this would be. We also knew very well that most churches saw the issue of gender violence as something that belonged in the private sphere as opposed to being openly discussed by either churches or communities. We felt the 16 days of activism on no violence against women, November 25 to December 10, was a perfect opportunity to launch this campaign. Three women, Futhi Ntshingila, who is now a journalist, Sarojini Nadar, the Coordinator of International Network for Advanced Theological Education, and the Coordinator of the ISB&WM's Women and Gender Programme, Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela worked together to produce the first resources of the campaign. We enlisted the help of a poster designer to portray the message of pain and suffering which we as the church and society have chosen to hide or ignore.

We decided that we wanted churches to openly speak out against abuse. We had learnt from previous workshops that the church responded with unhelpful suggestions to survivors of abuse. Women are usually encouraged to pray for their abusive partners or to persevere in the abusive relationship. More often than not it was the woman's faith that was questioned instead of the abuser being confronted.

We also realized that texts which dealt with the issue of abuse are not popular in churches. They are not read or used for sermons. We felt it was important for these texts to be read publicly. We knew from experience that these texts encouraged women to share their own stories of pain, and only then can they be referred to places where they could get help.

A common understanding of abuse was that it was primarily physical. We felt it was important for women to be aware of the other dimensions of abuse, including sexual, economic, verbal, psychological and spiritual dimensions. Our cultures and religion clearly provide a setting for all these forms of abuse to take place without being reported or challenged. Most women have accepted this as their lot, believing this is how God has ordered the world! Some women believe the other kinds of abuse are not as bad as physical abuse!

We therefore believed it was important for ministers to use the pulpit to challenge the notion of accepting abuse as part of life. We felt it was fair to ask them to use the Sundays of the sixteen days of activism for sermons on gender violence, its causes and consequences. While we received a lot of support from those churches and leaders who had been exposed to a Bible Study on Tamar's story, those who had not encountered Tamar and her story were reluctant to take this campaign seriously.

With the assistance of colleagues with computer skills we managed to design the initial resources, which were posters and pamphlets. In 2001 we also published a newspaper that had different articles on violence against women. This was edited by Beverly Haddad, the Gender worker at the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA). We are proud to say this newspaper was distributed to many churches and organizations as an insert in *Challenge* magazine, a prophetic South African ecumenical magazine.

Initially we committed ourselves to making this an interfaith campaign. This proved to be difficult because the Bible was our main resource, though we did try to get other faith communities to identify texts in their sacred texts that might be useful. We invited as many human rights organizations as possible to join us, especially those that were committed to the emancipation of women. The response was not as widespread as we would have hoped, demonstrating just how difficult it is to tackle gender issues in our context. Eventually we were joined by a few faith based organizations who committed themselves to the dissemination of the material in churches and communities. These organizations also contributed financially as we then had limited funds for the Campaign within the ISB&WM. The staff of all the committed organizations used every available opportunity to promote the Campaign.

Learn with Echo, which is a project of the University of KwaZulu-Natal that specializes in the production of material for adult learners, wrote an excellent article on the Campaign, incorporating material from our documentation. This article formed part of an insert in one of the most widely read local newspapers, the *Natal Witness*. We also managed to secure a slot with the isiZulu Radio Station (*UKhozi*) which reaches millions of people in our country. From these sources we received many telephone calls from people who needed help and we were invited to places which we had never thought would be open to the Campaign, like clinics and nursing colleges.

Shaped by the needs of communities

The issue of HIV and AIDS kept coming up each time we facilitated workshops on gender violence. One woman asked, "What would have happened if Amnon had also infected Tamar with HIV?" This was then a burning issue at the time as our government was struggling with the rights of women who are raped and infected by their rapists. Another burning issue was raised by women who claimed that no matter how informed and empowered they are, if their partners do not understand the realities of gender violence and HIV and AIDS then their lives are not any better. At the beginning of 2002 we therefore introduced men and gender work and we also added the link between gender violence and HIV and AIDS.

At this point, we realized that we had to redesign the poster and pamphlets to incorporate the way in which the Campaign was being shaped by our local contexts. With the help of a feminist artist, Dina Cormick, we managed to produce a poster that incorporates all the different issues that we seek to address with this Campaign. The new posters are brighter and more explicit. Young people particularly have found them more challenging and easier to understand. Indeed, the poster on its own can be used as a tool for discussion. We were able to make all these innovations thanks to substantial funding from the Australian Agency for International Development's Addressing Gender Violence Fund over a period of three years.

We use a range of different methodologies to achieve the Campaign's aims. Though our basic approach is contextual Bible study, sometimes there just is not enough time or an appropriate opportunity to facilitate a workshop or Bible Study, and so we have learnt to be flexible and use whatever amount of time there is and whatever resources are available. For example, at the beginning of 2004, in collaboration with PACSA, we invited a group of performers to perform their powerful stage play on rape, *Tsapeng: the third testament*. This is a remarkable play, based on an actual case of child rape. It has a profoundly powerful

message of pain and hope with amazing Christologies and images of God. This was attended by activists, church leaders, young men and women. The discussion which was held afterwards was engaged and moving. Community members and church leaders committed themselves to being proactive and to raise the alarm if children and women are raped.

We also use invitations concerning other contextual issues to raise the issues of the Campaign. Within our work in the ISB&WM we do considerable work in the area of economic justice, providing resources, including Bible studies, which contribute to building a basic economic literacy. We often use these opportunities to introduce the Campaign. Because the Campaign addresses issues which are a growing problem in our communities, it usually is received very well. People are always shocked and disappointed to find that there are texts that are hardly ever read in our churches. When we ask groups to write down their plans of action after workshops, one of their goals is to challenge their leaders to read the texts which we use for the Campaign.

The posters and pamphlets have been distributed at every opportunity. This has resulted in a greater awareness in all the sectors of our society and beyond. While attending a conference in Zimbabwe for church leaders who are infected/personally affected by HIV and AIDS, our Women and Gender Coordinator, Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela, was given an opportunity to speak, and the Tamar Campaign was one of the things she talked about. This resulted in her being invited to run the Campaign in Zambia, and so the following year she went there at the invitation of Aglow Zambia, a women's organisation, to launch the Tamar Campaign in Zambia. Wonderfully, the Campaign was not only recognized as a powerful tool by church leaders in Zambia but also received support from government departments.

Conclusion

This campaign has changed many people's lives; Tamar's protest has given many women a voice. Young men have been infuriated by the actions of the many men in the story who are accomplices in the rape of Tamar. This has encouraged them to promote a different culture of respect and protecting their loved ones. Church leaders have used this text as a tool to encourage a spirit of openness within churches. These issues were for a long time seen as taboo and had no place within the church. Just like during the apartheid years, it took a long time for the church to exercise its prophetic authority. The increase in the number of children and women who are raped has forced the church to recover its prophetic voice and Tamar's story has provided important resources and has build capacity for doing this. *Aluta continua*, the struggle does indeed continue, but we can win the battle against gender violence and the spread of HIV and AIDS, if we work together.

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