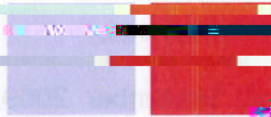




United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women



JOINT UNITED NATIONS PROGRAMME ON HIV/AIDS



[Note: che... against...]

Statement to the Fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Agenda item 3(a)(i): "Access and participation of women and girls in education, training, science and technology, including women's equal access to full employment and decent work"

28 February 2011
New York

Uniting the world against AIDS

Mr. Chairperson, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

This statement is on behalf of the Secretariat of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the secretariats of UNFPA, UNICEF, UNODC, WFP, WFP, WFP, as well as UN Women. We welcome the opportunity to discuss the 55th session of the Commission on Population and Development and participation of women and girls in education, training, science and technology, including from the perspective of women's equal access to employment and decent work. We will continue to address the linkages between HIV, education and employment of girls and women.

Mr. Chairperson,

As of December 2009, there were about 15.9 million women living with HIV worldwide, representing a significant proportion of all the HIV-positive adults.¹ The epidemic is taking a devastating toll on young people, with an estimated 1.2 million people living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa.² The vulnerability of women and girls to HIV remains high, and in many cases, particularly high in sub-Saharan Africa, which is home to about 76% of all women living with HIV.³

Today, we face a double burden: not only the impact of gender disparities on the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV infection, but also the impact of HIV on women's and girls' economic opportunities for women and girls – regarding aspects of their daily lives, including their capacity to negotiate safer sex or to resist sexual violence, including transactional sex and early or forced marriage. As discussed during the 53rd session of the Commission on Population and Development, women and girls living with HIV often face barriers to accessing and affording HIV-related care, often including barriers to education and employment opportunities for their own advancement. Once HIV-positive, women and girls are exposed to stigma, discrimination and higher risks of violence that limit their ability to exercise their rights.

Efforts to reduce HIV transmission must address the social, cultural and economic factors that increase women's and girls' vulnerability to HIV infection. Women and girls have played a powerful role in leading their partners in harmful norms and practices and in supporting and sustained with men and boys as key partners in establishing changes that endure. All these efforts are critical to achieving a non-violent, non-discriminatory, and non-stigmatizing environment and to promoting women's economic empowerment, including through the protection of their property and inheritance rights and equal access to employment. In support of gender equality, are key elements in this regard.

Gender equality is a strategic priority under the new UNAIDS Strategy 2011-2015: *Getting to Zero*. It emphasizes that meeting the HIV needs of women and girls and calling for zero tolerance for gender-based violence are essential to progress towards universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support, and reversing the spread of HIV, thus contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

Mr. Chairperson,

Increasing girls' and women's educational opportunities and the quality of education is inextricably linked to effective HIV prevention as well as improved sexual and reproductive health, including maternal health and child health. Growing evidence points to the fact that

education levels are a strong predictor of risk factors that substantially reduce HIV risk, such as delayed sexual debut, greater HIV awareness and knowledge, and higher rates of condom use. For example, for every additional year in school, girls are better equipped to make decisions affecting their sexual behaviour and to negotiate safer sex. Learning peer education programmes have been proven to substantially lower the risk of HIV infection:

- According to the Global Campaign for Education, seven million cases of HIV could be prevented in the next decade if every child receives an education.
- The risk of HIV infection is three times higher for young people who have not completed primary school than for those who have completed a basic education⁴.
- Women with post-primary education are five times more likely than illiterate women to be educated about HIV and to use condoms⁵.

The international community has made numerous commitments to work to ensure that more girls go to school and to ensuring that schools are safe and providing empowerment education. However, concrete action to maintain these commitments and to close the wide gap between access to quality formal and non-formal, formal education and HIV prevention has been lacking⁶:

- 72 million out of school children, of which slightly over 50% are girls⁷.
- Two out of three countries in the world face gender disparities in primary and secondary education and as many as half will not achieve the MDG goal of gender parity in education by 2015⁸.
- Two-thirds of the 796 million adults lacking basic literacy skills are women⁹.
- Globally, less than 50% of young women have completed lower secondary education and HIV compared with almost 70% young men, both of which fall far short of the UNGASS target of 95%¹⁰.

To help address these gaps, the UNAIDS Accelerated Call to Action for Women's and Girls, Gender Equality, and HIV¹¹ supports access to comprehensive sexuality education for young people, both in school and out of school, that promotes gender equality and human rights and that empowers young women and men with evidence-based knowledge, skills and resources necessary to enable them to make responsible choices about their social and sexual relationships.

Mr. Chairperson,

The workplace is a key area to promote gender equality and address gender violence, and facilitate equitable access for women to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. Taking action through the workplace to combat gender violence, and women's economic empowerment increases the bargaining power of women to negotiate safer sex, may also help women afford and have access to HIV testing and counselling services and to antiretroviral treatment. Women's participation in decision-making levels, in work-related groups and organizations, such as trade unions, can contribute to greater access and control over productive resources. It allows women to better access their rights, including and reproductive rights, and to have a say in their own lives.

At the same time, women in the informal economy are at a higher risk of violence in the workplace, such as informal economy workers, domestic workers, migrants, and sex workers. Gender-based violence and sexual harassment can threaten the health of women workers and increase their risk of HIV infection. The vast majority of women working in informal arrangements are not covered by protective regulations or social services¹⁵ and therefore have limited access to HIV prevention, treatment and support services.

Domestic workers, who are predominantly female, are especially vulnerable to violence as they work in private households and are often isolated from their own families or communities.¹⁶ Many migrant workers, many of whom are women, often have limited access to information and health care services.¹⁷ Workers are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence from clients, brothel owners or other controllers, law enforcement officials, intimate partners, their families, neighbours, and other sex workers.

The ILO Recommendation concerning HIV and AIDS in the world of work (2010, No. 200)¹⁸ notes that women and girls are disproportionately affected by the HIV pandemic as a result of gender inequalities and that women are important to a successful global response to HIV. The recommendation applies to all women and men workers, under all forms of contracts, and at all workplaces, thus encompassing all categories, including seasonal workers, migrant workers, health workers, sex workers and workers in the informal economy.

The ILO Recommendation calls for measures to be taken, in part through workplaces to reduce transmission of HIV and alleviate its impact through the following measures¹⁹:

- ensure fundamental freedoms;
- ensure gender equality and the empowerment of women;
- ensure actions to prevent and prohibit violence and harassment in the workplace;
- promote the protection of women and men's sexual and reproductive health and sexual and reproductive rights;
- empower all workers regardless of their sexual orientation, whether or not they belong to a vulnerable group.

Thank you.

Let me conclude by a brief reminder that on 8-10 June this year, the General Assembly will convene a High-level Meeting to review the progress made in implementing the 2001 Declaration on HIV/AIDS and the 2006 Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS, and chart the way forward to meet the target of halving the AIDS response.

These landmark Declarations have recognized that gender equality and the empowerment of women are fundamental elements of an effective AIDS response, and committed to eliminate gender inequalities, gender-based abuse and violence.

Gender-based violence, political discrimination and lack of human rights protection that hinder access of women and girls to HIV services is also a major barrier to their access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support.

UNAIDS looks forward to working with all relevant partners to ensure that the gender-related issues are effectively addressed during the High-level Meeting on AIDS in June.

Thank you.

