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SECRETARY-GENERAL HAILS WOMEN AS MOST COURAGEOUS, CREATIVE CHAMPIONS

IN FIGHT AGAINST HIV/AIDS, IN WORLD AIDS DAY MESSAGE

Following is Secretary-General Kofi Annan's message on World AIDS Day, observed on 1 December:

This year's World AIDS Day is an occasion to recognize the burden that women and girls bear in the age of HIV/AIDS, but equally, to celebrate their achievements in the fight against the epidemic.

Women are our most courageous and creative champions in the fight against HIV/AIDS. In most countries and communities I have visited around the world, it is women's voices that are heard above all others; women advocates and activists who are moved to act selflessly and speak publicly, often risking prejudice, abuse or violence, in order to improve the lives of others.

The courage that women are showing in this fight is matched only by the toll the disease is taking on them. Women already bear the brunt of poverty. AIDS makes the poverty trap even easier for them to fall into, and even harder to break. Women continue to face discrimination on a number of fronts -- from the workplace to laws governing land ownership and inheritance. AIDS puts them at even greater risk. Girls already make up the majority of children not in school. When AIDS strikes the family, those girls who are attending school are all too often taken out, to help run the household and care for sick relatives. Women now account for about half of all people living with HIV worldwide. In sub-Saharan Africa, where more than three quarters of all HIV-positive women live, almost 57 per cent of adults living with HIV are women.

Why are women more vulnerable to infection? Why is that so, even where they are not the ones with the most sexual partners outside marriage, nor more likely than men to be injecting drug users? Usually, it is because society's inequalities put them at risk -- unjust, unconscionable risk. A range of factors conspires to make this so: poverty, abuse and violence, lack of information, coercion by older men, and men having several concurrent sexual relationships that entrap young women in a giant network of infection. Nor does marriage always offer protection: in some heavily affected countries, married women have higher rates of HIV infection than their unmarried, sexually active peers.

These factors cannot be addressed piecemeal. What is needed is real, positive change that will give more power and confidence to women and girls. Change that will transform relations between women and men at all levels of society. Change that can only be brought about through the education of girls, through legal and social reforms, and through greater awareness and responsibility among men. Change that will allow women to play to the full their role in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Empowering women in this struggle must be our strategy for the future. It is among them that the real heroes of this war are to be found. It is our job to furnish them with hope.

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