

## International Women's Day 2009

### Message from the UNAIDS Executive Director

Gender equality must become part of our DNA – at the core of all of our actions. This will require a social revolution. Addressing gender inequality as a human right and development imperative constitutes a main plank of this social revolution. This is not only necessary for social justice but also for achieving universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support.

The lives of girls and women are still simply not valued on a par with those of boys and men. Diminished opportunities for women and girls should not be acceptable. Violence, including rape and sexual abuse against women and girls, should not be tolerated in any circumstances, be it in conflict or war or at home in our own communities.

Actual violence or the threat of violence often deters women and girls from accessing health services including life saving services for HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. Just as the world is compelled to respond to AIDS, we have a moral imperative to speak up to decry acts which discriminate against or undermine the rights of women and girls, and act up to protect and empower them. We must put an end to all forms of violence against women and girls.

The needs of women and girls cannot be addressed if we do not address the intersection of gender inequality and HIV. Yet we cannot address this intersection if we do not talk about it, challenge it politically and take innovative programmes to scale.

Social norms that are harmful must be challenged. Laws that block women and girls from realizing their full potential have to be changed. We have to speak out when women and girls do not have access to primary health care, education and equal work opportunities or control over their lives. For this we have to be bold.

In some countries and communities, people are making these things happen; and today, on the occasion of International Women's Day, we salute these brave women and men. We need to add to their numbers.

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UNAIDS is an innovative joint venture of the United Nations, bringing together the efforts and resources of the UNAIDS Secretariat and ten UN system organizations in the AIDS response. The Secretariat headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland—with staff on the ground in more than 80 countries. Coherent action on AIDS by the UN system is coordinated in countries through UN theme groups, and joint programmes on AIDS. UNAIDS' Cosponsors include UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank. Visit the UNAIDS Web site at [www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org)