



**Mekong Leaders'
Consultative Meeting on
Women and AIDS
*Press release***

***WOMEN IN MEKONG REGION FACED WITH HIGHER RATES
OF HIV INFECTION THAN MEN***

**China, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam
showing similar trends**

Bangkok, 8 March 2004 – The rate of HIV infection in the Mekong Region is rising faster among women than men. “Lack of attention to women’s rights is fuelling the HIV epidemic,” said Dr Kathleen Cravero, Deputy Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), speaking at the Mekong Leaders’ Consultative Meeting on Women and AIDS on the occasion of International Women’s Day. “More young women are becoming infected due, in large part, to a failure to encourage sex education or condom use. Furthermore, prevention strategies that focus exclusively on abstinence, faithfulness, and condom use – all of which are beyond the control of most women and girls – are obviously inadequate to protect them from HIV infection,” she said.

While men still represent a majority of those infected in the Mekong region, women are becoming infected at a much faster rate than men. Effective prevention messages and services often do not reach young people, particularly girls, who are the most vulnerable to HIV. Cultural traditions can make it difficult for girls and women to access the information and services required to protect themselves from HIV, according to UNAIDS. They can also exacerbate the burden of care on women.

“Women carry the burden of care for other family members with AIDS. When women fall ill, however, they are more likely than men to suffer ostracism in their community once their HIV status becomes known. Many lose social protections. HIV-positive mothers with infants may continue breastfeeding from fear of being stigmatized if they stop,” said Innes Zalitis, Country Representative for UNICEF in Thailand.

Globally, women account for half of the 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS. In sub-Saharan Africa, 58 percent of those living with HIV were women as of end 2003 and young women aged 15 to 24 were 2.5 times more likely to be infected than young men.

Thirty percent of adult infections in the Mekong region are in women, but the numbers are rising. The Asia Pacific region already has one country, Papua New Guinea, where men and women are equally affected by HIV. In the 15-29 age group in Papua New Guinea, the number of infections in women outnumbers those in men.

Women are particularly vulnerable to HIV due to insufficient access to HIV prevention services, inability to negotiate safer sex, a lack of female-controlled HIV prevention methods such as microbicides, and inadequate knowledge about AIDS. In Cambodia and Vietnam, almost 50% of the young women aged 15-24 surveyed believed they could contract HIV from a mosquito bite, around 30% believed that HIV could be contracted by supernatural means, and nearly 35% believed a healthy-looking person could not be infected.

The lack of employment opportunities for women also increases their vulnerability to HIV infection. Significant numbers of women in the Mekong region who have limited options for income generation may engage in sex work, heightening the risk of HIV. Even though they may be aware about HIV and sexually transmitted infections, they are often powerless to demand that their clients use condoms. When a brothel-based sex worker is found to be HIV-positive, she is often dismissed and loses her livelihood, with little or no social safety net to support her.

In societies where it is common or accepted for men to have more than one partner, wives also run the risk of being infected by their husbands. In the Mekong region, most sexually transmitted HIV infections among women and girls occur either inside marriage or in relationships women believe to be monogamous.

“Studies in antenatal clinics in Thailand show that over 80% of HIV-positive women report only one sexual partner. Increasing rates of sexual violence and rape in Mekong countries are also putting women at risk,” said Lucita S. Lazo, UNIFEM’s Regional Programme Director.

In preparation for the Mekong Leaders’ Consultative Meeting, UNIFEM, UNICEF and UNAIDS brought together a select group of leaders from 5 countries in the region – both men and women -- to explore how regional and national leaders can begin to address the complex issue of women and AIDS in the Mekong region within the context of the community, national, and global responses to AIDS.

The Mekong Leaders’ Consultative Meeting on Women and AIDS is the first initiative of the newly-formed Mekong Coalition on Women and AIDS, a regional offshoot of the Global Coalition of Women and AIDS which was launched in London in early February this year.

“Because of their lack of social and economic power, many women and girls are unable to negotiate relationships based on abstinence, faithfulness and use of condoms. It is precisely to address these inequalities and reduce women’s vulnerability to HIV that the Mekong Coalition on Women and AIDS has been created,” said Ms. Lazo.

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