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**Women's leadership can change the course of AIDS:
Unprecedented global women's summit opens in Nairobi**

Women's leadership has the potential to dramatically affect the future of the AIDS epidemic, participants at the first-ever International Women's Summit on HIV and AIDS were told today.

Over 1800 participants from all parts of the world packed the Kenyatta International Conference Center in Nairobi for the start of a three-day summit organized by the World YWCA in partnership with International Community of Women Living with HIV and AIDS. The summit focuses on the strategies, skills and partnerships needed to address rising HIV infection rates in women and girls.

The Hon. Mwai Kibaki, President of Kenya, emphasized that HIV and AIDS is “not just a health issue that should be left to individuals or families” but “a social issue that demands our collective responsibility as individuals, governments, civil society and the corporate sector.” Noting initiatives in Kenya focusing on education and gender parity in government positions, he called for the women’s movement to be at the forefront of lobbying efforts to support women’s leadership, education, and legislation against gender-based violence.

In welcoming the participants, Dr Musimbi Kanyoro, General Secretary of the World YWCA, stated that from the experience of the YWCA movement, “one woman can bring change to a family and many women together will bring change to humanity.” She emphasized that the task of the conference is “to mobilize the collective power of women to reverse the direction of the AIDS pandemic globally.” Even more, she stated, “the response to HIV will not be effective without the leadership of positive women.”

Demonstrating the United Nations' (UN) “maximum support” for the leadership of women in the response to AIDS, leading UN officials recognized the important role of civil society in keeping AIDS high on the political agenda and in implementing a response to AIDS that works for women.

Making the changes needed to address the growing impact of AIDS on women “will require sustained political leadership at the highest levels, combined with energetic and creative leadership in civil society and in the private sector,” said Dr Asha-Rose Migiro, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General. Such change must give “more power and confidence to women and girls” and “transform relations between women and men at all levels of society,” she stressed, assuring participants of her personal commitment and that of the United Nations' system to a full and effective response to HIV.

World Health Organization Director-General Dr Margaret Chan stressed that in the quest for universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support by 2010, “women must be in the driver's seat,” and can “turn the tide in this epidemic. Community interventions have taught us that transformation at the grassroots level is possible.” She also underscored the need to reach

many more women with services to prevent mother-to-child transmission, and to ensure that mothers also receive the care they need.

Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS, mentioned the recent progress made in the response, particularly in scaling up access to treatment: 2.3 million people are now on antiretroviral therapy. However, he said, “for each new person on antiretroviral therapy, we count six new infections.” Piot said this points to “an urgent need to reassess and revitalize HIV prevention.” Among the leadership that is required, he stated, “women must be at the table whenever AIDS programmes are designed, implemented and evaluated.”

Piot said this conference “is emerging as a defining moment in the global response to AIDS”.

Mari Jo Vasquez, outgoing chair of the International Community of Women living with HIV and AIDS emphasized that “situations of poverty and marginalization” are the major factors in vulnerability to HIV, with women living with HIV paying an “increased price” because of gender inequality. Global solutions have to address “the social inequalities and the stigma” of HIV and AIDS, “which are an underlying cause of the perpetuation of poverty and marginalization.”

Dr Helene Gayle, president and CEO of Care USA highlighted the disproportionate impact of HIV and AIDS on women and girls. According to UNAIDS, almost 50 percent of adults (over 15) living with HIV are women, and the proportion of women newly infected continues to grow in every region. Currently, approximately 17.5 million women are living with HIV globally, an increase of over one million within the last two years. The proportion is highest in sub-Saharan Africa, where almost 60 percent of people living with HIV are women.

Gayle highlighted that civil society can set the international agenda for the response and “serve to amplify the voices of affected communities, especially women and children.”

Monica Zetzsche, president of the World YWCA, stated “women’s leadership is essential in changing the course of this pandemic”. Noting that HIV and AIDS has been a priority since 1999 in the World YWCA’s mission to empower women and girls and develop leadership for social change, she said the women’s movement has launched a “massive offensive against the pandemic” that has mobilized strategic partners including faith-based, youth and women’s organizations.

The International Women's Summit: Women's Leadership on HIV and AIDS will close on 7 July with a “Call to Action” emphasizing critical areas that all stakeholders need to address to transform the lives of women and girls infected and affected by the pandemic.

A full schedule of Summit events, bios, speeches and other information is available on request and via www.worldywca.org. Webcasts of the sessions will be available via www.kaisernetwork.org

For more information

Kaburo Kobia, director of communication, World YWCA

T: +254 72 070 212, kaburo.kobia@worldywca.org

Sara Speicher, IWS press room coordination and interview requests

T: +254 72 070 5111, sara@communicationpoint.org