



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality
and the Empowerment of Women



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JOINT UNITED NATIONS PROGRAMME ON HIV/AIDS

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Statement to the Fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Agenda item 3(a)(i): “Access and participation of women and girls in education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women’s equal access to full employment and decent work”

**28 February 2011
New York**

Uniting the world against **AIDS**

Mr. Chairperson, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

This statement is on behalf of the Secretariat of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the cosponsors ILO, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNODC, WFP, WHO, as well as UN-Women. We welcome the opportunity to address the 55th session of the Commission on the priority theme on “Access and participation of women and girls in education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women’s equal access to full employment and decent work”. We would like to address the linkages between HIV, education and employment of girls and women.

Mr. Chairperson,

As of December 2009, there were about 15.9 million women living with HIV worldwide, representing more than half of all the HIV-positive adults¹. The epidemic is taking a devastating toll on young women aged 15-24, who account for more than 60% of all young people living with HIV worldwide and over 70% in sub-Saharan Africa². The vulnerability of women and girls to HIV remains particularly high in sub-Saharan Africa, which is home to about 76% of all women living with HIV³.

Today, evidence points indisputably to the impact of gender disparities on the vulnerability of girls and women to HIV infection. Lack of legal rights, education and economic opportunities for women and girls - regardless of their HIV status - limit their choices as well as their capacity to refuse sex, to negotiate safer sex or to resist sexual violence and coercion, including transactional sex and early or forced marriage. As discussed during the 53rd session of the Commission, women and girls also carry a disproportionate burden of AIDS-related care, often missing out on education and employment opportunities for their own advancement. Once HIV-positive, women and girls are exposed to stigma, discrimination and higher risks of violence that limit their ability to exercise their rights.

To be effective, efforts to reduce HIV transmission must address the social, cultural and economic factors that increase women’s and girls’ vulnerability to HIV infection. Women and girls have played a powerful role in leading vital changes in harmful norms and practices and these efforts need to be supported and sustained with men and boys as key partners in establishing changes that endure. Access of women and girls to quality formal and non-formal education, as well as accurate HIV information and comprehensive gender-sensitive sexuality education, and the promotion of women’s economic empowerment, including through the protection of their property and inheritance rights and equal access to employment, in support of gender equality, are key elements in this regard.

Promotion of gender equality is a strategic priority under the new *UNAIDS Strategy 2011-2015: Getting to Zero*. It emphasizes that meeting the HIV needs of women and girls and calling for zero tolerance for gender based violence are essential to advancing global progress towards universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support and to halting and reversing the spread of HIV, thus contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development goals by 2015.

Mr. Chairperson,

Increasing girls’ and women’s educational opportunities and the quality of education is inextricably linked to effective HIV prevention as well as improved sexual and reproductive health, including maternal health, and child health. Growing evidence points to the fact that

education levels are often correlated with factors that substantially lower HIV risk, such as delayed sexual debut, greater HIV awareness and knowledge, and higher rates of condom use. For example, for every additional year in school, girls are better equipped to make decisions affecting their sexual behaviour and they have higher earning potential – factors that have been proven to substantially lower the risk of HIV infection:

- According to the Global Campaign for Education, seven million cases of HIV could be prevented in the next decade if every child receives an education.
- The risk of HIV infection is more than halved for young people, particularly girls, who stay in school and complete a basic education⁴.
- Women with post-primary education are five times more likely than illiterate women to be educated on the topic of HIV and AIDS⁵.

The international community has made numerous commitments to women's literacy, getting more girls into school, and to ensuring that schools are safe and providing empowering quality education. However, concrete action to match these commitments and to address the linkage between access to quality formal and non-formal education and HIV prevention has been lacking⁶:

- 72 million out of school children, of which slightly over 50% are girls⁷.
- Two out of three countries in the world face gender disparities in primary and secondary education and as many as half will not achieve the MDG goal of gender parity in education by 2015⁸.
- Two-thirds of the 796 million adults lacking basic literacy skills are women⁹;
- Globally, less than 30% of young women have comprehensive and correct knowledge on HIV compared with about 37% of young men, both of which fall far short of the UNGASS target of 95%¹⁰.

To help address these gaps, the UNAIDS Agenda For Accelerated Country Action For Women, Girls, Gender Equality and HIV ¹¹ supports access to comprehensive sexuality education for young people, both in school and out of school, that promotes gender equality and human rights, and that equips young women and men with evidence-based knowledge, skills and resources necessary to enable them to make responsible choices about their social and sexual relationships.

Mr. Chairperson,

The workplace offers a unique entry point to promote gender equality, address gender-based violence, and facilitate equitable access for women to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. Taking action through the world of work to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment increases the bargaining power of women to negotiate safer sex, and may also help women afford and have access to HIV testing and counselling services and to antiretroviral treatment^{12,13}. Women's inclusion, especially at decision-making levels, in work-related groups and organizations, such as trade unions, can contribute to greater access and control over productive resources. It allows women to better access their rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, and lower their vulnerability to HIV¹⁴.

At the same time, women account for a significant percentage of workers at higher risk of violence in the workplace, such as informal economy workers, domestic workers, migrants, and sex workers. Gender-based violence and sexual harassment can threaten the health of women workers and increase their risk of HIV infection. The vast majority of women working in informal arrangements are not covered by protective regulations or social services¹⁵ and therefore have limited access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services.

Domestic workers, who are predominately female, are especially vulnerable to violence as they work and often live in private homes and are thus isolated from their own families or communities¹⁶. Women migrant workers may be at higher risk of HIV as they often have limited or no access to HIV prevention and health-care services¹⁷. Sex workers are highly vulnerable to many forms of gender-based violence from clients, brothel owners or other controllers, law enforcement officials, intimate partners, their families, neighbours, and other sex workers.

The ILO Recommendation concerning HIV and AIDS in the world of work (2010, No. 200)¹⁸ notes that women and girls are disproportionately affected by the HIV pandemic as a result of gender inequalities and that women's empowerment is a key factor in the global response to HIV. The Recommendation applies to all women and men workers "under all forms or arrangements, and at all workplaces", thus encompassing all categories, including seasonal workers, migrant workers, health workers, sex workers and workers in the informal economy.

The Recommendation calls for measures to be taken in or through workplaces to reduce transmission of HIV and alleviate its impact through the following measures¹⁹:

- ensure respect for human rights including gender equality and fundamental freedoms;
- ensure gender equality and the empowerment of women;
- ensure actions to prevent and prohibit violence and harassment in the workplace;
- promote the protection of women and men's sexual and reproductive health and sexual and reproductive rights;
- empowerment of all workers regardless of their sexual orientation or whether or not they belong to a vulnerable group.

Mr. Chairperson,

Let me conclude by a brief reminder that on 8-10 June this year, the General Assembly will convene a High-level Meeting to review the progress made in implementing the 2001 Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS and the 2006 Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS, and chart the way forward for the future course of the AIDS response.

These landmark Declarations have recognized that gender equality and the empowerment of women are fundamental elements of an effective AIDS response, and committed to eliminate gender inequalities, gender-based abuse and violence.

Addressing gender inequalities, discrimination and lack of human rights protection that hinder access of women and girls to HIV services is also at the core of the universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support.

UNAIDS looks forward to working with all relevant partners and stakeholders to ensure that the issues of women and girls are effectively addressed during the High-level Meeting on AIDS in June.

Thank you.

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- ¹ UNAIDS Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic, 2010.
- ² http://www.unicef.org/media/files/Children_and_AIDS-Fifth_Stocktaking_Report_2010_111610.pdf
- ³ UNAIDS Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic, 2010.
- ⁴ World Bank website, accessed on 09.02.2011
- ⁵ UNESCO. Education counts towards the Millennium Development Goals. 2010.
- ⁶ UNAIDS IATT on Education. Advocacy Brief on Girls' Education and HIV Prevention. 2008.
- ⁷ UNESCO, Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2010.
- ⁸ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Gender Parity in Primary and Secondary Education. Fact Sheet, September 2010, No. 4.
- ⁹ UNESCO. Education counts towards the Millennium Development Goals. 2010.
- ¹⁰ UNAIDS Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic, 2010.
- ¹¹ http://www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/dataimport/pub/manual/2010/20100226_jc1794_agenda_for_accelerated_country_action_en.pdf
- ¹² Pronyk P., Hargreaves J., Kim L., Morison G., Phetla C., Watts J., Busza J. Porter. (2006). Effect of a structured intervention for the prevalence of intimate-partner violence and HIV in rural South Africa: A cluster randomised trial. *The Lancet* 368: 1973-1983.
- ¹³ Phinney, H. (2008) Rice is essential but tiresome; you should get some noodles': Doi Moi and the political economy of men's extramarital sexual relations and marital HIV risk in Hanoi, Vietnam. *American Journal of Public Health* 98(4): 650-660.
- ¹⁴ 2009 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Women's Control over Economic Resources and Access to Financial Resources, including Microfinance.
- ¹⁵ Haspels N., Kasim Z.M., Thomas C., McCann D. (2001) *Action Against Sexual Harassment at Work in Asia and the Pacific*. ILO, Bangkok, page 56.
- ¹⁶ D'Souza, A. (2010) *Moving towards decent work for domestic workers: An overview of the ILO's work*, ILO Bureau for Gender Equality working paper 2, page v.
- ¹⁷ ILO. (2009) Gender equality at the heart of decent work, Report VI, International Labour Conference, 98th Session, Geneva.
- ¹⁸ http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---ilo_aids/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms_142706.pdf
- ¹⁹ Ibid, paragraph 14.