

## PRESS STATEMENT

### **UNAIDS calls for the empowerment of young women and girls on International Day of the Girl Child**

*Ensuring respect for the human rights of young women and girls is key to ending the AIDS epidemic as part of the Sustainable Development Goals*

**GENEVA, 11 October 2015**—On International Day of the Girl Child, UNAIDS is calling for the end to gender inequalities and the protection of the human rights of young women and girls everywhere. When young women and girls are empowered and have the freedom to make life-defining choices, it not only changes the course of their own lives but also those of their families, communities and societies.

“Ending the AIDS epidemic is dependent on social justice, which demands equity in education, employment and health for both girls and boys,” said UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé. “The newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals provide us with our greatest opportunity yet to do things differently for this generation. We must make the conscious decision to empower young women and girls to take control of their own health choices.”

Although there has been some progress in terms of gender parity in education and political representation, many challenges remain. Every day, around 41 000 girls are married before they reach the age of 18. Complications linked to pregnancy and childbirth remain the second leading cause of death among adolescent girls aged 15–19, and it has been estimated that around 120 million girls worldwide have experienced rape or other forced sexual acts at some point in their lives.

Gender-based violence and a lack of control over decisions affecting their own lives, including over key aspects of sexuality and reproduction, increase the risk of HIV infection among adolescent girls and young women. Around 350 000 adolescent girls and young women were newly infected with HIV in 2014. A study in South Africa found that young women who experienced intimate partner violence were 50% more likely to have acquired HIV than women who had not experienced violence.

The reasons for gender inequalities are intricately woven into the sociocultural, economic and political fabric of our societies and they stack the odds against girls from birth. Multisectoral responses are required to ensure equal access to education, including age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education, and to bolster social protection programmes. Also needed are integrated age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health services and the expansion of programmes to address gender-based violence. Innovative partnerships, such as Together for Girls, All In and DREAMS, will be crucial to highlight and respond to the specific needs of young women and girls.

Seizing the historic opportunity of the new Sustainable Development Goals, the global community must commit to policies and actions that protect, support and empower young

women and girls. This is what will redefine the role of young women and girls, strengthening the AIDS response and making possible the end of the AIDS epidemic by 2030.

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## **Contact**

UNAIDS Geneva | Sophie Barton-Knott | tel. +41 22 791 1697 | [bartonknotts@unaids.org](mailto:bartonknotts@unaids.org)

## **UNAIDS**

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) leads and inspires the world to achieve its shared vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. UNAIDS unites the efforts of 11 UN organizations—UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UN Women, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank—and works closely with global and national partners towards ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030. Learn more at [unaids.org](http://unaids.org) and connect with us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.