

**Fast-tracking the end of the AIDS epidemic for women**



*Some of the participant of the women's pre-ICASA conference*

From 29 November to 4 December 2015, close to 10,000 of the world’s leading scientists, policy makers, activists, people living with HIV, government leaders, as well as a number of Heads of State and civil society representatives are meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe to deliberate on ending AIDS by 2030 in Africa at the 18th session of the International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA).

Ahead of the ICASA, UN Women together with partners, organized a women’s pre-conference under the theme “Fast-tracking the end of the AIDS epidemic for women in the post-2015 development framework.” The pre-conference sought to promote a shared understanding of the needs and agenda of women living with HIV and AIDS within the SDG framework as well as the need to focus on gender equality and women’s empowerment in efforts to end AIDS.

Despite the tremendous progress that has been made in addressing HIV and AIDS across the world, HIV is the leading cause of death among women between the ages of 15-44 years and adolescent girls

and young women account for one in four new HIV infections in sub-Saharan Africa.

The issues that were identified and which need to be addressed in order to reduce HIV among women include: stigma and discrimination, violence against women, women’s political social and economic empowerment, engagement of women’s groups and networks, new infections among young women, and access to sexual reproductive health information and services.





*Dr. Perpetua Gumbo, Zimbabwe Permanent Secretary Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development*

"Across the world, violence against women and girls remains one of the most serious and, unfortunately, most tolerated human rights violation. Indeed, there is an inter-linkage between the high levels of violence against women and girls and the high rates of HIV infection among this group. This is a problem that needs to be addressed by all, governments, civil society and communities," said the Zimbabwe Minister of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development, Hon. Nyasa E. Chikwinya, in a speech read on his behalf by Permanent Secretary of Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development, Dr Perpetua Gumbo.

With declining global resources dedicated to HIV and AIDS, African governments have been called upon by participants to increase their domestic budgets to fight the epidemic by allocating 15 per cent of their budgets for universal health care as per their commitment in the Abuja Declaration in an effort to end AIDS by 2030.

The need to empower young women as the new generation of leaders was echoed repeatedly. Young women attending the pre-ICASA women's conference asserted themselves clearly on the need to have them speak for themselves and called upon all actors to engage them as change agents and not mere beneficiaries of AIDS responses. It was pointed



*Nacugo Sharifah, a young woman from Uganda.*

out that addressing household poverty was critical, and results from Malawi and South Africa on social protection programmes such as cash transfers show that this is one effective way of protecting young women from risky sexual relationships and keeping girls in school.

"The youth are greatly affected by HIV, especially in new infections and yet most times they do not seek treatment because for fear of stigma. For these reason, we need to be actively involved in discussions as well as in decisions in fighting the epidemic to ensure that the youth are fully sensitised about prevention as well as treatment," said Nacugo Sharifah, a young woman from Uganda.

Queen Nana Adwoa Awindor of Ghana, who is the chair of the African Queens and Women Cultural Leaders Network underscored the important role that cultural and traditional leaders have to play in the fight against HIV and AIDS.



*Queen Nana, Chair of the African Queens and Women Cultural Leaders Network*



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## ICASA BULLETIN

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“It is our responsibility to ensure that harmful traditional practices that promote the spread of HIV such as early marriages and female genital mutilation are eradicated,” she said.

Most of the issues affecting women that were discussed at the pre-conference, including the actions proposed to address them, were also raised during the official opening ceremony of ICASA, which was presided over by Zimbabwean Vice-President Emmerson Mnangagwa on 30 November.

The pre-ICASA women’s conference was attended by about 130 people ranging from women living women cultural leaders, civil society organizations and young women advocates. At the main ICASA conference, UN Women held a session on “Transformative leadership: the role of African

women in sustaining the AIDS response” and a skills-building workshop on engendering the national AIDS response.

