

INTEGRATION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Sixty-first session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights Agenda Item 12

Geneva, 6 April 2005 - **Chairperson, distinguished delegates**, UNAIDS thanks the Commission for the opportunity to address it under Agenda Item 12. UNAIDS also wishes to express its gratitude to the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Yakin Ertürk, who has described so forcefully the many ways that violence against women and girls – both inside and outside marriage – increases their vulnerability to HIV infection and to the impact of AIDS.

The increasing feminization of the epidemic is one case where women's attainment of "equality" is to be denounced. Today, nearly half of all people living with HIV worldwide – almost 20 million – are female. Increasingly, they are young and poor. In sub-Saharan Africa, the worst affected region of all, 57% people infected with HIV are women and girls – among young women the rate is a staggering 76%. Tragically, the number of women being infected is on the rise in every region of the globe.

Why is this happening? Largely because the human rights of women and girls are not protected. Gender inequality – and the poverty that so often goes with it – traps women into a cycle of vulnerability to HIV and AIDS.

More than 20 years into the epidemic, the vast majority of the world's young women and girls still do not know how to protect themselves against HIV infection and cannot get the sexual and reproductive health information they need. Even when they do have information, they are not always in a position to use it.

Persistent violations of women's rights to employment, access to credit, equal ownership of property, social assistance, and political participation make it impossible for them to attain any level of independent economic and social security. As a result, millions of girls and women are forced to enter into marriage or other forms of sexual relationship to escape from poverty. To put it simply, they are obliged to trade sex for food, clothing, and security.

Once in a relationship, women are often poorly placed to insist that their partner be faithful, use a condom, or get tested for HIV. In many situations, were they to try, they would risk disapproval, rejection or violence. And, paradoxically, although women are told they will be safe if they abstain from sex until they marry and then remain faithful to their husbands, the approach only works if their husbands have followed the same principles.

Fears of disapproval, rejection or violence stop women from getting tested for HIV, discourage them from revealing the results if tested, and deter them from seeking treatment for themselves. Fear of being abused or abandoned may deter a pregnant woman from taking steps to prevent transmission of HIV to her child.

When a man falls ill with AIDS, the primary burden of caring for him falls on women. When he dies, his widow and children will, in many cases, be turned out of the family home – in violation of their property and inheritance rights – and plunged into new depths of vulnerability.

On a more optimistic note, surveys for the January 2005 “3 by 5” Progress Report on access to HIV treatment suggest that overall women are getting fair access to treatment. It will be important, however, to ensure that fair access is sustained while working towards the larger goal of universal access to treatment for all in need.

There is nothing new about violations of women’s rights. In the context of AIDS, however, the issue takes on even more alarming proportions. The violations fuel the epidemic; the epidemic exacerbates the impact of the violations.

We know what needs to be done to stop these violations. International human rights law and agreements in the form of platforms for action provide us with clear guidance. The challenge now is to summon the necessary political and social will to protect and promote human rights in concrete terms.

UNAIDS launched the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS last year. The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS is an alliance of civil society groups, governments, UN agencies and concerned citizens from all walks of life who have come together to stimulate changes that will make the AIDS response work better for women.

The Coalition has one objective: to create an environment in which women and girls are able to take control of their own lives in a world with AIDS. Key to achieving that objective is an improvement in women’s ability to realise their rights – the right to equal access to treatment and care; the right to a life free from violence; the right to access, own and inherit property; the right to obtain an education.

On behalf of UNAIDS I now ask the Commission, the Special Rapporteurs and Representatives, the governments and non-governmental organizations gathered here to put women and girls at the heart of their human rights work and join us in taking urgent steps to address the violations that result in millions of women and girls becoming needlessly infected with HIV. Today, seven thousand women and girls will become infected with HIV. This should not, and need not, happen.