

STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: HALT THE SPREAD OF AIDS

Geneva, 10 December 2004 – Today is Human Rights Day, the 56th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the last of this year's 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence. It is also a day on which intolerable numbers of women will suffer violent assaults, and on which many will be infected with HIV.

This is the fourteenth year that the Center for Women's Global Leadership has coordinated a global campaign to highlight the fact that millions of women in every society around the world face violence every day, most often at the hands of husbands and partners, and within the so-called safety of their homes and families. That violence may be physical, sexual, or psychological.

"We must eliminate violence against women if we are to stop the spread of AIDS," said Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

Violence makes women more susceptible to HIV infection. The World Health Organisation (WHO) points out that when sex is forced, the risk of HIV transmission increases – especially among girls and young women whose vaginal tracts are immature and tear easily. Studies from Rwanda, South Africa and Tanzania show up to three-fold increases in risk of HIV among women who have experienced violence compared to those who have not. The WHO estimates that between one in three and one in five women worldwide are physically or sexually assaulted by intimate partners at some point in their lives. The Organisation also reports that many women say that their first sexual encounter was coerced.

"Not only does forced sex make women more liable to infection, but the fear of violent male reactions – physical and psychological - prevents many women from going to find out more about HIV," said Dr Piot. "It discourages them from getting tested and stops them seeking treatment."

UNAIDS and the Global Coalition for Women and AIDS therefore strongly support the decision to dedicate this year's 16 Days of Activism to underscoring the links between gender-based violence and the spread of HIV infection.

Since 25 November, hundreds of thousands of people in countries ranging from Austria to Ghana, from Jamaica to Russia, from India to the US have taken part in marches and seminars, theatre productions and training programmes, all on the theme "For the Health of Women, For the Health of the World: No More Violence". The campaign calls on countries and non-governmental bodies to take responsibility for ending violence against women, recommending a range of steps to ensure that this abuse of women's human rights is no longer tolerated. These include programmes to improve communication within couples and to foster equality in relationships.

"The sixteen days end today – but we must take inspiration from the work these people have done and build on what they have achieved as part of the global endeavour to stop violence and halt the spread of AIDS," concluded Dr Piot. "Let us remember that like HIV, violence against women *is* preventable."

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