

PRESS STATEMENT

On the eve of Zero Discrimination Day, UNAIDS calls for the protection for the health and human rights of vulnerable populations

Statement from Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS

GENEVA, 28 February 2014—On the eve of Zero Discrimination Day, 1 March, I am deeply concerned about the growing wave of punitive approaches and laws in different countries. Laws which risk undermining the rights to health and non-discrimination, as well as access to life-saving services for key populations, including people living with HIV, women, men who have sex with men, sex workers, transgender people (LGBT) and people who use drugs.

When UNAIDS announced that 1 March 2014 would become the first Zero Discrimination Day, we could not have imagined the sadly ironic timing of this important day. For all who seek a more just world, for all who strive for peace and prosperity—we must demand an end to inequality, discrimination and violence against people living with HIV, LGBT people, sex workers, people who use drugs and other vulnerable populations.

In recent days, leaders of the United Nations have called for an end to discrimination. In his recent address to the International Olympic Committee, the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that hatred of any kind has no place in the 21st century and that we must raise our voices against attacks on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex people.

UNAIDS has consistently highlighted that discrimination is a violation of human rights and a major barrier to an effective AIDS response. Yet many people living with HIV or vulnerable to it continue to face unfair treatment or unjustified criminalization.

UNAIDS deeply regrets that the international community is observing the first Zero Discrimination Day shortly after Nigeria and Uganda have enacted laws that further criminalize LGBT populations and people who support them. In December 2013, the Supreme Court of India re-criminalized adult consensual same-sex sexual conduct; and in June 2013, the Russian Federation passed a law prohibiting public information on sexual orientation and gender identity among minors.

Many other vulnerable groups also face punitive laws and illegal law enforcement—including sex workers and people who use drugs, whose daily lives are filled with discrimination, violence and abuse. In several countries in the world, people who use drugs, or are suspected of drug use, are detained without due process in detention centres where they are denied health care and face substandard conditions. People living with HIV continue to face high levels of stigma and discrimination, being denied health care, education, employment, housing and freedom of

movement based on their HIV status. Such discrimination and punitive approaches pose huge setbacks to both health and development.

Discrimination has many forms, often disproportionately affecting women. Statistics show that globally, one in three women will face gender-based violence. In only four out of ten countries worldwide do equal numbers of girls and boys attend secondary school, and women are 10% less likely to be literate than men.

The AIDS response has provided valuable lessons in human value and dignity, inclusion and participation. It has also taught us that discrimination can be deadly; that punitive laws foster hate, fear and violence and consistently put HIV prevention and treatment services out of reach for people who need them the most. The global AIDS response has shown that only by turning discrimination and denial into protection and acceptance, can society reach out to underserved groups and ensure they can access the services for their health and live productive lives of dignity—this in turn contributes to human security and global development.

On this eve of Zero Discrimination Day, I have been moved and inspired to see people from all walks of life answer the call for zero discrimination. People living with and affected by HIV and human rights defenders are on the front lines—and lawmakers, business leaders, activists, celebrities and young people are joining together to promote a different kind of world where no one has to fear discrimination or violence because of who they are, how they live their lives or whom they love.

On Zero Discrimination Day, I ask you to speak up if someone is discriminated against or threatened—to raise awareness and to celebrate diversity. Everyone, everywhere, has a right to their dignity, security, health and dreams.

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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 to maximize results for the AIDS response. Learn more at unaids.org and connect with us on Facebook and Twitter.