



HIV/AIDS and Children

statement by Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)

Mr Chair,

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) would like to bring the attention of the Commission to children and adolescents affected by HIV and AIDS. Very many people hold stereotypes about this epidemic. Sadly, these stereotypes often involve blaming those living with HIV/AIDS. Thus, for some, it is shocking to realise that **more than fifty percent** of those newly infected by HIV are between the ages of 15 and 24 years old. In some places, among 15-19 year olds, two girls are infected for every boy.

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) would like to bring the attention of the Commission to children and adolescents affected by HIV and AIDS. Very many people hold stereotypes about this epidemic. Sadly, these stereotypes often involve blaming those living with HIV/AIDS. Thus, for some, it is shocking to realise that more than fifty percent of those newly infected by HIV are between the ages of 15 and 24 years old. In some places, among 15-19 year olds, two girls are infected for every boy. Furthermore, the drastic increase in the rate of infection among women means a corresponding increase in HIV-infected babies born to them. To date, 1.5 million children under the age of five have been infected with HIV, of whom more than half a million have already developed AIDS. In addition, by the year 2000, AIDS will have robbed almost 5 million children of one or both parents.

But statistics do not capture the misery that HIV/AIDS can bring to children. There are the children who face the trauma of their own sickness and impending death; and the children who watch their parents grow sick and die. There are the children who live in homes stressed by less and less resources, and those who face cruel stigma and discrimination because of HIV. And there are the children who themselves are abandoned or orphaned, often becoming in turn - street children.

National and international organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, are trying to help families and children affected by HIV. However, not enough is being done to protect the rights of children in the context of HIV and AIDS.

This is a critical opportunity lost; critical because the human rights framework established to protect the rights of children provides the framework to protect them from HIV/AIDS. If this framework were utilised, governments would take steps to decrease children's vulnerability to HIV; they would protect children against HIV discrimination; and they would provide them and their families with the support and services that they need when affected by HIV/AIDS. Indeed, children and their families would be empowered to confront HIV/AIDS.



In terms of reducing vulnerability to infection, children and adolescents are often denied access to HIV education, information, health care and means of prevention - access which adults have. This is a violation of the rights of children and adolescents to non-discrimination, education and health, as well as a violation of their right to express their own views and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds.

The denial of access to HIV education and means of prevention is often attributed to cultural, religious and social norms. However, **either** there must urgently be found ways to provide appropriate education and support to children within the context of these norms; **or** the norms themselves must change. The alternative is the avoidable infection and early death of millions of young people.

Studies have shown that sex education and HIV education do not encourage sexual activity. In fact, such education encourages adolescents to postpone sex, and to practice safe sex, if they do engage in sex. Special efforts should be made to provide this education to children who are hard to reach, such as children of minorities, indigenous peoples and street children.

UNAIDS welcomes the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. All sexual exploitation and abuse, including that involved in the sale of children, their prostitution and their early marriages, increase the risk of infection by HIV. Efforts made to stop these practices should include HIV concerns. Sensitivity training regarding the HIV-related needs of victims should be given to police and to staff from legal, health and social service agencies. In particular, parents and the child victims themselves should receive counselling concerning such difficult issues as voluntary testing for HIV, and should receive support, if a child is found to be positive. Public information campaigns against child abuse and sexual exploitation, as well as education campaigns aimed at families, children and adolescents, should explain the risks of infection, means of protection, and services available, if infection does occur.

Finally, to reduce the impact of HIV and AIDS, governments must stop discrimination based on HIV status. This discrimination denies children and their families health care, education, family and social support; and for HIV-positive orphans, access to alternative care or adoption. To protect children and families from such discrimination would not only end its cruelty it would also enable children and families to live successfully with HIV/AIDS.

UNAIDS has tried to highlight some of the critical human rights of children and adolescents confronting HIV/AIDS. UNAIDS will do all it can, on its own and working with its cosponsors, to promote and support programmes to protect this most vulnerable of groups. But this partnership must be expanded if there is to be an effective response to children's needs in the face of this epidemic. UNAIDS asks the Commission, other UN human rights bodies, the governments and NGOs represented in this room to take the lead in protecting those rights that will protect children who now must live in a world with HIV/AIDS.

Thank you, Mr Chair

