A 12-year-old girl orphaned by AIDS told me to leave home. These days, when my family members see me, they pretend that they have never seen me before. "Although both my parents are alive, I will not be able to visit them. When they knew I was HIV positive, they..."

"I see my own size children wearing good clothes and going to school. I get worried over this. I wish I was like them, go to school..."

It is difficult for me at this moment. "There are others like me. If you are the guys helping, please see us and help us."

From causes other than AIDS; adopted and fostered children; street children and those neglected and abandoned; all are also vulnerable to HIV. Many girls have no access to school, and are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence. Women have little control over sex, leading to low rates of condom use and therefore high levels of sexually transmitted infections. Widespread sexual violence including gang rape is common. Gender inequality is a big problem in Papua New Guinea, originating from traditions, poverty and recent distortions of alcohol use, and numerous other factors that emerge out of poverty, urbanisation and unemployment. HIV is threatening children's most basic right— their right to survival.

Scores of children and adolescents are exposed to HIV because of sexual abuse and exploitation, sex work, drug and alcohol use, and clinics. Women have little control over sex, leading to low levels of condom use and thus high levels of sexually transmitted infections. Widespread sexual violence including gang rape is common. Most HIV positive children and adolescents have not been tested, let alone begun life-saving antiretroviral treatment. Without treatment, young children with HIV can die quickly—up to 60 per cent will not live to see their second birthday.

International guidelines recommend that HIV-related responses be integrated into programs for all vulnerable children, including those in the wantok system that traditionally provided social cohesion and protected more vulnerable members of a family. These responses must take into account the wants and needs of the children. Orphans from other causes than HIV and AIDS, and other vulnerable children—such as orphans, those affected by HIV and AIDS orphans, children of working parents, and those affected by natural disasters— also render them more likely to be affected by HIV, a fact that only reinforces the need to ensure their protection.

The situation worsens for these children when their parents die, as they are stripped of their parents' protection and sent to the AIDS crisis. The "Framework for the Protection, Care and Support of Orphans and Vulnerable Children Living in a Diverse Context in Papua New Guinea" is to strengthen families and communities by keeping parents alive and providing economic, psychosocial and other support. Loss of family increases their risks. Conditions such as low levels of knowledge about HIV and AIDS, low levels of condom use, gender inequality, high levels of poverty and the erosion of traditions that once protected women and children have damaged family relationships.

Children have limited access to life-saving treatment. Treatment is also rare for adults, so children living in AIDS-affected families deal with hardship long before their parents. With families and communities worn down by the daily struggle to survive, there is little energy left to help the increasing number of children affected by HIV and other vulnerable children. Churches, women's groups and local NGOs have stepped in, but the institutions—are not fulfilling their obligation to protect women and children, but have the potential to do so.