

## CONCLUSION

It will be critical in the next few years to ensure that gender inequality is recognised and addressed as a central driver of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. If not, the situation will worsen, and the ability of women – particularly the elderly and the very young – to cope will completely disintegrate.

As illustrated throughout this report, the challenges facing women and girls are complex. Yet this is not an excuse for inaction. As the orphan crisis deepens, and as more and more women and girls take to the streets in search of ways to survive, it will be impossible to ignore the importance of gender-transformatory strategies.

The complexity and the long-term nature of gender inequality cannot stand in the way of progress and change; nor can tradition and culture stand still. The efforts of governments and communities should be aimed at developing equitable ways of addressing HIV/AIDS, which respect women and girls as full members of society.

The statistics on infection rates are in themselves cause for alarm, but so too are the circumstances of girls and women who have sex for too many reasons other than love and self-respect.

The challenge will be to ensure that these statistics and social realities do not paralyse us. Instead, this report, together with the growing body of evidence supporting the findings of the Task Force, should spur governments, communities and families to action.

Without leadership on this aspect of the epidemic, many southern African communities will not survive. With firm leadership all the challenges presented in this report can be resolved.

Women's leadership and the support of governments and civil society groups are critical in this regard. Turning the tide must be the result of movements that are rooted in the experiences of women and arise from the genuine recognition of communities that the situation must change.

Women and men in the region must want gender equality as badly as they want an end to the epidemic. It is only brave leadership that will plant the seeds of a movement rooted in respect and a desire to improve the lives of all Africans.

The United Nations has an important role to play in achieving this. In particular, the United Nations system can facilitate partnerships between civil society, governments and international agencies, providing information and technical support where it is needed, and offering to bring together disparate groups. By establishing and then monitoring standards for how we will respond to women and girls, the UN can play a critical behind-the-scenes role as facilitator.

Most importantly, women, communities, governments, the UN, other multilateral organisations, private foundations and bilateral organisations can take concrete steps to support the processes that will be necessary to achieve the recommendations contained within this report.