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UNAIDS launches plan to empower women and girls to prevent HIV



2 March 2010 – The lead United Nations agency tackling the AIDS epidemic, along with rock and roll icon Annie Lennox, today launched an action plan to empower women and girls to protect themselves against HIV.

Known as the Agenda for Accelerated Country Action for Women, Girls, Gender Equality and HIV (2010-2014), the five-year plan partners the UN with governments, civil society and development partners to address gender inequalities and human rights violations that put women and girls at risk for HIV infection.

“The operational plan that we are launching this morning has been needed for some time now,” Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro said today at a meeting on women and HIV.

“For too long, the inequalities that affect women and girls have made them more vulnerable to HIV. For too long, societies have been unable – or unwilling – to talk about these inequalities as drivers of the epidemic. For much too long, cohesive action to address these inequalities have been lacking,” she stated.

More than 33.4 million people have been living with HIV worldwide since December 2008, half of them women. In sub-Saharan Africa, 60 per cent of people living with HIV are women.

"I believe we need a broad movement for change," said Ms. Lennox, an advocate since taking part in an HIV and AIDS event with Nelson Mandela in South Africa in 2003. "I see this Agenda for Action as a great opportunity to bring the realities faced by many women and girls to the forefront and to call attention to the injustices faced by many women and girls, placing them at a bigger risk of HIV."

Speaking at a news conference in New York, Ms. Lennox noted that the face of the epidemic has changed from "the intravenous drug users, sex workers and the gay community" in the 1980s to that of a heterosexual young woman who is at risk of infection from rape or from her husband.

She also called for long-term commitment, not only from governments to follow through on their commitments, but from the media to keep HIV and AIDS issues and stories in the spotlight.

"I've been trying to think how we can get the message across, especially to people in the Western countries so that they can understand that AIDS has not disappeared. HIV has not disappeared. It's still here and it's very, very strong," she stated.

Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (**UNAIDS**), said today's launch was about creating a new movement around gender equality and HIV and AIDS issues, and mobilizing people for urgent action.

"Urgency which is about stopping violence against women. Urgency which is about making sure that HIV/AIDS response will target more access [for] women to services which are available. Urgency which will call for a new mobilization of leaders to reduce the number of new infections among girls," Mr. Sidibé said at the same news conference.

Combating HIV and AIDS and reaching gender equality are among the eight Millennium Development Goals (**MDGs**) world leaders have agreed to achieve by 2015. The UN General Assembly will review progress made on the goals at a special meeting in September.

Today's launch comes on the sidelines of the 54th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women being held in New York until 12 March. This year's session marks the 15th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 – which remains the most comprehensive global policy framework to achieve the goals of gender equality, development and peace.

Speaking at today's **meeting** of the General Assembly to commemorate the Platform for Action, Ms. Migiro noted that there are many good and promising practices to build on, from legislative change, policy development and capacity building to sector-specific initiatives and efforts to improve data collection.

The challenge is to expand and apply such practices more systematically, replicate them wherever possible and use them as the basis for better policies and programmes, she stated, adding that "we are all determined to finish the task set out in Beijing."

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