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Carpe Momento! Seize the Moment!
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First, let me thank CARE USA and its partners for calling this meeting and giving me the honour to address its opening session. It is also a great pleasure to be back here in Uganda, a country I had the privilege to serve as UNICEF Representative and which made a deep impression in my head and in my heart.

It is appropriate for Uganda to host this conference. Long before the rest of the world woke up to it, Uganda was dealing on a daily basis with what is now widely known as “the feminization of AIDS”.

Let me start with a story that plays itself out over and over again in Uganda and elsewhere. A young woman is married – as a teenager - to a much-older man. She is aware of AIDS. But she has never taken drugs. She is faithful to her husband. She doesn’t engage in high-risk behavior. So she doesn’t think AIDS can affect her. Then, when taking a routine blood test during her second pregnancy – she is told that she is HIV positive.

She knows immediately how it has happened, but she is terrified to tell her husband. She knows that – even though she has never been with anyone else but he has (many times) – he will blame her. Silenced by fear, she says nothing... ..for months. Only when her baby becomes sick, does she explain to her husband that both she and the baby have AIDS. Her husband responds just as she feared he would – with anger and violence. She is thrown out of her house, fired from her job and ostracized from her community.

Eventually, this young woman, her daughter and husband will all succumb to AIDS. Tragically, this story is not unique. It is the story of millions of women living with HIV.

The fate of these young women provides a much needed “reality check”, both about the impact of AIDS on women and girls and about our response. In that context, four truths are abundantly clear:

- (1) Without engaging in any “high-risk behaviors”, women are more vulnerable to AIDS than men.
- (2) Our current efforts to help women and girls protect themselves from AIDS are not working.
- (3) If we don’t expand our concept of what prevention means and make our strategies more relevant for women and girls – time, energy and countless lives will be lost.
- (4) Women who are infected with HIV need to be able to access treatment and be freed from the fear of stigma.

Consider the following:

Today, sixty percent of all the people with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa are women – almost half worldwide. More than seventy-five percent of young people with HIV in South Africa are girls.

In Kenya, for every 10 young men with HIV, there are 45 young women with the virus. In one Kenyan city, the rate of HIV infection among young women is *seven times* as great as the rate among young men. More than half of all pregnant women in their mid to late twenties seeking ante-natal care in Swaziland tested HIV positive. In Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa, one in five pregnant women is living with HIV.

In Brazil, the number of new AIDS cases among women increased by 75 percent in the late 1990s, compared to just 10 percent among men. In Trinidad and Tobago, infection levels among teenage girls are six times higher than among males of the same age. In Honduras, AIDS is the leading cause of death for women.

Among African American women, the picture is very similar: AIDS kills more African American women ages 25-34 than anything else. Among teens and young adults becoming infected in the US, where HIV infections are being reported, 47% are girls.

Last year in Russia, 38% of all registered HIV cases are in women – a bigger share than ever before; in Ukraine, 42% people newly diagnosed with HIV were women.

The disproportionate infection of millions of poor women isn't merely an injustice. It's a socio-economic disaster.

In many countries, women are the food producers. Their deaths can lead to famine.

Women are mothers: when they die, their children lose love, care and support.

Women are caretakers of the sick: when they die, the sick are left to fend for themselves.

In short, women hold together the fabric of society. Throughout history, they have shown rock-solid resilience in the face of famine, illness, war and disasters. The simple truth is that empowering women and girls to protect themselves and their families from AIDS is key to getting ahead of the epidemic – and reducing global poverty.

Let's face the facts: conventional prevention strategies are leaving generations of women in jeopardy. What we call the ABC method of prevention – Abstain, Be Faithful, Use Condoms – is a good start. If every woman and man could choose – and did choose – to follow those three principles, we could stop AIDS in its tracks. Unfortunately, however, most women cannot choose any one of the three.

We teach that abstinence until marriage can help prevent AIDS – yet we live in a world where girls are married off as children or are otherwise forced into sexual relationships. We tell women to be faithful to their partners – but know that their partners are often unfaithful to them.

We tell them to use condoms – but know that their partners often refuse.

We tell them to support their families – but know that they often lack the tools and the opportunities to do this, except through risky behaviors.

Today, *being married* is actually a risk factor for some women. In many countries, girls between the ages of 15 and 19 who are married get infected at a higher rate than girls in the same age group who are sexually active but unmarried. Why? Because girls have more power to negotiate condom use with same-age boyfriends than they do with much-older husbands. And because older husbands have usually had many more sexual partners than the same-age boyfriends. A recent study in Chinandegas (Nicaragua) shows that married women were twice as likely as sex workers to be living with HIV.

In a study in Zambia, only 11 percent of women believed that they had the right to ask their husbands to use a condom – even if they knew he was unfaithful or HIV-positive.

A health survey in Rwanda revealed that nearly half of men and two thirds of women agree that refusing sex, going out without your husband, or voicing your opinion all are acceptable reasons for domestic violence.

Realities of Life for Women and Girls

If we are going to help women protect themselves, we have to acknowledge, and act on, the realities of their lives.

Let me describe a few scenarios that play out over and over again, every day, around the world.

