



## Ensuring a gender - equal planet for women and girls living with HIV

March 8, 2016

### Kampala:

The International Community of Women Living with HIV Eastern Africa (ICWEA) joins the rest of the world to celebrate the International Women's Day. On this day, we commit to breaking barriers to women's access to gender equality, dignity, fairness, quality health care services and to pursue justice and inclusion.

As we commemorate this day, we celebrate the many achievements women and girls living with HIV have attained over the years. We celebrate the courage and determination aimed at improving the quality of life as well as securing the rights of women living with HIV.

The Global theme *Pledge for Parity* challenges us but also encourages and calls for increased advocacy for women living with HIV. This is needed to achieve the women and girls' ambitions, accelerate gender-balanced leadership, respect and value difference created by the HIV epidemic in all aspects of women's lives,

We also embrace the United Nations 2016 theme, *Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality* which calls for efforts to be directed towards attaining worldwide gender equality by 2030.

This means that young women and girls receive equal treatment and are not discriminated against based on their gender. It means enjoying the same rights and opportunities across all sectors of society, including health, education economic participation and decision-making, and that our aspirations and needs are equally valued and favoured.

The theme also asks governments to make and follow through with national commitments to address the challenges that are holding women and girls back from reaching their full potential. Both themes are in line with the sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

For us women and girls living with HIV, a gender equal planet means;

**Access to comprehensive care and treatment:** Over the three decades of the AIDS epidemic. Women continue to be the face of the epidemic. Globally, there are 16 million women aged 15 years and older living with HIV; 80% live in sub-Saharan Africa. And yet worldwide, about 60% of people living with HIV do not access antiretroviral therapy. The

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fact that women account for more than half of the population of people living with HIV means, a high number of women and girls are not accessing ART.

There is therefore need for our East African Governments and all those in high burden countries to increase health factor funding to meet the World Health Organization recommendation of a minimum of 50USD per person per year as expenditure on health to be able to meet these care and treatment needs.

**Equal sexual and reproductive health and rights:** A report disseminated last year by ICWEA titled *Violations of sexual and reproductive health rights of women living with HIV in clinical settings* found that women living within Uganda are forced and coerced in sterilization. Similar cases have been reported in Kenya and some women have sued the centres at which they were sterilized. Some women and girls living with HIV have been forced to abort.

Women living with HIV should enjoy their full sexual and reproductive Health rights. They should also be supported to make informed decisions about their reproductive health including; the number of children to have. Access to all comprehensive sexual reproductive health information will enable them to exercise these rights.

For equal sexual and reproductive health, women and girls should also speak out whenever their rights are being abused instead of suffering in silence.

**Favourable policies, laws and legal environments:** In many parts of the world, countries including those in the East African region, HIV laws or bills that criminalize people living with HIV have been developed. While there is no public health evidence that the criminalization of HIV is effective at ending the spread of HIV, there is glaring evidence that it has potential to up root decades of efforts to end the epidemic in the region.

The negative impacts of this are greater on women than their male counterparts. Some of the clauses in the HIV Laws infringe on the rights of women and girls living with HIV. Such laws fuel stigma and discrimination, discourage women from seeking diagnosis and treatment out of concern for their privacy or negative social repercussions and for fear of being caught up by the law. As this happens, HIV incidences will escalate.

There should therefore be amendment of HIV Laws that will undo the work done to end the epidemic. Laws and policies that disrespect the confidentiality of women and girls living with should be reviewed, recalled and abolished. Laws that take into account Sexual Reproductive Health Rights needs and priorities of women living with HIV should be adopted.

**Meaningful inclusion in decision making at all levels:** Our lived experiences as women living with HIV, have taught us that to attain gender inequality, women and girls living with HIV have to be at the forefront of decision making processes in issues that affect their lives. That is why ICWEA advocates for institutional and technical capacity building of women and girls living with HIV. This will enable them influence policies, programmes and budgets and put them in position to meaningfully participate in decision making at various levels



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including district, national and international. Women's inclusion is the key to improved quality health service delivery for us.

These issues are further prioritized in the ICWEA one year campaign; *A beat to end sexual reproductive health rights violations, HIV criminalization and widening of contraception choices and options for women living with HIV*

As we commemorate this day, we continue to stand with our members in the Republic of Burundi during this period of continued unrest. For women and girls living with HIV in Burundi, life is more complicated because in addition to the general challenges and problems faced as people living with HIV, they have to worry about their lives and what the next day will bring.

The community of women living with HIV calls upon our governments and policy makers to create an environment that will ensure gender equality, dignity, fairness and provision of quality health care services.

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# Commonwealth Foundation

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