



A UNAIDS Initiative
**The Global Coalition
on Women and AIDS**

Press release

ACTION AGAINST AIDS MUST ADDRESS EPIDEMIC'S INCREASING IMPACT ON WOMEN, SAYS UN REPORT

BANGKOK, 14 July 2004 – Action against HIV/AIDS that does not confront gender inequality is doomed to failure, according to a report released today by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund.

Noting that women are now nearly half of all people infected with HIV, the report documents the devastating and often invisible impact of AIDS on women and girls and highlights the ways discrimination, poverty and gender-based violence help fuel the epidemic.

The report, *Women and HIV/AIDS: Confronting the Crisis*, reveals that 48% of all adults living with HIV are women, up from 35% in 1985. Today, 37.8 million people are infected worldwide: 17 million of them are female. The situation is even more alarming in sub-Saharan Africa, where women make up 57% of those living with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Young African women aged 15-24 are three times more likely to be infected than their male counterparts.

Without AIDS strategies that specifically focus on women, there can be no global progress in fighting the disease. Women know less than men about how to prevent infection and what they do know is often rendered useless by the discrimination and violence they face, according to the report.

“Promoting concrete actions that address the reality of women’s lives and help decrease their vulnerability to HIV is the only way forward,” said Dr Kathleen Cravero, Deputy Executive Director of UNAIDS. “We must reduce violence against women, ensure greater access to HIV prevention and treatment services and protect their property rights.”

Confronting the Crisis focuses on key areas identified by the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS – an international pressure group – as critical to an effective AIDS response. The Coalition is a broad-based initiative launched in 2004 to stimulate concrete action to improve the daily lives of women and girls infected and affected by HIV and AIDS.

These critical areas include HIV prevention, treatment, care-giving, education, gender-based violence and women’s rights. Women have the right to education and information needed to protect themselves, and to female-controlled protection methods. They have the right to economic independence and access to land, property and employment. They have the right to be free from harmful traditional practices and violence. They have the right to exercise control over their own bodies

and lives.

“The ABC approach - Abstain, Be faithful, use Condoms - is not a sufficient means of prevention for women and adolescent girls,” said UNFPA Executive Director, Thoraya Obaid. “Abstinence is meaningless to women who are coerced into sex. Faithfulness offers little protection to wives whose husbands have several partners or were infected before marriage. And condoms require the cooperation of men. The social and economic empowerment of women is key. The epidemic won’t be reversed unless governments provide the resources needed to ensure women’s right to sexual and reproductive health.”

Despite the odds stacked against them, many women have become leaders in the battle against HIV/AIDS. *Confronting the Crisis* offers a number of stories of women from across the globe who have undertaken innovative action to face the epidemic. These women are battling to change AIDS policies and strategies, and calling for funding to be directed to meeting women’s needs and circumstances.

“Gender inequality has turned a devastating disease – AIDS – into an economic and social crisis,” said Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of UNIFEM. “The crisis requires the infusion of serious resources into programmes and policies that promote gender equality and women’s empowerment. These must be grounded in the knowledge and experiences of women living and working in communities affected by HIV/AIDS. Women are not just victims, they are agents of change. Infected and affected women’s voices must be heard and their leadership invested in. To end this triple threat of HIV/AIDS, gender inequality and poverty, women must have the right to economic independence and access to land, property and employment, and a life free of stigma, violence and discrimination.”

Note to editors:

Some of the women whose stories are featured in *Confronting the Crisis* include:

Kousalya Periaswamy, living in India, was widowed and left HIV positive at 19 by a husband who only told her he was infected a few weeks after their marriage. She braved social disapproval and began speaking out to encourage positive women like herself to come forward. The group she helped to start, the Positive Women’s Network of South India, now has thousands of members, providing counselling, social services - and hope - for many women and girls.

[Ms Periaswamy is attending the IAS conference and may be available for interview]

In Sierra Leone, armed militiamen abducted Khadija Bah, 19, and made her their sexual slave after murdering her parents and husband. She escaped, made her way to the capital, Freetown, and like thousands of others with no means of support, she turned to sex work to survive. At a centre run by the Women in Crisis project, started by “Auntie Juliana” Konteh, Khadija found a safe place where she could talk about her trauma, learn to protect herself against HIV, and learn skills that would allow her to give up sex work.

For more information, contact:

UNAIDS: *Dominique De Santis, desantis@unaids.org, T: +66 1 250 0882 or +41 79 254 6803*

UNFPA: *William A. Ryan, ryanw@unfpa.org, T: +1 646 226 6104 (mobile)*

UNIFEM: *Leigh Pasqual, leigh.pasqual@undp.org, T: +66 1 250 0231 (mobile)*

Karishma Vyas, karishma.vyas@unifem.un.or.th, T: +66 6 141 2510 (mobile)