I am one of 7 million young people living with HIV. Here’s what I need you to understand.

The number of young people living with HIV is increasing. This is a call to action!

I am one of 7 million young people living with HIV.
I am one of 2 million children infected at birth or in infancy.
I am one of 5 million young people who contracted HIV at a young age, either through drug use or sex.

There are many of us – toddlers, small children, teenagers with desires and aspirations same as any other – who still don’t know that we are living with HIV.

In sub-Saharan Africa, I am most likely to be a young woman and in Eastern Europe I am probably a person who has used drugs. In Asia, there are many like me. In the Middle East, we are only a handful.

30 years into the HIV response, I face stigma and discrimination on a daily basis: people still fear me because of the virus in my body.

I am not part of a homogenous, empowered ‘Youth Movement’. YPLHIV are sex workers, people who use drugs, gays and transgender, migrants – and people just like you. We are a diverse group of young people with common needs and particular challenges, often only united by our HIV status.

I am sometimes an articulate voice for others like me or a leader at the centre of the response but as I ‘age out’, my skills, experience and leadership will be lost to the YPLHIV community.
I am often without a voice.

* Young People Living with HIV (YPLHIV)

I am asking for the same rights and opportunities as any other young person. Nothing more.
HERE ARE 5 OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS YOU CAN DO FOR ME

1. UNIVERSAL ACCESS
My needs change as I grow. I need a health service that supports me as I move from childhood to adolescence into adulthood – services that also respond to the particular needs of young people most affected by HIV. However, Universal Access is not just about health services – every part of the government has a responsibility to make Universal Access a reality for me. For example, laws and policies requiring parental consent for testing, treatment and care work against Universal Access for all young people.

2. RIGHTS
Do away with laws and policies that criminalise HIV transmission. Make laws and policies that promote and protect my rights. Make it your responsibility to entrench my rights to confidentiality, health, happiness, education, sexual and reproductive fulfilment, and participation. I am not under any increased responsibility to disclose. Scrap the laws and policy that make it compulsory for me to disclose my status. I will choose to disclose to whom I want, when I want and how I want.

3. MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT
Don’t assume that I want to make a career out of my status. I may want to be involved as an advocate, a volunteer or a mentor. I may not want to disclose my status but I can still be passionate and active about the issues that affect me and others like me. I also need to be a meaningful part of the larger community – gain a qualification, get a job, enjoy life with my friends and family. Let me choose my own path and destiny.

4. LEADERSHIP
I want to be active in the HIV response and have a space at your decision-making table. Flying me to a high-level meeting on the other side of the world does not develop my leadership skills or result in any benefit for my life and my community. I need the skills, qualifications and opportunities to become a leader, and the opportunity to pass on my knowledge to others like me when I am an adult. Ask me why I want to get involved and what I hope to accomplish, and find me mentors. Don’t burn me out.

5. SAFE DISCLOSURE
Three decades into the response, why is it that I still don’t feel safe to disclose my HIV status? Here’s what I need you to understand: I want to feel empowered to disclose my status not only for my own well-being but also for my peers. Providing a conducive environment for safe disclosure in my school and my community means that more young people will talk about HIV, more young people will test and more young people will get the support they need.

I face stigma and discrimination on a daily basis. 30 years into the response, people still fear my HIV status and I don’t feel safe to disclose. I endure a triple jeopardy – I am young, I am positive and often, I am part of a stigmatised group that sits on the margins of society. The ever-present prevention campaigns help to stigmatise me further. Ill-considered laws and poorly planned policies that breach confidentiality or require disclosure disempower me. It is time to change the messages and normalise my status.

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To find out more about the Y+ Programme visit www.gnpplus.net, or www.worldaidscampaign.org and to join the Y+ list serve send a blank email to ypluslistserv+subscribe@googlegroups.com