



Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS

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Press release

UN Secretary General's Report Calls for Action on Women, Girls and AIDS

Johannesburg, 6 July 2004 – HIV infections among women and girls in nine countries in southern Africa are increasing at an alarming rate, a new report commissioned by United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, has found, with many young women being infected almost as soon as they start having sex.

Women in sub-Saharan Africa are the majority of people living with HIV – nearly 60% of those aged 15 - 49, and amongst young people aged 15-24, 75% of those living with HIV are young women. Women are infected at younger ages owing to sexual relations with men who are five to ten years their senior and already infected with HIV. To stem this the UN Secretary-General's report encourages HIV prevention programmes to adopt an "ABC-Plus" (Abstinence, Be safer and Condomise) approach by addressing the factors that increase the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV infection such as violence, sex with older men and sex in exchange for goods and commodities.

Not only are the majority of people living with HIV girls and women, but *girls and women are the main providers of care*. Girls are increasingly being withdrawn from school to provide care for their sick parents, because of the economic impact of AIDS on the family or when orphaned. Women provide care for people who are ill depriving them of their ability to earn an income, and in some instances the burden of care shifts to elderly women placing a strain on their pensions. The report recommends that avenues be explored to keep girls in school. It calls for the adoption of a volunteer charter recognizing the rights of care-givers to respect, standardized working hours, remuneration, psycho-social support and other tangible protections.

Unlike other regions of the world where men have greater *access to treatment*, the report suggests that in Southern Africa women are likely to have better access to treatment as they make more use of public health services than men. The report calls for efforts to be made to encourage more male involvement in knowing their HIV status, preventing their partners from being infected with HIV, providing care and support and addressing stigma and discrimination which may hamper the ability of women to access treatment.

Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the Chairperson of the Task Force, says that, "the pervasive gender inequality and the violations of the rights of women that accompany it is one of the most important forces propelling the spread of the HIV amongst women. If we fail to transform the status of women the catastrophe of AIDS will deepen and the ability of women to cope, already critically stressed, may totally disintegrate."

"Although women and girls account for the majority of new HIV infections in sub-

Saharan Africa, this has not been reflected in the policies or the material resources committed to fight the disease”, said Dr Peter Piot, UNAIDS Executive Director. “It is high time for that to change and for women themselves to be given a greater role in shaping the programmes and strategies we need if we are to stem the tide of the pandemic.”

Note to the Editor:

Facing the Future Together: Report of the Secretary-Generals Task Force on Women and Girls report is an initiative of the United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan. The Task Force was established in 2003 under the leadership of Ms Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF. Members of the Task Force included parliamentarians, the Ministers of Health for Zambia and Namibia, religious leaders, educators, women living with HIV/AIDS from South Africa and Swaziland, Supreme court justices from Botswana and Zambia, senior government officials from Mozambique and Malawi, and women’s rights activists from Lesotho and Zimbabwe. The Task Force examined the situation of women, girls and HIV in nine countries in southern Africa most affected by HIV/AIDS: Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

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