

HIV/AIDS and Women

“That women constitute nearly 60% of the world’s HIV positive people must make us rage against women’s oppression, violence against women which has been demonstrated to be directly linked to HIV infection. Among young people in Africa, women constitute 77% of new infections”

**Nkhensani Mavasa of the Treatment Action Centre (TAC) in South Africa
speaking at the UN Special Session on AIDS, June 2006**

With these words Nkhensani Masava called on African leaders to protect the human rights of all their citizens, particularly women and girls. She reminded the UN delegates that the G8 countries promised universal access to prevention, treatment, care and support by 2010. Empty promises, she challenged, have allowed the AIDS epidemic to ‘rage on’ resulting in 14,000 new infections and 8,000 deaths daily.

The Changing Face of AIDS

Fact: Where once the face of HIV/AIDS was predominately male, today women account for more than half of the 40 million people living with HIV.

Fact: Young women are more at risk of infection. In sub-Saharan Africa young women aged 15 – 24 are more than three times as likely to be infected as young men

Confronting the AIDS pandemic today requires we address the needs of women and girls. For Mary Robinson, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and honorary president of Oxfam, this means three things: “money, laws and seats at the table.” Women must have a direct and equal say in designing programs and in determining treatment and prevention.

A lack of social and economic power has resulted in increased vulnerability for millions of women worldwide. Women, in many cases, are not able to negotiate safer sexual practices with their partners. Young women and girls are not only more physiologically vulnerable to HIV risk they are more likely to suffer rape or forced marriage. Poverty obliges many young women to work in the sex trade to support themselves and their families.

Government and community leaders must take immediate action in support of women’s equality and end gender-based violence. Such action would reduce women’s vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Education brings hope. Research by the Global Campaign for Education suggests that if all children, girls and boys, received a complete primary education around 700,000 cases of HIV in young adults could be prevented each year.

Some 6.5 million people living with HIV in developing countries have no access to needed medicines. Why? Patent rules make essential medicines so costly neither people nor governments can afford them. Many countries must spend

more on debt repayments than they spend on providing health care. What’s more, aid from rich countries is woefully inadequate.

More specifically and immediately rich governments, including Canada, must be ready to commit their fair share to the Global AIDS fund. This fund is considered the major funding mechanism for supporting treatment, care and prevention programs the world over. Oxfam Canada, along with a broad network of NGOs has signed a Platform for Action. Together we are calling on Canada to:

- * double financial support for domestic and international research and the development of new HIV prevention technologies, such as microbicides and vaccines, which are of particular importance in addressing women’s heightened vulnerability to infection
- * contribute 5% of the resource requirements of the Global Fund to fight AIDS. This would require an additional \$140 million to the Fund in 2006–07.
- * announce a timetable for raising Canada’s development assistance to reach 0.7% of gross national income.
- * invest in the health care systems of developing countries so as to enable poor countries retain medical staff and build better health facilities.

Make no mistake the AIDS pandemic can be beaten. Local actions can lead to global solutions. Visit www.oxfam.ca to learn more and to take action against HIV/AIDS.

For more information –

Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development (ICAD)
—www.icad-cisd.com

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
—www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw

The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS
—www.womenandaids.unaids.org

UN AIDS —www.unaids.org

United Nations Development Fund for Women
—www.unifem.org

Local Actions  Global Change