



Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS

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Speech

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

SOFIA LAUNCH

**House of Commons, London
23 November 2005**

**Remarks by Debbie Landey,
Deputy Executive Director, UNAIDS**

Ned Gerard, Member of Parliament, Chair All Party Parliamentary Group on HIV/AIDS, our host,

Excellencies, Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you Mary for these remarks – and for all the hard work you are doing through the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS and the Business Women’s Initiative on Women and HIV/AIDS to reduce the epidemic’s impact on women and girls. It is a privilege to be here with you today.

I would like to start by saying how **delighted and honoured** I am to be here with all of you on this historic occasion.

We are here to launch **SOFIA** - the brainchild of two women who have been leading efforts to make the AIDS response work better for women and girls. As individuals speaking out on the issue and as visionary leaders of huge global membership organizations, Alice and Lesley are both courageous and committed advocates for concrete action that has a real impact on the epidemic.

The launch of SOFIA is timely. Two days ago, UNAIDS released its **latest report** on the state of the AIDS epidemic.

I’ll start with the good news – namely that in several countries HIV infection rates have fallen recently. In both Kenya and Zimbabwe, for example, national prevalence rates are falling among women as well as men. This is partly due to behaviour change – people delaying the first time they have sexual intercourse, having fewer sexual partners, and increasing condom use. HIV information campaigns and voluntary HIV testing and counselling have encouraged these changes. In other words, HIV prevention efforts are working.

Sadly though, despite encouraging news from some countries, the reality is that the AIDS epidemic continues to outstrip global and national efforts to contain it. More people than ever before are now living with HIV. 17.5 million of these – just under half – are women. 2.3 million are under 15 years old.

Female infection rates are on the rise in almost every region of the world, with

some areas being hit harder than others. Once again, the statistics tell us that the impact is most severe in places where poverty has its tightest hold, and where socio-economic imbalances between men and women are most pervasive.

13.5 million (more than three-quarters) of women currently living with HIV are in **sub-Saharan Africa**. In this region, 76% of young people living with HIV are female. One-third of pregnant women in Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland are testing HIV positive.

Meanwhile, in Trinidad and Tobago, HIV infection levels are six times higher among girls aged 15-19 than among boys of the same age. In Honduras, AIDS is the leading cause of death for women.

Female infection rates are rising at alarming rates in South and Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. They are even inching up here in Western Europe. In the US, AIDS is the leading cause of death for African American women aged 25-34. In many countries marriage and women's own fidelity are not enough to protect them against HIV infection.

But if the epidemic is bigger than ever, so too is the global momentum to get ahead of it. Financial investment is increasing (we are now able to talk in terms of billions of dollars rather than millions).

Political commitment is growing: in September, the world's governments signed up to developing and implementing a package for HIV prevention, treatment and care with the aim of coming as close as possible to the goal of universal access to treatment by 2010 for all those who need it.

And people living with HIV – particularly in this context – women living with HIV – are strengthening their role at the heart of driving, developing and delivering effective AIDS response programmes.

You continue to inspire us.

Clearly, there is no single solution. Defeating AIDS has to be a broad, inclusive endeavour that concentrates on several fronts at the same time. It is also something that requires long term commitment. If we are to get ahead – and stay ahead – of this epidemic we must be coordinated, comprehensive and collaborative.

This is where SOFIA comes in.

SOFIA, like its big sister alliance, the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS, brings together individuals and representatives of a wide variety of institutions, to work towards one single, shared goal – to make life better for women and girls in a world with AIDS.

For this to happen, we need more HIV services for women. But this is not enough on its own. We must also break down the obstacles that stop so many of the world's women from accessing those services. This means campaigning for universal education and ending violence against women. It requires pushing for legal reform and an end to harmful social norms and practices where these exist.

No one is saying this is easy. But by pooling our skills, our experience, and our resources, and embarking on a course of bold and forward action, we can turn the tide – if we choose to do so.

I sincerely hope that by joining us here today you have already made your choice. And that like Mary, Alice, Lesley, Kanyoo, David and other extraordinary people around the world, you will choose courage, action, and hope.

Thank you.