



FIERCE Voices, Eternal Flames: A Tribute to Women Leading the HIV Response

On this 17th Day of May 2025, the International Community of Women Living with HIV Eastern Africa (ICWEA) stands in solidarity with communities around the world to commemorate the International AIDS Candlelight Memorial a powerful platform to honour those we have lost to AIDS, support people living with HIV, honoring the people who have dedicated their lives to supporting those affected by HIV and renew our commitment to end the HIV epidemic.

This year's memorial is held under the theme: "Ending AIDS by 2030: Building a Sustainable HIV Response." The theme calls on all of us — governments, civil society, donors, and communities — to sustain and strengthen the fight against HIV, especially amidst growing funding cuts to HIV and TB programmes and services and persistent inequalities.

Despite progress, we are far from done. In 2023, 44% of all new HIV infections globally were among women and girls. In parts of eastern and southern Africa, adolescent girls and young women continue to experience disproportionately high infection rates. These statistics are not just numbers — they are lives and futures at risk. The International AIDS Candlelight Memorial serves as an important platform for global solidarity, breaking down barriers of stigma and discrimination, and giving hope to new generations by ensuring that that our countries double investments in HIV prevention, including expanding access to PrEP, and HIV prevention tools that are discreet for women and girls including the Dapivirine Ring (DVR), Cabotegravir and that HIV prevention services are accessible and available to all communities in an equitable manner to ensure zero new infections and that every child is born free of HIV.

But our response must also be safe and rights-based. Today, new and evolving forms of violence against women and girls living with HIV are threatening the very foundation of our progress. Coercive HIV testing, forced disclosure, breaches of confidentiality, and violence linked to assisted partner notification, forced family planning services; are driving women and young women away from Health care. These abuses not only violate basic human rights — they also undermine trust in health systems, reduce uptake of services, and put our 2030 goals further out of reach.

For ICWEA, the AIDS Candlelight Memorial is more than an annual ritual — it is deeply personal. It is a moment to remember and celebrate the courage, leadership, and resilience of women living with HIV who have been at the forefront of the response.

Through our Annual FIERCE campaign — launched in 2022, ICWEA recognizes amplifies and honors women living with HIV who have made great contribution in the fight against HIV and AIDS. — ICWEA remembers two extraordinary women from Kenya and Rwanda who sadly passed away while serving as Country Coordinators in our network. These trailblazers dedicated their lives to advancing the rights and health of women and girls living with HIV. Their sudden passing was a painful reminder of how often we celebrate heroes only after they are gone.

It is our promise to never again wait to acknowledge greatness. We will recognize women's leadership, experience, and impact while they are still alive — celebrating their work, telling their stories, and inspiring others to lead. We believe that movement building means organizing and activating the collective power of women to achieve a shared vision of dignity, equity, and health for all.

ICWEA joins the Candlelight Memorial commemorations to reaffirm our commitment to a sustainable, gender-responsive HIV response, and we stand united with all who believe in a future free from AIDS, stigma, violence, and discrimination amidst the Health Service Integration agenda being fronted by our governments which is bound to negatively affect women and girls living with HIV access to services.

Let this Candlelight Memorial not only remember those we have lost — but also ignite the power of those still fighting, leading, and living.

We remember. We celebrate. We act.