

Speech

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Speech at the 5th meeting of the Regional Coalition of
First Ladies and Women Leaders
of Latin America on Women and AIDS

Mexico City, 2 August 2008

**Speech by
Peter Piot,
UNAIDS Executive Director**

Excellencies, First Ladies of Latin America and the Caribbean, distinguished guests, friends and colleagues:

It is a privilege to participate in this meeting of the Regional Coalition on Women and AIDS. I thank you for inviting me, and affirm my solidarity with your movement.

I want to begin with a special word of thanks to **Dona Margarita Zavala de Calderón**, for hosting this very special meeting – to **Dona Xiomara Castro de Xelaya**, First Lady of Honduras, and to **Signora Patricia Perez** for starting the Coalition in the first place.

Over the years, we have seen how vital leadership is in the fight against AIDS. So I'm particularly pleased that this Coalition brings together two kinds of leaders: women leaders in the AIDS response (including women living with HIV) and women leaders in the political arena.

Your Coalition has become a rallying point for women across the region to make their voices heard. In the course of the coming week, we must make sure that women remain at the centre of the proceedings of this International AIDS Conference.

The struggle for gender equality has never been more pronounced than it is in the era of AIDS. Inequalities due to gender heighten stigma; they deepen exclusion; they magnify discrimination.

As so often happens, AIDS highlights the faultiness in our societies. Gender inequality is just one of them.

But AIDS also forces us to think and work in different ways. More than any other issue I can think of, HIV has brought communities to the heart of the response.

In some countries it has helped catalyze the emancipation of gay men. In the same vein, I believe AIDS also offers an opportunity to make real inroads on women's equality.

Today, I want to speak to you specifically about **violence against women**. Fear of violence is a major reason why women feel they cannot insist on fidelity, cannot demand condom use, or refuse sex with a man, even when they suspect he has HIV.

Violence against women is embedded in all cultures. In some Latin American countries, for example, one in four women reports having been violated by her partner at some point in their relationship.

Violence against women and girls is one of the most pervasive and outrageous of human rights violations. It is also, tragically, often one of the most “tolerated” human rights abuses.

As a result, in many societies, violence is carried over from generation to generation. Early on, young girls learn to see violence as a natural part of life, and are conditioned to bear their fate silently. Many are actually abused as children: a PAHO/WHO report indicates that a shocking 36% of all Latin American girls have suffered child abuse.

And for young boys, inflicting physical abuse is wrongly seen to be part of being macho.

If we want to stop men inflicting violence on women, we must help boys understand that it is unacceptable.

Every country in this region has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women – the most important international instrument on human rights. Many have passed domestic laws to protect women from violence against women.

But the best of laws will not have any impact unless we change attitudes, among both men and women, and in our communities. This is where the real change will come from.

As a man, I recognize that we men need to face our responsibilities in curbing male violence towards women. Acts of violence are completely unacceptable, and men must find the courage to say so and to live up to their words.

We – men and women alike - must also have the courage to recognize and act on the links between the twin epidemics of violence and HIV.

Gender-based violence is often the subject of passionate debate. But all too few governments are prepared to finance programmes to tackle it.

But there are some signs of positive change.

Some countries in this region have announced budget allocations in their national plans to end violence against women. In some countries, plans of action to end violence against women have been integrated and budgeted into Poverty Reduction Strategies.

A number of bilateral donors are also taking action to stop violence. The Spanish MDG Achievement Fund has made multi-million dollar grants to some countries to support approaches to end violence against women. This is probably one of the largest grants ever made specifically for this purpose.

The priority on gender of the Global Fund on HIV/AIDS, TB and Malaria provides the much-needed boost for financing initiatives that address gender inequalities.

But money is just one factor. We have to invest this money in changing social norms, in enforcing laws to protect women from violence, and in educating boys,.

Changing the way people think and act requires massive and concerted action – by schools, families, the media, the judiciary, the police, the church, and – critically – by schools.

So it was good to see Health and Education Ministers formally agree to work together to address violence against women and girls in the Declaration “Prevention through education” they signed yesterday at a landmark meeting organized by the Government of Mexico.

In short, positive change requires a coalition – in which civil society – including both women’s groups and networks of people living with HIV – play a key role.

Honourable First Ladies and friends:

This is where your leadership is so important. You have the capacity to wield tremendous influence. I call on you to use every gram of that capacity to eliminate gender-based violence and make the AIDS response work better for women and girls in Latin America.

And I, in return, pledge the continued support of UNAIDS to your efforts to consign both these epidemics to the history books.

Thank you