

NEWS

From the Council of Women World Leaders

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WOMEN HEALTH MINISTERS JOIN FORCES

Geneva, 18 May 2004: Women health ministers from around the world agreed to form an international network to address the persistent inequalities women experience in accessing basic health services, including HIV prevention and care services. The ministers were gathered at an unprecedented meeting organized by the Council of Women World Leaders (CWWL) on the occasion of the 57th World Health Assembly.

The Council of Women World Leaders is a network of current and former women heads of state, chaired by Her Excellency Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Council's mission is to promote good governance and enhance the experience of democracy globally by increasing the number, effectiveness, and visibility of women who lead at the highest levels in their countries. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and Finland's Ministry of Health and Social Services supported the Geneva meeting.

"As women health ministers, we came together to express our deep concern about the growing and disproportionate burden that health issues are placing on women. We recognize that addressing the underlying problem of gender inequality is critical, and that solutions to such health problems will have to include the empowerment of women through education and a guarantee of their human and reproductive rights," stated Minister Hyssälä of Finland who will co-chair the new Ministerial Network with Minister Agnes Taylor-Lewis of Sierra Leone.

The Network will include current women health ministers who will participate on a voluntary basis. Women leaders in multilateral and regional organizations (such as the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, the World Health Organization, the Pan American Health Organization, the World Bank, UNICEF, and the United Nations Development Programme), and selected non-governmental organizations may be invited to participate in relevant Network meetings and activities, thus providing linkages among all sectors.

CWWL Secretary General Laura Liswood explained, "The foundation of a Network of Women Ministers of Health will serve as a platform for the ministers to exchange ideas as they work toward solutions for critical health issues that impact women and girls. It will provide opportunities to discuss and develop recommendations and programs for practical health solutions to the varied challenges confronting nations and the world."

Gaps in health remain one of the most pernicious manifestations of the inequalities faced by women. For example, studies from Sub-Saharan Africa show that young women and girls between 15 to 25 years of age are 2.5 times more at risk of becoming infected with HIV than boys of the same age. Women and girls often have limited access to resources such as

education, income and property and cannot access even basic preventive and curative health services, thus compounding the negative impacts of unequal social norms and poverty.

“As HIV spreads into uncharted territory, women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of AIDS care,” said Dr Kathleen Cravero, UNAIDS Deputy Executive Director. “I welcome the newly-formed network of women health ministers, which I am certain will make a difference in mobilizing governments and communities worldwide to improve the daily lives of women and girls.”

During the Geneva meeting, the new Network of Women Health Ministers agreed to focus upon the role of health ministers and several crucial health issues facing women, including high rates of maternal mortality and morbidity, the need for improved reproductive health care and HIV prevention services – especially for adolescent girls, and the health implications of all forms of violence against women.

The Council of Women World Leaders (CWWL) was established in 1997 by Founding Chair Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, President of Iceland (1980-1996), and Laura Liswood and is currently comprised of 31 members. The Council also maintains a sister organization, the Assembly of Women Ministers, which is chaired by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. For further information on the CWWL and its work, please see www.womenworldleaders.org.

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