



**Commission on the Status of Women  
Fifty-ninth session**

**Realizing the rights of marginalized and disadvantaged women and girls**

**PANEL DISCUSSION**

**Issues Faced by Women Living with HIV: Policy Options for Future  
Progress**

**by**

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10.00 am to 1.00 pm**

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\*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## Introduction

Advances in HIV science have led some to anticipate the end of HIV epidemic—indeed many believe the worst of the threat is now over. However, women living with HIV around the world continue to experience persistent challenges to accessing medication and treatment and serious violations of their sexual, reproductive and human rights. For the over 17 million women currently living with HIV and the many women, young women, and girls who will face a new HIV diagnosis this year, the epidemic is far from over. Twenty years ago, the Beijing Platform for Action recognized the staggering number of people living with HIV as well as new infections, and, critically, the gendered aspect of the epidemic and the importance for global HIV strategic responses to address the particular needs and vulnerabilities of women, particularly young women and adolescents. The call to action issued by the original Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action in 1995 remains as urgent and as relevant today.

- Women living with HIV experience a range of obstacles to achieving their highest attainable standard of health, including violations of their sexual and reproductive rights. As a result, women living with HIV continue to receive substandard or harmful health care.
- Forced and/or coerced sterilization and abortion of women living with HIV remains a serious human rights violation occurring today.
- Maternal mortality rates remain high among women living with HIV, despite efforts that have reduced maternal mortality rates for many women around the world.
- Institutional, systemic, and intimate partner violence against women living with HIV is endemic and largely underreported and increases risk of HIV acquisition.
- Criminalization of non-disclosure, exposure, and transmission disproportionately impacts women living with HIV and undermines evidence-based public health strategies for prevention.
- Indigenous women living with HIV are hidden in the response to HIV. They are considered an ethnic minority, not as a culture of people whom have no political power in their own country. The continued oppression by politically dominant cultures makes it particularly difficult to raise HIV as health priority.
- Women living with HIV continue to face obstacles in engaging in global decision-making platforms and in ensuring that our needs and voices are heard. Nowhere is this clearer than in the continued lack of support and focus for research that reflects critical and ongoing concerns of women living with HIV around contraception and HIV risk as well as issues around HIV and aging that perhaps could not have been foreseen by the Beijing Platform in 1995.

Despite these obstacles, networks of women living with HIV continue to fight for sexual and reproductive health and rights, champion our rights to be free of all forms of gender oppression, and challenge systemic drivers of inequality around the world. As the only global network for and by women living with HIV, the International Community of Women Living with HIV, founded in 1992, envisions a world where all women living with HIV live free of gender oppression, realizing and claiming our full rights inclusive

of sexual, reproductive, legal, social, economic and health rights. As we reflect on the many challenges still facing women living with HIV after 20 years, our clarion call *nothing for us without us!* has never been more relevant or more necessary.

Networks of women, and particularly women living with HIV, are uniquely positioned and empowered to identify and address stigma, discrimination, and the intersecting needs of marginalized women. The global discourse and target to “End AIDS” by 2030 will not mean an end to HIV. Realizing the principle of GIPA—Greater Involvement of People Living with HIV—is critical to ensure effective implementation the new SDGs. Critically, we must ensure the meaningful involvement of women living with HIV and other directly impacted women and girls within the decisions that affect our lives.

Communities most affected by the implementation of the SDG outcomes, including women living with HIV, must be involved in the decision-making process—it is not solely about governmental decision-making on global priorities, but also about ensuring that people living with HIV and other directly impacted communities maintain a role in program design, selection of interventions, and other decisions that directly affect our lives. The involvement of directly impacted women leads to improved uptake and programme effectiveness and efficiency, reducing loss to follow-up and resulting in greater accountability within the HIV response.

### **Options for policy interventions**

Women living with HIV hold unique insights and ability to develop innovative solutions to problems. It is critical to create and maintain alliances with partners who respect the agency, autonomy, and wisdom of women living with HIV to lead advocacy, deliver services, and support women. Partners must ultimately ensure that those efforts are recognized and supported. Strategic partnerships should come from directly communities of women living with HIV themselves. Peer support has played a key role in building capacity and providing sustainable support for networks of women living with HIV to hold systems accountable and to monitor and evaluate programming.

As we reflect on the 20th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration, evaluate our collective achievements, and work as an international community to forge a new set of global priorities post-2015, we must maintain a continued focus on access to care, treatment and support, prevention of stigma and discrimination, and increased attention to securing sexual, reproductive, and human rights and protections for women, young women, and girls living with HIV. Women living with HIV, in all our diversity, must remain at the heart of movements for change.