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**WOMEN AND HIV/AIDS  
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY, MARCH 8<sup>TH</sup> 2004**

## **COMBATING GENDER INEQUALITY CRUCIAL IN FIGHT AGAINST HIV/AIDS SAYS WHO**

**Women's vulnerability to the epidemic is increasing throughout the world**

**Geneva** - You are invited to WHO headquarters in Geneva on 8 March, 15.00 hrs (local time), in the Executive Board Room to celebrate International Women's Day and join in the panel discussion entitled: Women and HIV/AIDS.

Women now account for almost 50% of HIV/AIDS cases worldwide, a percentage that has grown remorselessly since the beginning of the epidemic 20 years ago. This is because women are biologically, economically, socially and culturally more vulnerable to infection than men. Factors such as financial dependence on men, physical and sexual abuse from partners, and the fact that it is acceptable for men to have multiple partners are gender aspects that need to be considered in responding to the epidemic.

HIV/AIDS is particularly devastating for women in sub-Saharan Africa, where women are more likely to be infected with HIV than men. Young women aged 15-24 are up to 2.5 times more likely to be infected than men belonging to the same age group.

"In too many places women have fewer legal rights than men, and less access to education, training and paid work" said Dr LEE Jong-wook, WHO Director-General. "Women are also subject to gender inequalities that include less access to HIV/AIDS information, almost no power with regard to the practice of safe sex, and less financial security. Health interventions for HIV/AIDS should promote equitable access for women to information, treatment, care and support."

UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, via video link from New York, LEE Jong-wook, Director-General of WHO and Marika Fahlen of UNAIDS will be among the participants in this year's International Women's Day discussion. They will focus on the specific problems women face in the epidemic and discuss how gender inequality is fuelling the disease worldwide. Ludfine Anyango from ActionAid, Kenya and Alice Welbourne from the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW) will also discuss the steps their non-governmental organizations are taking in tackling the epidemic from a gender perspective in order to address the needs of women.

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