HIV responses can help end violence against women and girls

GENEVA, 8 March 2013 —This International Women's Day, the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS (GCWA) welcomes renewed efforts to achieve a world where gender equality is a reality.

We have witnessed positive steps forward to address HIV and gender based violence. The United Nations Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS: Intensifying our Efforts to Eliminate HIV/AIDS is guiding global action to respond to HIV. It specifically pledges to eliminate gender inequalities and gender-based abuse and violence. Civil society is building strong partnerships between women and men to promote gender equality and reduce harmful cultural norms that drive the HIV epidemic. As part of this, the GCWA is rebuilding and reengaging women and girls worldwide to create change in their own lives.

These actions are helping to change the way we respond the HIV. Gender based violence is increasingly being addressed by countries and communities as a core issues in HIV response. We have more data and better understanding on what really works. These changes in HIV responses are contributing to falls in new HIV infection rates by 50% or more in 25 countries – 13 of them in sub-Saharan Africa.

However, despite the significant progress made by the HIV response, women and girls remain heavily impacted by HIV. Women constitute almost half of all people with HIV. In sub-Saharan Africa this percentage rises to 58%. Globally, young women (aged 15 to 24) are particularly vulnerable to HIV with infection rates twice as high as young men of the same age.

Violence against women remains an unchecked global pandemic. Up to 70% of women experience physical or sexual violence or both from their intimate partners in their lifetime. The prevalence of forced first sex among adolescent girls younger than 15 years ranges between 11% and 48% globally. In the last decade, approximately 67 million girls were married before the age of 18 years; 12% of whom were married by age 15, making them vulnerable to violence, early pregnancy, and associated maternal death or disability, as well as increased risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

The interconnectivity between HIV and violence against women is increasingly recognised. A South Africa suggested that 12% of new HIV infections in women could be attributed to intimate partner violence. At the same time, women living with HIV are vulnerable to sexual, physical and psychological violence, particularly if they are openly living with HIV. A study from Nigeria found that women living with HIV who disclosed their status were three times more likely to have experienced violence by their partner following diagnosis than women living with HIV who had not disclosed.

Overcoming the twin challenges of HIV and violence against women requires empowering women and girls to allow them to access to the education, economic opportunities, health and rights that enables them make informed decisions that improve their quality of life. Effective and
sustainable HIV responses must further invest in gender equality and zero tolerance for gender-based violence.

To build a world where gender equality is a reality, we need political will, backed by adequate resources and social support to unleash the amazing potential of women and girls, who are empowered, to support stronger societies. Therefore, the GCWA continues to prioritize gender equality with zero tolerance for gender-based violence, because healthy and truly successful societies can only be built from a foundation of mutual respect, peace and equality between the sexes.

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4 Jewkes et al 2010.
5 Iliyasu et al., 2011.