

STRONG

“I want stigma and discrimination to disappear. I want to have positive hope for tomorrow. I am strong, proud and beautiful. I want to be part of the solution.”

PARTICIPANT OF THE YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE, ICASA 2011

- The HIV epidemic remains a major global public health and human rights challenge, being the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age (15–49 years).¹
- Of the 33.4 million people living with HIV worldwide, women account for almost half (15.9 million) of adults living with HIV.
- The vulnerability of women and girls to HIV remains particularly high in sub-Saharan Africa; 80% of all women in the world living with HIV live in this region.²
- In the majority of countries, the epidemic shows the most growth among young women between the ages of 15 and 24; in sub-Saharan Africa young women in this age group are up to 8 times more likely to acquire HIV than their male peers.

The 2011 Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS acknowledges that...

“globally women and girls are still the most affected by the epidemic and that they bear a disproportionate share of the care-giving burden and that the ability of women and girls to protect themselves from HIV continues to be compromised by physiological factors, gender inequalities including unequal legal, economic and social status, insufficient access to healthcare and services, including for sexual and reproductive health and all forms of discrimination and violence, including sexual violence and exploitation against them;”
(para 21)

1. The World Health Organization (2010). *Women and health : today's evidence tomorrow's agenda.*

2. UNAIDS. *The Global Report. UNAIDS Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic 2010.*

IN OUR WORDS

“In my country, we don't know about sexual and reproductive health and rights. The men think that they can get sex at any point that they like. I will make sure that women know about their rights and choices. In practice, we don't have the right to decide how many children we want to bear. I will work to organize the women so that we combat these things that are impacting women.”

YOUNG WOMAN LIVING WITH HIV, NIGERIA

PROUD

“I won't sleep until young women living with HIV are given a voice and a platform to speak.”

YOUNG WOMAN LIVING WITH HIV, NIGERIA

- HIV incidence among young women is increasing in every region of the world and AIDS continues to be the leading cause of death and disease for women of reproductive age.
- Gender inequality, including violence, is both a cause and a consequence of HIV transmission. At least one in three women will be beaten, coerced into sex or abused in her lifetime, while women subjected to violence are at higher risk of acquiring HIV, and women who are living with HIV are more likely to suffer from violence.¹
- Women, especially young women living with HIV, continue to experience gross human rights violations that relate to their sexual and reproductive health. In fact, human rights have often been characterized by our governments as a great imposition, and so addressed more in their breach than in respect and accountability. This is especially true when it comes to those of us who are made vulnerable through a lack of human rights.

The 2011 Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS pledges to ...

“eliminate gender inequalities, gender-based abuse and violence; increase the capacity of women and adolescent girls to protect themselves from the risk of HIV infection, principally through the provision of healthcare and services, including, inter alia, sexual and reproductive health, and the provision of full access to comprehensive information and education; ensure that women can exercise their right to have control over, and decide freely and responsibly on, matters related to their sexuality in order to increase their ability to protect themselves from HIV infection, including their sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence; and take all necessary measures to create an enabling environment for the empowerment of women and strengthen their economic independence;” (para 53)

1. The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS. *Preventing HIV infection in girls and young women*. Available at: http://data.unaids.org/GCWA/gcwa_bg_prevention_en.pdf

IN OUR WORDS

“I work on the issue of forced sterilization as I am a young women who has been forcefully sterilized. I advocate and help to create space for other young women. In my country, women don't realize their sexual and reproductive health rights nor do they understand when they are sterilized. When I spoke out, many other women felt free to come out and speak up. I didn't stop there. We brought it to the international community. We sued the Government. Our efforts grew with the support of women and girls worldwide. Sterilization can cause you to lose your family or your husband. Women feel a sense of losing themselves as women. HIV-positive women are being robbed of the opportunity for motherhood.”

YOUNG WOMAN LIVING WITH HIV, NAMIBIA

BEAUTIFUL

“For those who are living with HIV like me, please tell yourself that you are beautiful and believe in yourself. I want all the young women to hold hands and support each other.”

PARTICIPANT OF THE YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE, ICASA 2011

Young women living with and affected by HIV face many of the same issues as older women or men living with and affected by HIV as well as particular, nuanced, or exacerbated issues, including:

- Exclusion from fora where decisions that affect their lives are made – in the family, community, health facilities, and in local, national and international policy-making.
- Violations of sexual and reproductive health and rights – lack of access to information and services; negative or judgmental attitudes of healthcare staff; coercion or force around sexual and reproductive decision-making; stigma and discrimination; fear of disclosure and breaches of confidentiality; criminalization of sexual transmission or exposure and/or vertical transmission. These compromise the ability of young women living with HIV to realize their sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Violence and other human rights violations – including rape and sexual violence;

forced/coerced sex and marital rape; early marriage; female genital cutting; and lack of property and inheritance rights. Violence against young women is also a consequence of HIV transmission, creating a barrier to treatment and care services, vertical transmission, secondary prevention and increasing the vulnerability of young women living with HIV to abandonment, destitution and survival sex.

- Lack of economic empowerment opportunities.

The 2011 Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS commits to...

“encouraging and supporting the active involvement and leadership of young people, including those living with HIV, in the fight against the epidemic at local, national and global levels; and agree to work with these new leaders to help develop specific measures to engage young people about HIV, including in communities, families, schools, tertiary institutions, recreation centres and workplaces;” (para 56)

IN OUR WORDS

“Young women living with HIV are not voiceless. Your story shows your strength. Stand up and get empowered. It is not easy to help someone who doesn't want to be helped. Whenever you get opportunities take them. Educate yourself. Connect with women's rights organizations. Start at the grass roots level. Don't limit yourself to your story. Learn and encourage others. We have ICW chapters for young women and adolescent girls. If you are a young woman living with HIV, make an impact in the lives of others.”

YOUNG WOMAN LIVING WITH HIV, ZIMBABWE