



Press release

WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINES OF THE AIDS RESPONSE

Between one fifth and half of girls worldwide experience sexual violence

Premiere of Women and AIDS film on International Women's Day

Geneva, 8 March 2004 – Across the world, between one-fifth and half of all girls and young women report that their first sexual encounter was forced. Too many women are unable to refuse sex or insist on a condom because they lack social and economic power, according to the film “Women Are”, being premiered in Geneva today to mark International Women's Day.

Despite the challenges they face, women are on the frontlines of the AIDS response in their communities, empowering themselves and leading change.

The women featured in “Women Are” describe the hardships they face in light of the growing AIDS threat, but also provide concrete examples of how they have managed to overcome these obstacles and empower women in their communities to fight the epidemic. “The call to empower women is not new, but AIDS makes it more urgent,” said Dr Musimbi Kanyoro, General Secretary, World Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), who co-produced the film with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). “The film premiered today brings to life not only the deeply-rooted injustices and discrimination faced by women, but provides hope for the millions of women out there who feel disempowered and vulnerable. It is a wake-up call for women to take action to stem the tide of AIDS.”

“Women are disproportionately vulnerable to HIV and they account for half of the 40 million people living with HIV or AIDS around the world,” said Dr Peter Piot, UNAIDS Executive Director, on the occasion of International Women's Day. “Only too often, women – and particularly young girls – are unable to protect themselves from unsafe sex because they don't have the information or confidence to do so.”

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, such as microbicides. Women are also biologically more vulnerable to infection; male-to-female HIV transmission is estimated to be twice as likely than female-to-male.

Tackling the inequality of women is not simply a matter for women, however. Men should declare zero tolerance for violence against women, be committed to their daughters' education and help alleviate the burden of care placed on women.

Women bear a disproportionate share of the burden of AIDS care. In poor households, the presence of an AIDS patient can absorb a third of all household labour, most of it by women. The knock-on effects of the plunge in household income

caused by AIDS is often to pull children out of school – and girls are the first to go. Across Africa, formal school participation is declining.

As long as women and girls are unable to enjoy education, property rights, freedom from violence and economic security, progress on the AIDS front will pass them by. “Millions of women around the world were already facing a lifetime of hard labour,” said Dr Piot. “AIDS has turned it into a death sentence.”

Moves are under way to address these inequalities. For example, the global push to achieve education for all and the campaign by the World Health Organization and UNAIDS to ensure that three million people in the developing world have access to HIV treatment by 2005 – and that half are women. The YWCA has also scaled up its efforts in local communities, currently delivering HIV/AIDS and reproductive health education to women and girls in 62 countries worldwide, as well as broader social and economic empowerment programmes that aim to reduce women's vulnerability to infection.

But more is needed, and more urgently. UNAIDS has therefore recently launched the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS, which brings together activists, government representatives, celebrities, and community workers, to mitigate the impact of AIDS on women.

Note to Editors:

The 52-minute film was produced by Mondofragilis with the support of the World YWCA and UNAIDS. It was filmed during December 2003 and January 2004 and is scheduled for its inaugural showing on March 8, 2004 in honour of International Women's Day. First broadcast rights are available. For more information about the film, visit www.mondofragilis.com/womenare.

For more information about the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS, visit the UNAIDS website, www.unaids.org.

For more information on the World YWCA, visit www.worldywca.org.

For more information, please contact Dominique De Santis, UNAIDS, Geneva, (+41 22) 791 4509, or Laurence Levrat-Pictet, World YWCA, Geneva, (+ 41 22) 929 60 33.