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Global Coalition On Women And AIDS Leadership Council meets in Toronto to address alarming global increase of HIV virus among women

*"All AIDS strategies should answer the question, "Does this work for women"
Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director, UNAIDS.*

TORONTO, June 6, 2006 – In its 25-year history, AIDS has changed the world. It has killed 25 million people. It has become the leading cause of death among both men and women aged between 15 and 59. The number of women and girls living with HIV/AIDS is spiraling upward at a staggering rate, and their numbers continue to grow. Yet existing AIDS strategies do not address the factors that put women at risk.

"In New York last week the High Level Meeting on AIDS produced a Declaration that acknowledged the urgent need to scale up towards the goal of universal access to HIV and AIDS services," said Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director, United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS at a meeting of the **Global Coalition on Women and AIDS (GCWA) Leadership Council** in Toronto today. "The challenge now is to make sure that governments keep the promises they made last week, and take concrete action to ensure that universal access is truly universal – that it applies to women and men, girls and boys."

As UNAIDS highlighted in its Global Report, issued in New York last week, gender inequality and the low status of women remain two of the principal drivers of HIV. Worldwide, 17.3 million women aged 15 years and older are living with HIV, 48% of all adults living with the virus. Most live in sub-Saharan Africa but the epidemic is spreading among women in Asia, Eastern Europe and North America. In Canada, 25% of new infections are women: more than 40% of these women are between the ages of 15 and 29 years old.

One reason for this is that globally speaking, women and girls have less education and know less about HIV. Two-thirds of young women in sub-Saharan Africa still do not know how HIV is transmitted. Another reason is that in many countries, women are unequal partners in marriage or other relationships: in much of Africa and Asia, more than half of all women are married before their 18th birthdays, often to much older men. In addition, women are rarely at the table when AIDS policies and programs are designed. In less than 10 per cent of countries surveyed by UNAIDS this year, do women participate fully in the development of national AIDS plans.

The GCWA Leadership Council is a group of influential advocates from all over the world – celebrities and politicians, advocates and experts - many of whom are living with HIV.

The Council met in Toronto today to discuss its new Agenda for Action on Women and AIDS and to catalyze movement on decisions taken at the High Level Meeting on AIDS in New York, ahead of the XVI International AIDS Conference to be held in Toronto this August.

The High Level Meeting concluded with a Declaration that expressed governments' concern at the overall expansion and feminization of the pandemic and recognition that gender inequalities and all forms of violence against women and girls increase their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, who attended the High Level AIDS meeting, called AIDS "the greatest challenge of our generation". In his remarks, Annan said that turning the tide against AIDS required real, positive change that will give more power and confidence to women and girls, and transform relations between women and men at all levels of society. Echoing the calls laid out in the Global Coalition's Agenda for Action, he said: "It requires greater resources for women, better laws for women, and more seats for women at the decision-making table," he added.

"Women living with HIV have come to the realization that we must come together as a global community and demand that our specific needs be met", says Louise Binder, a prominent Canadian HIV and women's advocate. "While we act locally to prevent the spread of HIV among women and provide appropriate treatment and care, we must think globally to ensure that no woman is left behind."

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The GWCA is a worldwide alliance of civil society groups, networks of women with HIV and AIDS, and government and UN organizations. It was launched in 2004 by UNAIDS to respond to increasing levels of infection among women amid a growing concern that existing AIDS strategies did not tackle the social, cultural and economic factors that put women at risk of HIV infection and that burden them so heavily with the epidemic's consequences. The Coalition works at global, regional and national levels to highlight the impact of AIDS on women and girls and mobilize actions to enable them to protect themselves from HIV and access treatment, care and support when they need it.

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