

Long-awaited United Nations Women's Agency Now Within Reach

August 7, 2008 (Mexico City, Mexico) – The creation of a new UN agency for women would dramatically improve the international response to the AIDS pandemic, said AIDS-Free World today at the XVII International AIDS Conference in Mexico. Until now, the UN response to women has been fragmented and incoherent. But UN Member States are poised to adopt a resolution at the 63rd session of the UN General Assembly this September to establish a new agency. The ideal model, say advocates of women's rights, would combine and significantly strengthen the four tiny, under-staffed and poorly funded parts of the UN currently devoted to women's issues; it would be led by an Under-Secretary-General with decision-making authority at the top ranks of the UN system, would lean on the expertise of civil society and would have an initial budget of at least \$1 billion dollars.

“This is the most critical and overdue reform in UN history,” said Stephen Lewis, Co-Director of AIDS-Free World and former UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, “and nothing demonstrates the need for it more painfully than HIV/AIDS. The virus has exploited women's lack of power at every level; all the condoms, doctors, drugs and behavior change experts in the world can't stop it if we don't address the root causes of women's vulnerability. A new women's agency has the potential to transform the UN system and enhance its credibility around the world. Most importantly for those gathered here in Mexico, it would put women's voices where they belong, in the forefront of the response to the pandemic.”

AIDS-Free World has been petitioning the international community for more than two years to create a new UN agency that would give appropriate representation to 52% of the world's population and bring expertise to gender issues, including the grossly disproportionate impact of the AIDS pandemic on women and girls.

“UN Member States can change the world by creating a powerful women's agency,” said Sonia Pierre, Dominican of Haitian descent human rights defender and Director of the Dominican Haitian Women's Movement (MUDHA). “It's not a panacea for the injustices faced by women worldwide, but it would ensure that in every issue involving women there would be a voice and a vehicle, especially at country level, to identify injustices and advance the struggle for women's rights.”

The AIDS pandemic has exacted a carnage among women that knows no parallel in modern history. In sub-Saharan Africa, home to over two-thirds of people living with the virus, some 60% of infected adults are women. Three out of four young people in the region who are living with HIV are female.

“The graveyards of Africa are filled with bodies of women, many in their late teens, twenties and thirties,” said Siphwe Hlophe, Founder and Director of Swaziland Positive Living (SWAPOL). “Grandmothers in Africa carry the continent on their backs.

They reel under the burden of care for millions of AIDS orphans. Women are dying every day as we wait for an ideal on paper to become a reality on the ground.”

The creation of a well-funded, dedicated UN agency to promote women’s human rights and advance the worldwide struggle for gender equality has never been more urgent. Advocacy to ensure that Member States adopt this resolution at the September UN General Assembly is a top priority for AIDS-Free World.

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AIDS-Free World is an international advocacy organization committed to speaking up with and for people affected by AIDS, and speaking out for more urgent and more effective global action in response to the crisis

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