



Statement

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60TH SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Agenda Item 12: Integration of the human rights of women and the gender perspective

Geneva, 5 April 2004

Chairperson, distinguished delegates,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Commission under this agenda item.

Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection and to the impact of AIDS. As the General Assembly recognized in its historic Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS adopted in June 2001, “women and girls are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS”.¹ The Assembly has also stressed that “gender equality and the empowerment of women are fundamental elements in the reduction of the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV/AIDS.”²

Fighting AIDS is not only necessary to realize the right of women and girls to the highest attainable standard of health, but respecting, protecting and fulfilling the human rights of women and girls is a necessary and fundamental component of addressing HIV/AIDS.

Vulnerability to HIV infection

About half of all HIV infections worldwide are now occurring among women. This vulnerability is primarily due to inadequate knowledge about AIDS, insufficient access to HIV prevention services, inability to negotiate safer sex, and a lack of female-controlled HIV prevention methods.

Girls and young women in particular are at risk. The rate of HIV infection among young people worldwide is growing rapidly – 67% of newly infected individuals in the developing world are young people aged between 15 and 24 years. The escalating risk is especially evident among young women and girls (15-24 years), who make up 64% of the young people in developing countries living with HIV or AIDS. Globally, studies show that young women and girls are up to 2.5 times more likely to be HIV-infected as their male counterparts.

Impact of AIDS

Women and girls also disproportionately bear the burden of care in the epidemic. In the community and at home, women are expected to take the lead in domestic work and provide care to family members. HIV and AIDS have significantly increased the burden of care for many women. Poverty and poor public services have also combined with AIDS to turn the care burden for women into a crisis with far-reaching social, health and economic consequences.

AIDS intensifies the feminization of poverty, particularly in hard-hit countries, and disempowers women. Entire families are also affected as vulnerability increases when women’s time caring for the sick is taken away from other productive tasks within the household.

HIV/AIDS is threatening recent positive gains in basic education and disproportionately affecting girls’ primary school enrolments. Education is one of the key defences against the spread of HIV and the impact of AIDS and the evidence for this is growing. Yet, in countries with high HIV prevalence, girls’ enrolment in school has decreased in the past decade. Girls are the first to be pulled out of school to care for sick relatives or to look after younger siblings.

¹ UN General Assembly, “Global Crisis – Global Action: Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS”, UNGA Resolution A/RES/S-26/2, 27 June 2001.

² A/RES/S-26/2, para. 14.

HIV/AIDS and human rights of women and girls

Discrimination against women, both legal and de facto, renders them disproportionately vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Women's subordination in the family and in public life is one of the root causes of the rapidly increasing rate of infection among women. Systematic discrimination based on gender also impairs women's ability to deal with the consequences of their own infection and/or infection in the family, in social, economic and personal terms.³

With regard to prevention of infection, the rights of women and girls to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, to education, to freedom of expression, and to freely receive and impart information, should be applied to promote and ensure equal access for women and girls to HIV-related information, education, means of prevention and health services.

Violence against women in all its forms during peacetime and in conflict situations increases their vulnerability to HIV infection. Such violence includes, *inter alia*, sexual violence, rape (marital and other) and other forms of coerced sex, as well as traditional practices affecting the health of women and children. States have an obligation to protect women from sexual violence in both public and private life. Measures for the elimination of sexual violence and coercion against women in the family and in public life not only protect women from human rights violations but also from HIV infection that may result from such violations.

Furthermore, in order to empower women, States should ensure women's rights to, *inter alia*, legal capacity and equality within the family, in matters such as divorce, inheritance, child custody, property and employment rights, in particular, equal remuneration of men and women for work of equal value, equal access to responsible positions, measures to reduce conflicts between professional and family responsibilities and protection against sexual harassment at the workplace. Women should also be enabled to enjoy equal access to economic resources, including credit, an adequate standard of living, participation in public and political life and to benefits of scientific and technological progress so as to minimize risk of HIV infection.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women obliges States parties to address all aspects of gender-based discrimination in law, policy and practice. States are also required to take appropriate measures to modify social and cultural patterns which are based on ideas of superiority/inferiority and stereotyped roles for men and women. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has underscored the link between women's reproductive role, their subordinate social position and their increased vulnerability to HIV infection.⁴

Global Coalition on Women and AIDS

UNAIDS is committed to supporting action and advocacy which reduce the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV infection and to improve the quality of life for

³ See report of the Expert Group Meeting on Women and HIV/AIDS and the Role of National Machinery for the Advancement of Women, convened by the Division for the Advancement of Women, Vienna, 24-28 September 1990 (EGM/AIDS/1990/1).

