

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 silken 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 sunlounger 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?

'We're run by men, who think in a specific way. They're wired one way'

There are 1,600 Mentor Mothers working for the NGO in seven African countries. 'In Malawi,' says France, 'there's one

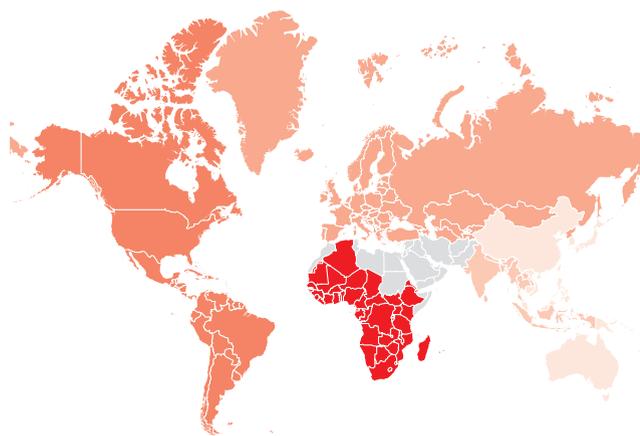
Below Hayek Pinault talks with Mentor Mothers working in Phola Township. **Bottom** Mokoena has her mid-arm circumference measured by Mentor Mother Thobile Mdluli as part of a routine health check to test for malnutrition or obesity



HIV INFECTION AROUND THE WORLD*

Prevalence (average %) by region

- 0.1(Eastern Mediterranean) 0.3(South-East Asia) 0.5(Americas)
- 0.2(Western Pacific) 0.4(Europe) 4.2(Africa)



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

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

doctor for every 30,000 people, and yet there will be one nurse and five or six Mentor Mothers in a clinic. The nurses in South Africa told me and Salma they'd rather lose a limb than lose their Mentor Mothers.'

So how are the mentors incentivised to do the work? 'We pay them,' says France. 'Their HIV state becomes a way of raising their status and they go from being incredibly vulnerable, not having a place in society, to feeling empowered.' The charity insists that the women have their own bank accounts: 'Husbands would say, "Oh, you can just pay the money to me." But we would insist and so, for the first time, the women were actually in control of their own money. One of our mentors was the first to have a water source in her village – she paid for her own borehole. One was the first person in her family to own a house. Another learned to drive. The critical thing is that they're not settling for what they have any more. They have different dreams for their daughters.'

Hayek Pinault took along her own 10-year-old daughter, Valentina, to South Africa with her, as well as her teenage stepdaughter Mathilde. 'Yeah, my daughter was there,' she says. 'We put her to work, participating in all kinds of dances and games and clapping, helping to stimulate the young children's development. My stepdaughter did interviews with other teenagers. They know that this kind of work is part of my life. A very important part of my life. My kids have seen many different kinds of life and they're eager to learn, and also pretty cool about it. They jump in and fit in.'

Was she shocked by the poverty she and the girls saw? 'No, baby, no, no. Not with mothers2mothers. I've been doing this for 25 years. I've worked in Sierra Leone. Actually, I was really inspired by South Africa and the spirit

'There's a lot of poverty, but these women are warriors on a mission'

of the country. There's so much hope and strength. Yes, there's a lot of poverty and there are a lot of problems, but that group of women said, "We're going to come out of it." These women are warriors, and they're on a mission to save lives and to make those lives better. I felt at home with each one of them and I'm sincerely interested. I don't come with pity – I find that incredibly disrespectful. I enjoy this work and I was so grateful to the mentors and clients and everybody I met who gave me this window into their life, into their house, who let me in.'

Focusing on the essential difference between the sexes, Hayek Pinault continues, 'When there's a conflict, we want to talk about a problem and solve it. Men, they want to fight. That's what I mean by female wiring. We're here to give life, to preserve life and to continue life.'

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 empathic. 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*.'

m2m.org

