

WOMEN: AT THE HEART OF THE HIV RESPONSE FOR CHILDREN

Throughout this report, the term 'children' applies to all children below the age of 18 years, including adolescents, as defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The United Nations defines adolescents as persons aged 10–19 years, and youth as persons aged 15–24 years. Grouped together, 'children and adolescents' represent those aged 0–19 years.

Because HIV-related stigma persists, UNICEF takes steps to safeguard the identities of children and their mothers in accordance with their wishes and with global standards of child rights and protection. UNICEF obtains written consent from people living with the virus before identifying them as such in photographs and other media. Unless otherwise stated, people depicted in this publication, and in the accompanying materials online, should not be assumed to be living with HIV.

Note: Data in this report are drawn from the most recent available statistics from the United Nations Population Division, UNAIDS and UNICEF unless otherwise indicated. The range in parentheses after a given estimate represents the confidence bound of the estimate.

The essays in 'Perspectives' represent the personal views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the United Nations Children's Fund.

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Front cover: Happiness Mbewe and her 14-month-old son Davis Christopher from Fuka Fuka, Blantyre, Malawi, are beneficiaries of the services offered by the UNICEF-supported mothers2mothers programme.

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Henrietta H. Fore, Executive Director, UNICEF



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Foreword

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Women not only bear the brunt of the HIV epidemic, they are also at the forefront of the HIV response. I saw this first-hand on a recent visit to South Africa, where I had the privilege of meeting with young mothers living with HIV at the Soshanguve Community Health Centre in Gauteng.

These young women were brave and strong in the face of tremendous challenges. They spoke poignantly about how they had learned they were living with the virus – usually as part of a routine antenatal visit – and about the painful process of telling partners, families and friends of their diagnosis. About the fear they experienced for themselves and their children.

But they also spoke about what gives them hope. The joy of seeing their babies thriving tops the list. But almost as important is the support they are receiving from other women living with HIV.

Under the UNICEF-supported mothers2mothers programme, more experienced mothers living with HIV provide support and advice to pregnant women and mothers of HIV-exposed babies. These peer mentors offer all kinds of practical guidance and information, which the younger mothers badly need. But they also share their own stories of living and thriving with HIV, and these stories have the power to encourage and inspire.

The impact in the lives of the young mothers is remarkable. Far from being desolate about their HIV status, the young women I spoke to lit up about their ambitions: to finish school; to take a course in welding; to become a nurse, teacher or social worker. Above all, they were excited about setting an example for their children and helping to improve their prospects in life.

This is a happy story. But in sub-Saharan Africa, the HIV crisis is far from over, and women and girls are by far the most affected. In fact, women form the majority of those living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa. This gender disparity is even more marked among adolescents: Globally, girls made up 66 per cent of the new HIV infections among those aged 15–19 in 2017.

Every one of those girls deserves a chance to make the most of her life. To survive, and to thrive. To become a productive adult. A mother to children of her own.

We have made so much progress in the global fight against HIV and AIDS. For example, services aimed at prevention of mother-to-child transmission reached 80 per cent of pregnant women living with HIV worldwide in 2017, compared with only 51 per cent in 2010.

UNICEF Executive Director
Henrietta H. Fore (right) with
mothers2mothers participant
Karabo Sikosana and her son.
Ms. Fore made a field visit to
South Africa in May 2018.
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But as the projections about the HIV epidemic make urgently clear, we need to do more. For unless we do, based on current trends and anticipated population growth in HIV-affected areas, there will still be around 1.9 million children and adolescents living with HIV in 2030. Over the period from 2018 to 2030, 3.7 million children and adolescents will be newly infected with the virus.

We need to redouble our commitment and our efforts, working together to find new ways of reaching the unreached. That means more investment. More innovation. More co-creation of solutions to reach those we are not yet reaching. And it also means recognizing the invaluable role women play in the response to HIV – and doing more to encourage and empower women to speak out.

This publication shares the perspectives of women from all over the world, including policymakers and researchers, doctors and campaigners who are helping lead the HIV response for women and children. Their testimonies illuminate and personalize the data and the narrative in the rest of the report.

Often these writers pay tribute to other inspirational women they have worked with – not only to individuals in leadership positions but also, as one contributor puts it, to the “thousands of women who



walk dusty roads to homes, clinics and communities to give physical and emotional support to those affected by the epidemic.”

If we are to achieve the HIV-free world of which we dream, we need to bring to bear all the expertise we have gained through the three decades of the HIV response – and listen to these voices of experience and hope. And act on them.

Henrietta H. Fore
Executive Director, UNICEF



1. Introduction

"I am ... filled with pride, thinking about the countless people who fought for justice, called for equal access to quality health care for all – not just for those who could afford it – and helped transform the AIDS response. So often those advocates were women, remarkable women who were on the frontlines caring for families and communities and calling for change. ... They are the heroines whose voices and faces are so indelibly marked in my memory. And they are the ones on whose shoulders we stand as we continue to work towards an AIDS-free generation."

Gro Harlem Brundtland

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