

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY MESSAGE 2021

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Winnie Byanyima

Executive Director of UNAIDS

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations

Women leaders have provided a guiding light for the world in responding to the COVID-19 crisis, from heads of government to coordinators of grass-roots social movements. They have reminded the world how crucial it is to have critical numbers of women, in all their diversity, in positions of leadership.

But the COVID-19 crisis has seen progress towards equality pushed back. It has widened the gap between women and men in wealth, in income, in access to services, in the burden of unpaid care, in status and in power.

Up to 20 million more secondary school-aged girls could end up out of school following the crisis. Many may never go back to school or have access to skills and economic opportunities, and will be at greater risk of violence, poor health, poverty and more.

Two and a half million more girls are now at risk of child marriage in the next five years. There has been a dramatic increase in violence against women.

Pandemics such as COVID-19 and HIV magnify the fissures in society and exacerbate vulnerabilities. Gender-based and intersecting inequalities and violence hold back the lives of women and girls all over the world.

The pandemic has brought into sharp and painful focus that even before COVID-19 an estimated 34 million girls between the ages of 12 and 14 years were out of school, one in three women globally reported having experienced physical or sexual violence and women the world over worked longer hours for less or no pay.

Women who were already stigmatized are among those who are being hardest hit by the impacts of the pandemic. The sudden loss of the livelihoods of sex workers and their lack of access to health care and social protection have intensified their vulnerabilities, especially for those living with HIV. Many female migrants and precarious workers adversely affected by the pandemic are excluded from government relief and protection programmes, as well as health services. Stigma, discrimination and criminalization put transgender women, and women who use drugs, at heightened risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and hold them back from accessing HIV prevention, treatment and care services.

Recovery strategies cannot be gender-blind or gender-neutral: they must overturn the inequalities that hold women back.

Together, UNAIDS, UN Women, the United Nations Children’s Fund, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the United Nations Population Fund have convened a broad movement, Education Plus, to work with governments to secure the transformative changes that will enable all of Africa’s adolescent girls to be in school, safe and strong. That includes all the girls who have been pushed out of school during the COVID-19 crisis and those who were excluded from school even before the crisis hit.

Overcoming the COVID-19 crisis, and ending new HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths, both require that we close in on the inequalities that drive vulnerabilities. The new global AIDS strategy 2021–2026 puts the rights and multiple and diverse needs of women and girls across their life cycle at the centre of the response: from preventing vertical transmission to providing access to quality education in safe and supportive environments to ensuring comprehensive sexuality education and holistic sexual and reproductive health services.

Gender inequality is not only wrong. It is dangerous. It weakens us all. A more equal world will be better able to respond to pandemics and other shocks; it will leave us healthier and safer and more prosperous.

Progress on gender equality has never been automatic. It has never been given, it has always been won.

We are inspired by the women’s movements leading the struggle for equality. The United Nations stands alongside you to advance a world where women and girls in all their diversity will thrive and take their rightful places as equals.

This International Women’s Day let’s support and celebrate women taking the lead.

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Contact

UNAIDS Media | tel. +41 22 791 4237 | communications@unaids.org

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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 as part of the Sustainable Development Goals. Learn more at unaids.org and connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube.