

World AIDS Day

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Op-ed by

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Today, women and girls account for nearly half of the 37.2 million adults living with HIV worldwide. Over the past two years, the number of women infected with the virus has increased in every region of the globe, and if current trends continue, women and girls will soon outnumber men and boys infected with HIV. Already, 60% of adults living with HIV in southern Africa are women. In Sub Saharan Africa young women aged 15 to 24 are three times more vulnerable to HIV than their male peers. This increasingly disproportionate pattern of HIV infection threatens to have devastating long-term consequences, not just for the women affected but for their families and communities. In developing countries, women are often at the core of efforts to overcome poverty.

We live in a world where the ABC mantra: Abstain, Be faithful or reduce the number of sexual partners, and use Condoms—is not enough to protect women where gender inequality is pervasive.

We know why AIDS has such a severe impact on women and girls. Women are physically more susceptible when exposed to the virus, and too often they don't have the social and economic power to avoid exposure. Too many women don't have control over their own lives—to go to school, earn a living, inherit property or have access to healthcare. Furthermore, violence against women, their abuse, and exploitation continues unabated throughout the world—all of which enhance their chances of infection.

Now we need to ensure that women can choose marriage, rather than have it forced on them; to decide when and with whom they have sex; to successfully negotiate

condom use. The good news is increasingly we see women are joining together to support, energize and drive the response against AIDS and to improve the lives of women and girls around the world.

This can only happen if men and boys fully support this movement for change. By encouraging their daughters to stay in school, fathers can give girls a better chance of a life without AIDS. By ensuring female members of the family have access to AIDS treatment and prevention programs mothers will have a better chance of seeing their children grow-up. And by taking a stand against violence, men of all ages can make the world a safer place for women and girls.

Globally, we must do more to focus attention and resources on the female face of AIDS. Right now it is almost impossible for most women to take the initiative when it comes to AIDS prevention. There is an urgent need to make female condoms more readily accessible in more parts of the world. Even more urgently is the need for investment in a safe and effective microbicide that a woman could use to protect herself. At present only three candidates are in the final stages of testing—we need three dozen. And we need them to be available, accessible and affordable.

Many of us working to alleviate the impact of AIDS are alarmed that despite our best efforts, we have not yet turned the tide of AIDS. To do this we must all make a serious commitment to promote long-term solutions not quick fixes. It could mean challenging some long-standing customs and traditions, reforming outdated legal systems. It means changing the way the world works and it won't be easy. However if we value women, and if we are committed to stopping AIDS, it's not just the right thing to do—it's the smart thing to do.

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