JOHANNESBURG - Mukarwego Athanasie knows what it is like to be used as a weapon of war. “I am a victim of rape that was used as a weapon during the war in Rwanda,” she says.

As part of their campaign of terror, HIV infected soldiers would rape whole villages of women to spread the virus amongst the civilian population.

“Women were told they had to be raped and infected so they would die after a long time,” says Athanasie.

But despite suffering rape throughout the war in Rwanda, Athanasie counts her blessings that she miraculously failed to contract the virus. She sees the miracle as a chance for her to help other women who are not as lucky.

Athanasie works for the Rwandan Women's Network, an organisation that takes care of about 500 women who contracted HIV because of being raped during the war.

The Rwandan Women's Network has constructed 20 houses for the women to live in and a centre that is used as a resource base.

“These women need to be taken care of,” says Athanasie. “We are teaching them to read and write, working on income generation projects and also help them to engage in various business activities as a way of poverty eradication.” But lifting the women out of economic hardship is not the only battle the Rwanda Women's Network faces. The stigma attached to the HIV virus acts as another form of infection in the women's lives. “When you have that stigma everything goes backwards,” says Athanasie.

The women also face the challenge of having to take care of their daughters, many of whom are also infected with the HIV virus.

“They have a double challenge: that of their own situation and of their daughters,” says Athanasie. Athanasie was speaking at an event to draw attention to the plight of women suffering as a result of HIV/AIDS on the African continent held at the Women’s Action Tent, a forum for women that took place as a parallel event to the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The meeting heard stories from women from around the African continent and allowed rural women to interact with government ministers.

Speaking at the event, South African Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang committed her government to the implementation of a Constitutional Court decision ordering her government to distribute the anti-AIDS drug Nevirapine to pregnant women who are HIV positive.

However, she said the court decision had provided some leeway to the government in implementing the decision. Implementation had to be done at a “progressive” pace because “systems” were not in place.

She said “other questions” needed to be asked, such as the resistance to the drugs and the impact of poverty on rural communities. In addition, said Tshabalala-Msimang, nobody knew what happened to babies whose mothers had been given nevirapine.

“It is difficult to say I am going to give it to a certain amount of people. What about the others? The truth of the matter is that these medicines are very expensive and we would have to close down other services if we were going to provide antiretrovirals to the five million HIV positive South Africans.”

Dealing with the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tshabalala-Msimang demanded that pledges to the fund by rich countries should be “turned into real money”.

She said United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan had asked for $10-billion in contributions to the fund, but there were only pledges totalling $2-billion. The actual money in the fund was about $348-million, she said. “That is peanuts, said Tshabalala-Msimang.

Officialdom’s rationale to the HIV/AIDS crisis was in stark contrast to the experiences of rural women speaking at the event.

Shimba Mulunda, from the United Methodist Church Regional Missionary in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) described an ongoing genocide in the country, mainly in the eastern areas.

“There are women being raped at this moment,” she told the several hundred strong gathering, adding that research showed that two out of three women in refugee camps have been raped.
“They need help because a large number of young girls have been raped and need assistance.” Mulunda described how war was still raging in the region and how most hospitals and health centres had been closed. She called for the women to be taught literacy and computer training so they could be helped to gain confidence.

“There won't be any sustainable development unless there is sustainable peace,” she said. Also speaking at the meeting was Zoe Bakoko, Ugandan Minister for Gender, Labour and Community Development.

“HIV/AIDS has been the worst genocide we have witnessed on the African continent. It is worse than diseases and wars. It has killed our children, husbands, brothers and women,” she said. Bakoko said women had suffered the most because they were designated as the weaker sex in society and could often not say no to sex.

Looking at a quizzical Tshabalala-Msimang, she said fighting HIV/AIDS was about providing information to people. “It is not time to bury their heads in the sand,” she said, warning Tshabalala-Msimang that the next crisis South Africa faced would be that of a burgeoning AIDS orphan population. - ENDS