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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by ICW Global: Comunidad Internacional de Mujeres Viviendo con VIH-SIDA, Interact Worldwide, International HIV/AIDS Alliance, Salamander Trust and World Young Women’s Christian Association, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

Women, gender-based violence and HIV

Despite the biomedical advances made over the last three decades, HIV continues to have a disproportionate impact on women.

In every region of the world, HIV incidence among young women is increasing. AIDS continues to be the leading cause of death and disease for women of reproductive age, and it is widely recognized that violence is both a cause and consequence of HIV transmission. Women, especially young women living with HIV, continue to experience gross human rights violations that relate to their sexual and reproductive health.

Gender inequality has long been recognized as, and continues to be, both a cause and a consequence of HIV, and the intertwined pandemics of HIV and violence against women begin to illustrate the complexity of the way gender power imbalances play out in the context of HIV.

There is now clear evidence globally that intimate partner violence doubles women's vulnerability to acquiring HIV, and at least one in three women will be beaten, coerced into sex or abused in her lifetime.

Recent evidence suggests that the pathways between intimate partner violence and HIV acquisition are much more complicated than originally thought, and include higher incidences of risky sex, lower ability to negotiate condom use or discuss safer sex practices, and a tendency among men who perpetrate violence to have had more sexual partners, riskier sex and a higher prevalence of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

In addition, for women who are living with HIV, their HIV status acts as an additional determinant of violence. These women are more likely to experience violence, as an HIV diagnosis exposes women to new sites of violence, not only from partners, family members and the wider community, but also within institutional settings, and as a result of gender-blind laws and policies relating to HIV.

The result is a web of complex, reciprocal and self-perpetuating links between violence against women, HIV and a lack of access to sexual and reproductive health rights, including family planning and HIV-prevention services, which have implications for the well-being of women living with HIV and the onward transmission of the virus.

The following reports from women living with HIV bring these issues to life:

- A woman in Argentina stated that the issue of violence against women was one thing, and violence against women living with HIV was another. All the women living with HIV in her organization had been subjected to various forms of violence before and after diagnosis: from sexual, psychological and economic to institutional violence. The most important lesson for them was that they were able to talk about the issue and, by identifying it, support each other and make joint decisions to seek help and improve their quality of life. She noted that a woman living with HIV who is subjected to violence of any kind is potentially a woman who abandons her treatment and dies.

- A woman in Zambia explained that she started taking medication in 2006, but her husband did not know. She would take the medicine out of a bottle and put it in a plastic bag or a paracetamol box. Sometimes she missed a dose; he would come back at 6 p.m., drunk, close the door and say, “Today you are going to freak out”. He would lock her in, beat her up and lock her out of the house. She would go to the neighbours; if they had mercy they would let her in, if not, she would sleep under a tree until the next day. As a result of that she missed doses sometimes. She said she felt very bad, and didn’t even feel like taking the medicine.

We call upon Member States to raise the bar in relation to women and girls, gender-based violence and HIV. Rights, access, investment, safety and security, and equity are key to these issues.

We present the following recommendations:

1. Respect, protect and promote the sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls in all their diversity and throughout their lives, especially:

(a) Review and repeal all policies and laws that increase women’s and girls’ vulnerability to violence, such as those which criminalize sex work, same-sex sexuality, drug use and HIV exposure or transmission;

(b) Build the capacity of police, social workers and the judiciary to respond appropriately, quickly and sensitively to reported violence, and to uphold the rights of women and girls who experience intimate partner violence, including marital rape, “date rape”, “corrective rape” against lesbians and bisexual women, and violence against sex workers;

(c) Ensure equal rights to ownership and inheritance of property for all women and girls, especially those widowed by AIDS-related illness.

2. Overcome structural, legal and cultural barriers to access to family planning, sexual and reproductive health, HIV and violence protection services, especially:

(a) Promote access to information, support and caring services for all those vulnerable to or experiencing gender-based violence in all its manifestations;

(b) Promote widespread access to information about the close reciprocal links between gender-based violence and HIV for women and girls;

(c) Ensure widespread access to programmes which reduce gender-based violence, and all its direct and indirect causes.

3. Invest in quality family planning, sexual and reproductive health, violence protection and reduction, and HIV services, integrating these when possible; and in partnerships with networks and coalitions of women living with HIV and violence and with other women most affected by these issues.

4. Protect and ensure the safety and security of women and girls, especially:

(a) Sensitize health-care providers to protect and ensure the safety and security of women and girls in all our diversity in health-care settings, including family planning, HIV and other sexual and reproductive health services;

(b) Sensitize all other government institutions to protect and ensure the safety and security of women and girls in all our diversity, especially in the context of HIV and related issues;

(c) Promote mass media, private sector and community-based campaigns to promote safety and security and attitudes of zero tolerance towards gender-based violence against women and girls, in all its manifestations, especially in the context of HIV.

5. Guarantee full equity in access to quality family planning, sexual and reproductive health, violence reduction and protection and HIV services, especially:

(a) Empower women and girls in all our diversity to be catalysts of change, and eliminate all forms of violence against us;

(b) Promote and ensure fiscal policies to provide equitable funding for all the preceding recommendations.

We look forward to seeing how the United Nations, under the leadership of the Commission on the Status of Women, addresses the above-mentioned issues to transform the negative cycle of violence against women leading to HIV leading to more violence against women, into a positive cycle of safety and security for all women and girls leading to the promotion and protection of our human rights (including the human rights of women living with HIV) leading to the greater safety and security of women and girls.

We are not inheritors of the earth: we are its stewards for our children. In New York at this session, we have an opportunity to change the world, to shift the earth on its axis and to put women, our rights, our choices — and your support for them — front and centre of all we do: with regard to family planning; in relation to creating the “AIDS-free generation” we all crave; and in regard to making the world a safer place for women and children — and for us all.