⁴ CEDAW, General Recommendation No. 15 (ninth session, 1990). *Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-fifth Session, Supplement No..38 (A/45/38)*, chap. IV.

those now living with HIV. 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, launched in February 2004.

The Coalition has five key aims:

- *to address the increasing global impact of AIDS on women and girls.*

The latest epidemiological figures show that AIDS is having an ever-increasing impact on women and girls, highlighting the inadequacy of efforts to date.

- *to help meet a series of ambitious international targets.*

The UN Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS, adopted by the General Assembly Special Session on AIDS in 2001, provides a series of progressive, measurable targets to tackle HIV and AIDS – many relate directly to women and girls. Most of these targets are set for 2005 and need extra effort and attention if they are to be met.

- *to support the wider global AIDS response.*

As a result of the devastating impact of the epidemic on women and girls, progress in many other areas of the response to AIDS relies on what is done for women and girls today. They will be key to driving the response tomorrow.

- *to improve HIV prevention for women and girls.*

To be effective, prevention programmes must recognize the realities of many women's lives. Women and girls often have limited access to essential education and health care services and often cannot choose to abstain from sex or insist on condom use. In addition they are often coerced into unprotected sex, and are often infected by husbands in societies where it is common or accepted for men to have more than one partner.

- *to address severe societal and legal inequities which compound the impact of HIV and AIDS on women and girls.*

Women and girls are disadvantaged by society in a number of ways that men are not. HIV and AIDS make these inequities worse and life threatening. Women face particular challenges in the areas of access to property rights, through limited access to education, limited access to care and treatment and when violence against women is tolerated.

In pursuit of these aims, the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS seeks to stimulate action on a number of fronts:

- scaling up prevention of new infections among women and girls, including through their access to reproductive and sexual health care;
- promoting and ensuring equitable access of women to care and treatment;
- promoting the development of and access to safe female-controlled prevention technologies, such as microbicides and female condoms;
- protecting women's property and inheritance rights (worldwide women own less than 2% of land and receive less than 10% of credits);

- ending violence against women, not least in the domestic environment;
- supporting and recognizing the role of women in home based care; and
- supporting universal education and in particular keeping girls in school (for instance by abolishing school fees and making curricula relevant to addressing AIDS).

In addition to focussing on the empowerment of women and girls, the Coalition will also seek to reinforce positive male behaviour. Girls and young women need safe and supportive environments to explore issues around HIV and AIDS. This environment includes the support of individuals with influence over young women's lives – including local authority figures, older women and service providers - to help influence what young women, as individuals, cannot easily control.

Conclusion: States' obligations

Let me conclude by referring to what States can and must do in response to the global HIV/AIDS epidemic. In the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS adopted by the General Assembly in June 2001, all States committed to taking action on the global HIV/AIDS crisis. Several of those commitments are of particular relevance to the human rights of women and girls.

The world's women, increasingly threatened and burdened by the global epidemic, need States to follow through on those commitments. In particular, UNAIDS wishes to highlight the following commitments of States:

- The commitment to develop and implement national strategies and financing plans for combating HIV/AIDS that, among other things, address gender dimensions of the epidemic and integrate a gender perspective (paragraph 37);
- The commitment to establish national targets to achieve global prevention goals, and in connection with this, challenge gender stereotypes and gender inequalities (paragraph 47);
- The commitment to enact, strengthen or enforce, as appropriate, legislation and other measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against and to ensure the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by people living with HIV/AIDS and members of vulnerable groups (paragraph 58);
- The commitment to develop and accelerate the implementation of national strategies that promote the advance of women and women's full enjoyment of all human rights; promote shared responsibility of men and women to ensure safe sex; and empower women to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality to increase to increase their ability to protect themselves from HIV infection (paragraph 59);
- The commitment to implement measures to increase capacities of women and adolescent girls to protect themselves from the risk of HIV infection, principally through the provision of health care and health services, including for sexual and reproductive health, and through prevention education that promotes gender equality within a culturally and gender-sensitive framework (paragraph 60);

- The commitment to ensure development and accelerated implementation of national strategies for women's empowerment, the promotion and protection of women's full enjoyment of all human rights and reduction of their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS through the elimination of all forms of discrimination, as well as all forms of violence against women and girls, including harmful traditional and customary practices, abuse, rape and other forms of sexual violence, battering and trafficking in women and girls (paragraph 61).

States have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfill the human rights of women and girls. UNAIDS is committed to supporting States in this regard.

Thank you.