

Global Coalition on Women and AIDS sets Agenda for Action at High Level Meeting on AIDS

New York, 1 June 2006 – The UNAIDS-led Global Coalition on Women and AIDS today issued a new Agenda for Action on Women and AIDS, urging leaders attending the 2006 High Level Meeting on AIDS to keep promises made at previous international meetings to tackle the social, cultural and economic factors that intensify the impact of AIDS on women and girls.

‘Five years ago, Member States agreed that gender equality and women’s empowerment are fundamental to ensuring an effective response to AIDS,’ said Dr Peter Piot, UNAIDS Executive Director. ‘Specific pledges were made to promote women’s rights, protect women and girls from discrimination, and improve their access to vital services such as education and the prevention of mother-to-child transfer of HIV. Some progress has been made, but major opportunities to stem the global epidemic are being missed.’

Dr Piot stressed: ‘The ultimate criterion to judge all AIDS programmes is “Does this work for women and girls?”’

According to the *2006 Report on the global AIDS epidemic* released by UNAIDS on 30 May, the eve of the High Level meeting, eleven countries have managed to reduce mother-to-child transmission of HIV by 20 per cent - the target set in the 2001 United Nations Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS. Elsewhere, however, progress has been slow. In 2005, fewer than 10 per cent of pregnant women worldwide received an HIV test. Less than one in ten pregnant women living in low and middle income countries received antiretroviral treatment to prevent HIV transmission to their newborn infants.

At the same time, female infection levels have been rising in every region of the world. Today, almost half of all adults living with HIV (17.3 million) are women – two million more than in 2001. Seventy-four per cent of all young people living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa are female.

One reason for this is that women and girls have less access to education and know less about HIV. Two-thirds of young women in sub-Saharan Africa still do not know how HIV is transmitted. In Bangladesh, less than one in five married women surveyed had even heard of AIDS. Another reason is that in many countries, women are unequal partners in marriage or other relationships. In much of Africa and Asia, between 50 and 60 per cent of all women are married before their 18th birthdays – often to older men, who have been sexually active for longer and who are more likely to have acquired sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV.

In addition, women are rarely included when AIDS policies and programmes 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.

‘Today the Global Coalition is launching its Agenda for Action on Women and AIDS. We highlight three key ways the international community and national governments can address these issues,’ said Ludfine Anyango of ActionAid Kenya, a member of the Leadership Council of the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS.

The first step is to secure women’s rights. Effective implementation of laws and policies that affirm and protect the rights of women are vital for winning the struggle against AIDS. Some countries have passed important legislation on issues such as domestic violence, equality in marriage, HIV-related discrimination, and property and inheritance rights. Yet strategies to enforce these laws and finance their implementation are rarely in place.

The second is to review existing AIDS strategies to ensure they work for women, and to invest in scaling up access to services women need – such as education, sexual and reproductive health services, antenatal care, prevention of mother-to-child transmission, and antiretroviral therapy. The Global Coalition also emphasises the need to close the funding gap for microbicide development and the female condom, and calls for increased support for women who care for sick friends and relatives.

The third step is to ensure the full participation of women in national coordinating bodies to ensure that AIDS policies, programmes and strategies work for women.

‘In short, if delegates at this week’s High Level Meeting are to make the AIDS response work better for women, they must focus on three things: money, laws, and seats at the table,’ observed Mary Robinson, Executive Director of Realizing Rights: the Ethical Globalization Institute and member of the Global Coalition’s Leadership Council. ‘At the same time, they must bear in mind that making the response work better for women is critical to getting ahead of the AIDS epidemic as a whole.’

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