

## **“The Epidemic Now: Implications for Women and Response”**

**Statement by Marika Fahlen,  
UNAIDS Director  
on the occasion of International Women’s Day  
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For a long time, AIDS has been seen as a disease striking mainly men. Today, 25 years into the epidemic, women account for about half of the 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS worldwide. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where the HIV transmission is predominantly heterosexual, almost 60% of the people living with the virus are women. New infections – 5 million last year – are increasingly occurring among women, in particular adolescent girls. It may not take long before women account for the majority of the 14,000 new infections every day. And on the mortality front, we already see how premature deaths because of AIDS are on the rise among women in some high prevalence countries.

At the root of these developments is the deprived status of women in society. Fighting AIDS is therefore fighting for women’s equal rights.

We need to get to the bottom of societal issues such as: Why are women deprived of adequate knowledge about the risks of HIV? Why do women have such limited access to life-skills for prevention and to technologies that will protect them against infection? Why are women denied the rights to own, inherit, manage and dispose of property on an equal footing with men, when they have such central roles for family and community wellbeing, and indeed for development at large? Why are HIV positive women, more than men, subject to stigma and discrimination?

To address these injustices, we have to look at the gender biases in social norms, legislative systems and customary law, in the distribution of economic opportunities and in the pattern of sexual relations. And we need to look at the enormous potential of women that goes untapped because of structural gender inequalities. The strength, resilience and creative capacities of women are essential to an effective response to AIDS. But as long as women are unable to enjoy the right to education, property ownership, economic security and freedom from violence, progress on the AIDS front will pass them by and others as well.

The impact of AIDS intensifies the feminization of poverty and hampers the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Few National AIDS Plans make provisions for the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on women. And national economic accounts give little recognition to the unpaid care work carried out by women and girls to address the illness of family and community members.

Women face multiple layers of vulnerabilities to HIV/AIDS:

- **biological factors** - women and girls are physiologically more susceptible to infection; male-to-female transmission is twice or more likely as from female-to-male;
- **cultural factors** - customary law often place women as second rank, subordinate, citizens;
- **social factors** - for many young women being faithful in marriage is no protection against HIV; recent studies from Africa have shown that young married women had higher levels of infection than unmarried sexually active girls of the same age;
- **economic factors** - lack of recognition of work which remains unpaid; economic dependence as a result of lack of own income-earning opportunities; for the same reason, transactional sex in exchange of protection, money and goods.

To address the special conditions, needs, opportunities and strengths of women in the fight against AIDS, UNAIDS has initiated a Global Coalition on Women and AIDS. Two key partners of this Coalition, launched in early February, are at this podium today: Ludvine Anyango who is a member of the Coalition Steering Committee and Alice Welbourne who represents one of the convening agencies of the Coalition.

Being a global movement, the Coalition seeks to stimulate action on a number of fronts:

- i) scaling up **prevention** of new infections among women and girls, including through their access to reproductive and sexual health care;
- ii) promoting and ensuring **equitable access** of women to care and treatment;
- iii) promoting the development of and access to safe female-controlled **prevention technologies**, such as microbicides and female condoms;
- iv) protecting **women's property and inheritance rights** (worldwide women own less than 2% of land and receive less than 10% of credits)
- v) **ending violence against women**, not least in the domestic environment
- vi) supporting and recognizing **the role of women in home based care**
- vii) supporting universal education and in particular **keeping girls in school** (for instance by abolishing school fees and making curricula relevant to addressing AIDS.)

Some of the main premises for this global movement are:

- change is not only imperative , it is also possible and highly beneficial to all in society;
- men and boys can and should be positive agents of change in supporting women to exercise their inherent human rights and freedoms. They should also help change the repressive relations between men and women which are at the root of so much of the larger vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS.

It should be said , at this International Women's Day, that men of all ages should join women as active advocates and activists in fighting AIDS and the gender inequalities that fuel the epidemic.

We need this involvement and commitment, because the sad fact is that the glaring gap in gender equality is worsening the impact of HIV/AIDS overall among households and communities as well as on the future of nations. For each of us and for any society, this is a situation which should be morally intolerable. Ultimately it is politically unsustainable.

It therefore has to be stated again: investing in women is good development for all. This is a core principle throughout the work of UNAIDS.

Thank you.