

## PRESS STATEMENT

### **Empowering women is critical to ending the AIDS epidemic**

*Message from UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé on International Women's Day*

**GENEVA, 8 March 2015**—As we celebrate International Women's Day, world leaders and civil society are gathering in New York to take part in the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. There, they will review the progress made since the adoption 20 years ago of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which set ambitious targets designed to improve the lives of women around the world. The Platform for Action strived to make sure that women and girls could exercise their freedom and realize their rights to live free from violence, go to school, make decisions and have unrestricted access to quality health care, including to sexual and reproductive health-care services.

In the response to HIV, there have been major advances over the past 20 years and new HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths are continuing to decline. However, in reducing new infections this success has not been shared equally.

In 2013, 64% of new adolescent infections globally were among young women. In sub-Saharan Africa, young women aged 15 to 24 are almost twice as likely to become infected with HIV as their male counterparts. Gender inequalities, poverty, harmful cultural practices and unequal power relations exacerbate women's vulnerability to HIV, but concerted global commitment and action can reverse this.

Twenty years ago, world leaders recognized that gender inequality was a major barrier to women achieving the highest possible attainable standards of health, and that women had unequal opportunities to protect their health and well-being. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognized fundamentally that the human rights of women include their right to assume control over matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. We should all be concerned that 20 years on, the United Nations Secretary-General's report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration underscores unacceptably slow progress in many areas, including the persistent denial of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The core principles of the Beijing Declaration are at the heart of UNAIDS' commitment to ending the AIDS epidemic. As the world moves towards collectively agreeing global sustainable development goals, we need to reaffirm the commitment that no one is left behind.

UNAIDS has put forward a global Fast-Track Target of reducing HIV infections to less than half a million per year by 2020. Reaching this ambitious target means committing to reducing new infections among women and girls by at least 75% over the next five years. The 90–90–90 treatment targets are also important as AIDS is the leading cause of death globally among women of reproductive age and of adolescent girls in Africa. The 90–90–90 treatment targets are: 90% of people living with HIV knowing their HIV status; 90% of people who know their HIV-positive status receiving treatment; and 90% of people on HIV treatment having a suppressed viral load so their immune system remains strong and they are no longer infectious.

Ensuring that women and girls are empowered to protect themselves from HIV, to make decisions about their own health and to live free of violence, including violence related to their HIV status, will be crucial to ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030.

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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 towards ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030. Learn more at [unaids.org](http://unaids.org) and connect with us on Facebook and Twitter.