

**UNAIDS Statement to the Forty-ninth Session of the
Commission on the Status of Women**

New York, 7 March 2005

Madame Chairperson,

We are here to recommit ourselves to the goals and objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome of the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly.

Ten years on from Beijing, I would like to draw attention to a phenomenon that has taken place since 1995: the rapid increase in the number of women and girls living with HIV.

Back in the mid 1990s, women accounted for 40 per cent of all adults living with HIV. Today, almost half the 37.2 million people living with HIV worldwide are women. Female infection rates are rising relentlessly throughout the world – from New York to Bangkok, from Beijing to Lusaka, from Kiev to Cairo. This is devastating – both for the women affected and for the families and the communities they live in. The longer-term implications, particularly for developing countries, are terrifying.

The numbers are going up every day - today another 7,000 women will be infected. The story will be the same tomorrow. And the next day. And the days after, ad infinitum. Unless we take action now to address the root causes that fuel the female epidemic.

It has now become clear that many of the more traditional responses to the AIDS epidemic, which focus on altering the way people behave, simply do not work for women. And they will only be able to work if we move now to tackle the gender inequalities that prevail in so many societies around the world today.

In 2005, too few girls are in a position to get an education. This immediately reduces their chances not only of learning skills that will help them support themselves later on in life and thus reduce their economic dependence on men. It also deprives them of the opportunity to learn how to protect themselves from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Madam Chairman

Last year, UNAIDS launched the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS which brings together activists, civil society groups, networks of women living with HIV, government and UN agencies. The Coalition is guided by the principle that women are not victims but are in fact resilient and resourceful leaders in the fight against AIDS. Effective leadership by women for women is critical. So too, is collaboration with men and boys.

The Coalition was born out of the recognition that despite our best efforts, we have not yet turned the tide of AIDS. And that if we are to meet our Millenium Development Goal of halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS by 2015, we have to pull together and make a serious commitment to finding long-term solutions and not quick fixes.

This means challenging some long-standing customs and traditions. It means changing the way things work. And it won't be easy. However if we value women, and if we are committed to stopping AIDS, it's not just the right thing to do it's the only thing to do.

I thank you.