

## Profile

### Robin Gorna takes the helm at the International AIDS Society



Robin Gorna is the newly appointed Executive Director of the International AIDS Society (IAS), the leading independent association of HIV professionals (listen to webaudio for an interview with Gorna). Her involvement with AIDS is longstanding. While studying theology at the University of Oxford in the mid-1980s, a close friend, who was a gay man, died in a car crash. At that time—the start of the UK's HIV epidemic—prejudice was high. After her friend's death Gorna went to see *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer's political play about AIDS, and around this time the Terrence Higgins Trust were seeking volunteers. She signed up. Gorna's willingness to embrace this issue was perhaps unsurprising. Ideas about social justice had shaped her upbringing; her mother was involved in race and community development and her step-father worked for racial equality. "That moment connected all of the issues that mattered to me—social justice and homophobia with the outbreak of HIV", she says.

From 1987, Gorna was working full-time on AIDS projects: as Director of health promotion for the Terrence Higgins Trust, in local government, and at the European Commission, alongside writing and taking part in other AIDS projects. During this time she was one of the first voices to highlight how women were in the HIV frontline, notably in her 1996 book *Vamps, Virgins and Victims: How Can Women Fight AIDS?* In 1998, she moved to Sydney, Australia, to become Executive Director of the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO) and her collaboration with IAS began when she became Community Co-chair of the 12th World AIDS Conference in Geneva. David Cooper, Director of Australia's National Centre for Epidemiology and Clinical Research, worked with Gorna for about 3 years to organise the meeting. "She was always committed, thoughtful, and insightful about the role of community. During the regular planning meetings for the conference, we all watched with delight the progress of Robin's pregnancy such that by the intensive marathon meeting in April, 1998, at which the programme is set, Robin was breastfeeding twins during the important planning sessions. There was something really collegial about this group dynamics that I think contributed to the success of the meeting", Cooper recalls.

After a career break to raise her children, Gorna joined the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) as head of the Global Policy Team on AIDS: "At AFAO, I learnt the power of government in Australia and saw what government could achieve. But I wanted to see what government can do from the inside rather than the outside; hence the move to DFID." There, Gorna led many policy processes, including delivering the first UK Government strategy on AIDS in developing countries and securing international agreement to universal access to treatment, first at the G8 in Gleneagles

and then through the United Nations. "She was a force behind ensuring 'the three ones'—a landmark agreement to better scale up the National AIDS responses—was a reality for international partners. She was one of the most instrumental people in solidifying the UK-US relationship on HIV/AIDS both at headquarters and on the ground", says Mark Dybul, former US Global AIDS Coordinator.

Gorna is committed to evidence informing policy and programming. She is currently based in South Africa as DFID's Senior Regional Health and AIDS Adviser, and although she realises what it takes to transfer knowledge into practice, she is frustrated by inefficiencies that hinder progress. Gorna cites examples such as HIV and tuberculosis services not being integrated or antenatal clinics not being merged with services that prevent mother to child transmission of HIV. "We need to put people at the centre of our response, we need to look from the perspective of the user of the services and not from the provider and what they assume donors want people to do with their money", she explains.

For Gorna the current debate on strengthening of health systems versus strengthening the HIV/AIDS response is a false one. She is troubled by the competition between Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 4, 5, and 6, and how HIV/AIDS is a lightning rod for other issues. "Here in southern Africa, a woman living with HIV might be repeatedly pregnant and at risk of dying during childbirth. She may well have HIV because she can't get contraception, which is why she is repeatedly pregnant and her child may die of malaria. The idea that you have these different health MDGs and these are different people with different issues seems to be deeply false." Gorna insists there is a need for dedicated work on HIV because the issues are not only about health: "They are about social concerns, education, the work place and economic issues, and discrimination. I think we risk getting ourselves boxed into unhelpful debates here. We need to think about what health systems are for and be nuanced about it."

Gorna joins IAS mid-way through a strategic consultation about its role. "Understanding how IAS's membership can be best served and how we can add value to the other partners of the global health architecture will be critical", she says. Dybul adds, "Robin will bring to IAS an openness of spirit, a strong knowledge base mixed with a hunger to know more, an incomparable ability to listen to and work with others, and a fierce spirit of advocacy, human rights, and responsibility to act. She combines strong advocacy with policy making...And she has a great sense of humour—a very important characteristic in this line of work."

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