FEMINISTS AGAINST AIDS

Teaching young women self-respect is key to the fight against HIV.
To mark World Aids Day, Hollywood powerhouse Salma Hayek Pinault met the mothers changing lives in South Africa.
By Sasha Slater.
Photographs by Hazel Thompson
Hayek Pinault with Gabi Mokoena from Phola Township, South Africa, who is HIV positive but, through mothers2mothers, gave birth to a daughter who is HIV negative.
It would be very easy for Salma Hayek Pinault to spend her life lounging on silk cushions dipping a spoon into a big bowl of caviar every now and then. Professionally, after all, the Oscar-nominated actress and owner of her own production company has nothing left to prove. It’s safe to assume that home life, as the wife of the billionaire mogul François-Henri Pinault, is at the gilded end of the spectrum. And since Pinault, CEO of Kering, controls fashion brands including Gucci, Bottega Veneta, Alexander McQueen and Saint Laurent, her wardrobe must be a shifting kaleidoscope of the world’s most-wanted clothes.

But Hayek Pinault is not one to while away the days on a sun lounger by the pool. In fact, when I catch up with her on the phone from LA, two weeks after her visit with a charity to South Africa, I am astonished both by her energy and her forthright feminist approach to solving the big problems of today. ‘The world is in such a bad state,’ she tells me in her Mexican-inflected English. ‘Everybody’s going round looking for solutions. But history tells us that we keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. The thing is, we’re run by men and they think in a specific way. They’re wired in one way. I have always believed that the great future of the world is in the hands of women.’ And not in the hands of any women, but specifically, mothers.

The visit to Africa was with the charity mothers2mothers, which has spent the past 15 years combating the spread of HIV from women to their children. Its secret weapon is harnessing the power of those who already have HIV as mentors to teach other HIV-positive women how to avoid passing the virus on to their own children.

By any measure, it has been a huge success. As Emma France, global development and strategic engagement director at the charity, says, ‘Infant pandemic rates are staggeringly down. When we started, around 1,500-1,600 babies were infected with HIV globally every day - and I think now that number is 300.’ A baby with HIV who doesn’t receive treatment has a 50 per cent chance of dying before the age of two.

‘I started doing the maths,’ says Hayek Pinault. ‘I asked the Mentor Mothers, “How many lives have you saved?” And they’d never thought about the question like that. But when we worked it out, each one of them has saved more than 1,000 children’s lives.’

That’s a heartening story. But as Hayek Pinault points out, there’s no room for complacency where HIV and Aids are concerned. ‘At one point, remember, everyone thought it was under control, and everybody relaxed! Ninety-eight per cent of infants leave the preventative mothers2mothers programme free of HIV. The new tragedy is the children who grow up free of the virus, only to contract it as teenagers. Among adolescent girls around the world, the numbers are skyrocketing, with 6,500 becoming infected every week.

In Africa, France puts the rise down to the girls not being valued, not staying in schools, not having the power, even, to make a man wear a condom. Some turn to prostitution either to earn money to stay in school or to feed their siblings, or simply to stave off destitution. Mentors who work with these girls are HIV-positive women from their own communities. Who better to educate and support the teenagers? There are 1,600 Mentor Mothers working for the NGO in seven African countries. ‘In Malawi,’ says France, ‘there’s one

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**HIV Infection Around the World**

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<th>Prevalence (average %) by region</th>
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<tr>
<td>0.1 (Eastern Mediterranean)</td>
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<tr>
<td>0.3 (South-East Asia)</td>
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<td>0.5 (Americas)</td>
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<td>0.2 (Western Pacific)</td>
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<td>0.4 (Europe)</td>
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<td>4.2 (Africa)</td>
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Below Hayek Pinault talks with Mentor Mothers working in Phola Township. Bottom Mokoena has her mid-arm circumference measured by Mentor Mother Thobile Mdluli as part of a routine health check to test for malnutrition or obesity.
Since the start of the epidemic in 1981, an estimated 78 million people have become infected with HIV and 35 million people have died of Aids-related illnesses.

In 2016, an estimated 36.7 million people were living with HIV and one million people died of Aids-related illnesses.

There were roughly 1.8 million new HIV infections in 2016 – a decline from 2.1 million new infections in 2015.

It is estimated that 1.8 million children are living with HIV, most of whom were infected by their HIV-positive mothers during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding.

More than half of all people living with HIV (53 per cent) now have access to life-saving treatment.

Source: avert.org

HIV AND AIDS BY NUMBERS

Below Nhlanhla Vanessa Motha from Ackerville Township, South Africa, talks to Hayek Pinault about becoming a Mother Mentor.

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The concept of mentoring is what gives the charity its unique perspective and makes it so effective. Hayek Pinault too has had mentors, and powerful ones, of her own. Some under the radar, others, such as Jane Fonda, rather more out there. ‘And I tell you another of my mentors,’ she continues with energy. ‘A friend for more than 20 years is Ashley Judd. We’ve done a lot of this work together and that’s what’s kept our friendship so close. We’re empathes. We know what it is like to wake up in the middle of the night crying because of a situation in another country, and it’s not easy to be like that. We’re still very close and she still inspires me. She’s someone I can really talk to, and she’ll understand everything I’m going through and everything I’m saying.’

Hayek Pinault’s crusade is, as she says, about women’s empowerment and, of course, Judd was one of the first Hollywood stars to raise her head above the parapet and identify Harvey Weinstein as a predatory sex abuser. ‘There are huge cultural problems,’ she says. ‘We have them here too... look at our own culture – it’s not just in the developing world.’

Kering is conspicuous for the pioneering work of its two foundations: Kering Foundation and Chime For Change, a Gucci initiative. These days, it’s not enough for a company to employ talented designers and make beautiful things: ‘Luxury has to become something that’s making life better for everyone,’ says Hayek Pinault. ‘It’s time to redefine luxury as something that works with the environment and supports women.’ And that makes good business sense too, since 80 per cent of Kering’s customers are, of course, women.

‘I came back,’ Hayek Pinault says, ‘with a lot more energy than I had when I went. There are all these people who wake up in the morning, and go out there and try to find the joy. One thing I can tell you about the South Africans, they do it with joy. When you’re going on these trips people say, “You’re gonna get infected with Aids,” but that’s not true. You’re going to get infected with life.’

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