In places where economic options are few, many men take jobs that keep them away from home for months on end. They often visit sex workers and expose themselves to HIV. When they bring the virus home, the family's cycle of illness and death begins.

In many countries, women are restricted from owning or inheriting property. When her husband dies, a woman is either given to her husband's family in what's called a "widow inheritance," which includes marriage to one of his relatives; or she is completely dispossessed. This is a practice well known in Uganda. Either way, the vulnerability to HIV increases.

In poor countries where schools fees are the rule, many girls resort to drastic measures to get an education. These include transactional sex in which girls rely on older "boyfriends" to pay their tuition or related costs. These relationships are often long-term, so the girls don't ask these "boyfriends" to use condoms or to take an HIV test. And so they begin a pattern of risky behavior that often costs them their lives.

Getting HIV from much-older boyfriends ... or unfaithful husbands ... or through forced marriages – all stem from one stark reality – that women lack control over their bodies and their daily lives, and the tools, resources, and support needed to change their situation.

If women had more options – the option to choose marriage, rather than have it forced on them; to decide when and with whom they have sex; to negotiate condom use with their partners; to live their lives free from violence; to earn incomes adequate to feed their families; to help shape laws rather than suffer their weaknesses – their ability to protect themselves from HIV would be real.

This is doable, but reducing women's vulnerability to HIV means increasing their access to information, to services, and to resources. It means promoting long-term solutions, not quick fixes. It means challenging long-standing but now *fatal* laws, customs and traditions. It means changing the way the world works – and the way we do business.

It won't be easy – but if we value life, if we value women, and if we are committed to stop AIDS – we have no choice.

Solutions for Women and Girls

The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS was launched in 2004 by a wide ranging group of partners who share two key goals:

- to spotlight the issues of women, girls, and AIDS; and
- to catalyze changes that make the AIDS response work better for women.

To that end, the Global Coalition has embraced four key principles:

- Women are not victims and their vulnerability does not stem from weakness. In fact, the resilience of women to persevere against all odds is inspiring;
- Women – particularly those living with HIV or whose lives are otherwise affected by HIV and AIDS - are leaders in the fight against AIDS.
- The realities that make women and girls more vulnerable to HIV **can** be changed with sufficient attention, commitment, and resources; and
- Men and boys **can and must** be positive forces for change in improving the situation of women and girls.

The goal of the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS is to spur concrete action that helps women take control of their own lives and, ultimately, lessen the impact of the epidemic on themselves and their families.

It seeks to broaden HIV prevention strategies so they are relevant to women's lives – what might be called ABC+ – by ensuring women can access information, essential services, and opportunities. In other words, by ensuring their ability to realize their human rights.

Let's be clear: persistent violations of women's rights to employment, access to credit, ownership of property, freedom from violence, and political participation are increasing their vulnerability to HIV. These violations are, therefore, directly fueling the AIDS epidemic.

We know what to do to stop these violations. There are international conventions and agreements that spell out very clearly what needs to be done.

Here are some of the “pluses” in ABC+:

Securing access to education: Educated girls have a better chance of building a future for themselves and their families. They also have lower rates of HIV infection. Abolishing school fees, providing cash grants, and introducing flexible schooling are all ways to help girls get an education. *Keeping girls in school prevents HIV.*

Reducing violence: Women who live in fear for their lives or the well being of their children are in no position to negotiate anything – much less condom use. Reducing violence against women increases their access to services, their courage to negotiate safer sex and their ability to take advantage of education and job opportunities. *Reducing violence against women prevents HIV.*

Securing property rights: Protecting women’s property and inheritance rights reduces their need to engage in risky behaviour to meet basic needs. It helps them keep their children in school, food on the table, and secures the respect of their families and communities. *Securing women’s property rights prevents HIV.*

Improving access to prevention services: Far too often, women are crowded out of treatment – even free treatment - cannot overcome the transportation, child care, or “domestic” barriers they face. If women and girls (including those who are HIV-positive) can access reproductive and sexual health services they are far more likely to be able to continue caring for their children, attending work and school, and keeping their families intact. *Ensuring women’s access to healthcare prevents HIV.*

Investing in microbicides and female condoms: Prevention methods that women control are vital to long-term change. For women who can’t choose when and with whom to have sex, for women whose partners will not use condoms or be faithful, and for women who are too beaten up or beaten down to ask, methods that *they* control will make all the difference. An additional investment of \$1 billion today could put an effective microbicide in women’s hands within the next ten years. *Making microbicides and female condoms a reality for women prevents HIV.*

For young women who never imagined that they could be infected by their husbands.... for the women who are terrified of negotiating condom use... and for the girls who do not have the “right to abstain”, we must work harder to make education, economic opportunity and healthcare realities rather than dreams.

This conference is a step in the right direction – i.e. toward action. Awareness of the impact of AIDS on women and girls is insufficient, pity is useless and anger alone is futile. Don’t just know about the disproportionate impact of AIDS on women – do something about it. We can, in fact, enforce women’s basic human rights. We can reduce domestic violence, protect women’s hold on property and keep girls in school. We can make female condoms and microbicides available in every community.

So again, let's be clear: the decisions are ours – and history will judge us by the choices we make.

Thank you