



## International Community of Women Living with HIV Eastern Africa

### **Promoting and protecting the rights of women and girls living with HIV is key for effective HIV responses**

Today March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the International Community of Women Living with HIV joins the rest of the world to celebrate the International Women's day under the theme "*Time is Now: Rural and urban activists transforming women's lives*" with a call to all stake holders collaborating to advance human rights-based policies and practices aimed at ending AIDS as stipulated in the Sustainable Development Goals.

As we celebrate the International Women's Day, we celebrate the many achievements and successes that women and girls living with HIV have attained over the years, the courage and determination aimed at improving the quality of life as well as ensuring that the rights of women living with HIV are upheld. Whereas several achievements have been registered in women's empowerment and in HIV response globally and in Eastern African Community in particular, women especially with HIV in all diversity continue to face discrimination, rejection, violence and imprisonment. We still have countries which have HIV specific laws that criminalize HIV and are being used as an entry point to HIV based arrests and victimization. Domestic violence cases on the basis of HIV status is increasing. While women are encouraged and supported to disclose their HIV status to their partners, some have been abandoned with their children while others experience physical, economic and emotional violence after disclosure. This calls for more efforts for us all to 'Press for the Progress' of women living with HIV in all our diversities.

Today ICWEA takes the opportunity to draw attention of our governments to the failure in exploring the linkage between human rights violations of girls and women for women and girls in the region. Many of the programs either are silent or put no importance on rights abuses that happen to women and girls living with HIV in their diversities in the communities and health care settings. There is limited recognition of the important link between human rights abuses and health outcomes, such as patient quality of care, and health workforce capacity. Human rights violations of women and girls living with HIV compromise

provision of quality care, which is critical for adherence to medications and maintenance of overall health and wellbeing.

In the health care facilities, women living with HIV continue to report bad treatment, access inadequate information or may not get services because personnel may have an attitude problem, may not be around or they may be late. Vital information like results from viral load tests are delayed for up to a year or six months yet they are very critical for women living with HIV to take critical decisions that would otherwise improve their wellbeing. Adolescent Girls and Young women are denied vital information on Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights, yet it is vital for them to have it in order to have a safe passage to adulthood and to be able to participate in containing the epidemic.

The People living with HIV stigma index states that in Rwanda, 31% reported that they have had their rights abused due to their HIV positive status, in Kenya, a total of 39.1% of women living with HIV reported abuse of their rights while 11% of people living with HIV reported that they had been coerced into undergoing a medical or health procedure including an HIV test. Worse still, meaningful engagement of people living with HIV in development and review of policies, laws and guidelines is still very low. In Tanzania it was found to be almost nonexistent as only 3.7% reported to have been involved. Only 2.1% of the women had been meaningfully engaged. In the Ugandan case, 11% of the people living with HIV indicated that they had been forced by health workers to undergo sterilization because of their HIV positive status.

Such violations never get prioritized and the voice of women living with HIV does not seem to be given as much importance even when they continuously raise such issues. It is even absurd that the perpetrators continue to operate without being accountable for their actions.

As we commemorate the International Women's Day 2018, women living with HIV in the region call upon governments and stakeholders to:

1. UNAIDS, governments and other development partners to support or carry out an assessment in Prison and Police to unveil the number of people that are in Police and Prison cells because of HIV status.
2. Adopt rights-based approaches to responding to HIV/AIDS, especially those that address the gender dimensions of HIV/AIDS by paying attention to the human rights violations confronting women living with HIV. Above all, make efforts to address the compounded vulnerabilities of women living with HIV
3. Ensure effective participation of women living with HIV in the national HIV/AIDS response by strengthening their capacity to participate fully in

the HIV and AIDS response through leadership training, sustained technical support and mentorship in order to grow a new cadre of women leaders.

4. Increase women's awareness and understanding of human rights, including the right to full and meaningful participation
5. Strengthen the legal protection for women living with HIV in our diversities.

*You can join online conversations by sharing your own views on the International Women's Day on the hashtag #IWD2018 , #PressForProgress and our social media platforms: twitter: @ICWEastAfrica and facebook page: IcwEasternAfrica*