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## **Statement to the Fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women**

**Agenda item 3(a)(i): “Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”:**

**Implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child”**

**26 February - 9 March 2007**

**New York**

Uniting the world against **AIDS**

Madame Chairperson, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

AIDS is a defining issue of our time. Most unfortunately, it is defining the lives of millions of women and girls, as 7000 of them become infected with HIV each day. UNAIDS greatly welcomes the theme of this session of the Commission. The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against girls would not only protect their human rights, it would go a long way to reduce their vulnerability to HIV infection and to the impact of AIDS.

Globally, almost 18 million women and girls over the age of 15 are living with HIV – nearly half of all people infected. In the nine most heavily infected countries in Africa, 59% of adults and nearly 75% of young people infected with HIV are female. In some countries, young women and girls can be 4 to 13 times more likely to be HIV-infected than young men. These figures represent the “feminization of the epidemic”. In hard hit areas, it is undoing any development gains for women and girls. Among other things, this feminisation reflects the reality that the HIV-related needs of women and girls are not being addressed in national responses to HIV. It also reflects the fact that age-old, wide-spread discrimination and violence against women and girls makes them extremely vulnerable to HIV infection and to the impact of AIDS.

For these reasons UNAIDS initiated the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS. It brings together leaders on women, girls and HIV to galvanize greater attention to women and girls in the response to HIV. There are seven action areas, a number of which are particularly pertinent to this year’s theme of the Commission: reducing gender-based violence, preventing HIV infection among adolescent girls, protecting the property and inheritance rights of women and girls, and supporting efforts towards universal education for girls.

Madame Chairperson,

Millions of women and girls are becoming infected with HIV because they are denied information and education about HIV; they are denied equal access to the commodities and services to prevent infection; and if they had such access, they are denied the right to choose when, with whom and under what circumstances to have sex. The discrimination that girls face in access to education denies them the strong protective effect that education has been shown to have against HIV. In many countries, girls who do make it to school find school fraught with sexual violence and rape.

Among the 14 million children who have lost one or both parents to AIDS, girls face the triple discrimination of being girls, being linked to HIV infection, and being orphans. They face higher levels of discrimination in inheritance and property rights and higher levels of violence and

sexual abuse. Incredibly tragic, these make them more vulnerable to HIV infection themselves. Women and girls bear a disproportionate burden in providing care and support to sick family members and to the children left behind after parents die.

Violence and HIV go hand and hand in many ways. Studies have shown that women who have experienced violence are at higher risk of HIV; and women and girls who are HIV positive are at higher risk of violence. Much of the vulnerability of girls and young women to HIV can be found in their relationships with older infected men. Some of these relationships take the form of early marriage, some take the form of transactional sex, and some involve rape and sexual coercion. In all these situations, girls have little or no ability to avoid sex or negotiate safe sex.

Girls are particularly disempowered to seek and receive health care, including HIV testing and treatment. In many countries, they do not have the right under law or custom to have independent access to such services, nor do they have the money by which to reach them or pay for them. Violence or the fear of violence prevents women and girls from seeking HIV testing and counseling, or if HIV positive, from disclosing their status or seeking treatment and prevention of mother to child transmission.

Madame Chairperson,

Last year saw the highest number of new HIV infections ever with some 4.3 million people being infected. Dr Peter Piot (Executive Director, UNAIDS) has stated, "I am increasingly convinced that just expanding programmes, doing more, even much more, of the same, is not going to stop this epidemic. ...we will need to pay far more attention to the drivers of this epidemic, particularly gender inequality and....the social, economic and cultural environment and norms within which HIV flourishes."<sup>1</sup>

Governments have recognized that discrimination and violence are among the drivers of the epidemic. In the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS (2001) and the Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS (2006) they committed themselves to "eliminate gender inequalities, gender-based abuse and violence... and all forms of discrimination... including harmful and traditional and customary practices, abuse, rape and other forms of sexual violence, battering and trafficking in women and girls". But Governments have yet to prioritize programmes to address gender inequality and violence in their national responses to HIV. We wish to reiterate that implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the

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<sup>1</sup> Statement of the Executive Director to the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Committee, Lusaka, December, 2006.

Beijing Platform of Action, and the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) is absolutely necessary in the fight against AIDS. Unless we stop gender discrimination and violence, we will not be able to stop the spread of HIV.

The UNAIDS Secretariat is working with the partners of the Global Coalition on a number of fronts to change this situation. With UNIFEM, we have mobilized funds for an HIV window in the UN Trust Fund to Eliminate Violence against Women. With the International Center for Research on Women and the Food and Agricultural Organization, we are exploring how to better respond to links between property and inheritance rights and HIV. With WHO and the Center for Women's Global Leadership, we hope to better to elucidate effective interventions to address the intersections between violence and HIV. With the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS and the World YWCA we are seeking to raise the voice and participation of girls including those living with HIV. With the UNFPA, IPPF and the International Women's Health Coalition, we are trying to strengthen girls' access to sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention services; and with UNICEF, to strengthen girls' right to education.

Dealing with discrimination and violence against girls in the context of HIV will take at least three prongs of change: leadership and financial and political commitment among national governments, the donor community and the UN system; the reform of law and policy and investment in their real enforcement; and the social mobilization and empowerment of girls and women and boys and men toward change. We urge the members of the Commission to show the bold leadership it will take to protect girls in the context of HIV by implementing actions to prevent discrimination and violence in their own responses to HIV:

- Conduct gender analyses of the national epidemic to determine how harmful gender norms, violence and inadequate laws are making girls particularly vulnerable to HIV.
- Ensure that girls are in school and stay there, that schools are free from sexual violence, that schools foster and teach gender equality, and that every school provides age-appropriate HIV prevention and sexual information and education and life-skills training to girls and boys.
- Implement economic empowerment and microfinance schemes and include in these information on HIV, sexual and reproductive health and violence.
- Change laws and policies to prevent violence and discrimination inside and outside marriage, to allow adolescent girls independent and free access to sexual and reproductive

health services and to HIV-related health services, and to protect children who have lost their parents to HIV from violence, discrimination and property-grabbing.

- Implement programmes involving men and boys to transform harmful gender norms and lead to the rejection of violence.
- Outlaw early marriage and female genital mutilation, and implement public and community campaigns against gender-based violence and intergenerational sex.
- Implement legal, social and medical support services for victims of sexual violence that include timely access to post exposure prophylaxis for HIV.
- Ensure that the burden of AIDS care does not fall on girls by providing economic and social support to families affected by AIDS and creating alternative forms of care.
- Ensure that national monitoring and evaluation mechanisms collect and disaggregate data by sex, marital status, and age, and ensure equity in access and uptake of HIV services and commodities.

Madame Chairperson,

Real change in ensuring that girls are free from violence and discrimination will require a sea-change in commitment and resources. Perhaps the horror of the AIDS epidemic will help galvanize that change which is long overdue. We do not have time to wait. We look forward to working together on all efforts to protect girls from discrimination and violence and to do our part to help turn back the twin epidemics of violence and HIV. Gender discrimination is not a women's problem. It is a problem for humanity. All of us suffer, and our communities are underdeveloped because of gender inequality. Therefore, we need to engage men and boys in stopping gender-based discrimination and violence. We hope to see more men on the table, including here at the Commission on the Status of Women.

Thank you.