

PREFACE

“We must make sure that girls — who run a particular risk of infection -- have all the skills, the services and the self-confidence to protect themselves. Across all levels of society, we need to see a deep social revolution that transforms relationships between women and men, so that women will be able to take greater control of their lives -- financially as well as physically. And we must encourage men to replace risk-taking behaviour with taking responsibility.”

- Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General¹

As early as the 1980s, development workers and gender activists were beginning to recognise that HIV/AIDS would have especially severe implications for women. By the middle of the decades, the Society for Women and AIDS in Africa (SWAA) was beginning to mobilise women in the fight against AIDS.

By June 2001, it was clear that women, particularly in Africa, were beginning to strain under the pressure of high infection rates and increased workloads due to AIDS. The United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS declared that “women and girls are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS” and committed UN member states to a set of actions to reduce the impact on women and girls, and promote and protect their human rights.

A year later, at the Barcelona International AIDS Conference in July 2002, Stephen Lewis, the United Nations Secretary General’s (UNSG) Special Envoy on HIV/AIDS in Africa said,

“The toll on women and girls is beyond human imagining; it presents Africa and the world with a practical and moral challenge, which places gender at the centre of the human condition. The practice of ignoring gender analysis has turned out to be lethal... For the African continent, it means economic and social survival. For the women and girls of Africa, it’s a matter of life or death.”

It was a plea that went largely unheard.

In January 2003, Mr. Lewis, accompanied by James Morris, Executive Director of the World Food Programme and the UNSG’s Special Envoy for Humanitarian Needs in Southern Africa, visited Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe in a joint effort to tackle the unprecedented humanitarian crisis in southern Africa caused by the interlinkages between HIV/AIDS, food insecurity and weakened government capacity.

Their mission report highlighted the impact of the crisis on the women of southern Africa, stating that “very little is being done to reduce women’s risks, to protect them from sexual aggression and violence, to ease their burdens or to support their coping and caring efforts.”² The envoys recommended that an “immediate, strongly led and broadly implemented joint effort to take action on gender and HIV/AIDS must be initiated without delay. The effort should feature leadership from the United Nations, the active engagement of governments and substantially increased support to civil society organisations, including remarkable grassroots initiatives.”³

The Establishment of the Task Force

This time, the call to action for Africa’s women was heard. The United Nations Secretary General immediately requested UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy to set up a Task Force to respond to this recommendation.

A planning meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, bringing together global, regional and country level representatives from the United Nations, resulted in Terms of Reference for the Task Force focusing on six issues, within a broad gender framework (see Annex 1):

1. Prevention of HIV/AIDS among young women and girls
2. Girls’ education
3. Violence against women and girls
4. Property and inheritance rights of women and girls

5. The role of women and girls in caring for those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS
6. Access to HIV/AIDS care and treatment for women and girls

It was agreed that the Task Force would focus on the nine countries in southern Africa most severely affected by HIV/AIDS – Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The Task Force Terms of Reference set out a process designed to ensure that a wide range of stakeholders in each country were included in consultations and meetings.

Task Force Members and Working Group

UN country teams in these countries were asked to nominate eminent persons, activists and leaders from government and civil society to serve as Task Force members. As a result, the Task Force comprises 27 women and men living and working in southern Africa, who are actively engaged in policy-making, programme implementation and community mobilisation (See Annex 2).

During the course of its work, the Task Force has been assisted by a working group based within the regional team of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) in Pretoria, South Africa. This working group of four resource people, led by a UNICEF staff member, has drawn on the technical support of regional representatives of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and other UN agencies.

Country Visits and Regional Consultation

In order to ground the recommendations of the Task Force in country realities, working group members, joined by colleagues from UNAIDS, the World Health Organisation (WHO), UNIFEM and the Southern Africa AIDS Information Dissemination Service (SAFAIDS), visited each Task Force country to conduct rapid assessments of the situation and of existing initiatives and actions on gender and HIV/AIDS, and to gather concrete suggestions for action. Country visits were followed by a regional consultation of Task Force members, hosted by Ms. Bellamy, to review what was learnt from the rapid assessments and reach consensus on the way forward.

Global Coalition on Women and AIDS

During the same period, UNAIDS set up a “Global Coalition on Women and AIDS”, which seeks to build global and national advocacy to highlight the effects of HIV/AIDS on women and girls and stimulate concrete, effective action. The Task Force is one of a number of regional initiatives under the umbrella of the global coalition. It complements and informs the work of the Global Coalition, focusing on the same issues, but with the particular aim of catalysing urgent action in the sub-region of southern Africa.

MOVING FORWARD

This report and its recommendations are rooted in the experiences and insights of people grappling with these challenges on the ground, supplemented by information from existing literature and discussions with individuals working on human rights, gender and development, and HIV/AIDS within and beyond the sub-region.

In most countries the visits have already catalysed increased action on Task Force issues. It is hoped that the recommendations and substance of this report continue to inspire accelerated action.