



# Message

## MESSAGE ON THE OCCASION OF WORLD AIDS DAY

**1 December 2004**

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This World AIDS Day, the news is sobering -- the epidemic continues to spread in every region of the world. The number of people living with HIV globally has reached its highest level with close to 40 million people, up from 36.6 million in 2002. The steepest increases in HIV infections occurred in East Asia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia over the past two years.

The number of women living with HIV is on the rise in every region. Today the face of AIDS is increasingly young and female. This has profound implications—we will not be able to stop this epidemic unless we put women at the heart of the response to AIDS.

Prevention methods such as the “ABC” approach – Abstinence, Be faithful, and use Condoms – are good but not enough to protect women where gender inequality is pervasive. We must ensure that women can choose marriage, to decide when and with whom they have sex, and to successfully negotiate condom use.

Half of all women live on less than US\$2 a day; illiteracy rates among women are nearly 50 percent higher than among men in many countries; only a small fraction of land is owned by women; and inheritance laws and criminal laws make it easy for men to take advantage of women. Each of these realities makes women more vulnerable to HIV.

We need to give girls everywhere a chance at education, and petition governments around the world to enable women to own and inherit property. Women who are economically self-sufficient and secure are far less vulnerable to HIV. We need to get laws passed everywhere that make domestic abuse illegal, that treat rape as a real crime to be punished harshly.

To reverse these inequities we must focus attention and resources on increasing access to prevention and treatment services for women. We need to make female condoms readily accessible in more parts of the world. And even more urgently is the need for investment in a microbicide that a woman can confidently and confidentially use to protect herself from HIV.

If we can do a better job preventing HIV among women and girls, we can ultimately get ahead of the epidemic and save millions upon millions of lives. The good news is we are seeing more women and men joining together to support, energize and drive the response against AIDS and to improve the lives of women and girls around the world.

Together we must be bold by challenging inequality whenever and wherever it appears—as we strive for a world free of AIDS.

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