

Media Release

Re: International Women's Day 2010

What: The AIDS Committee of Durham Region Honours International Women's Day!
When: Sunday, March 7, 2010
Where: The ACDR will be participating in IWD: Celebrating Womanity, West Shore Community Centre in Pickering

Join the AIDS Committee of Durham Region in Promoting the Health & Empowerment of Women and Girls!

Each year on March 8th, International Women's Day marks an opportunity for communities to celebrate the social, economic and political empowerment of women as well as reflect on the issues that impact the health and well-being of women and girls. There are many factors that influence the health of women in our community: such as gender, access to health care/treatment, immigration status, ethnicity, culture, income, employment, education and environment. Since March 8th, 2009, the global economic crisis has dominated much of the popular discourse, however, the human cost, a cost most keenly felt by women, has remained largely ignored.

Gender inequality directly results in higher rates of poverty in women. According to the UN Development Programme, women make up over 70% of the 1.3 billion people globally who are living in poverty.ⁱ In 2001, 2.4 million women in Canada were living below the Low-Income Cut-off, as compared with 1.9 million men.ⁱⁱ The Centre Social Justice reports that the average Canadian woman's full-time wage was 73% of the average man's in 1996, and that this disparity is prevalent regardless of educational level.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition to gender inequity in wages, there are a gamete of factors such as systemic racism that serve to compound experiences of oppression. For example, First Nations women in Canada earned 87.5% of what other women earned in 1996.^{iv}

Women are at increased risk of physical and sexual violence. 51% of Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16.^v Every minute of every day, a Canadian woman or child is sexually assaulted.^{vi} Thirty-six percent of female victims of spousal violence and less than 10% of victims of sexual assault reported these crimes to the police in 2004.^{vii} Women in abusive relationships are often coerced into engaging in unsafe sexual practices, increasing their level of risk. Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, young women and geographically-isolated women are more likely to experience violence.^{viii} HIV/AIDS and drug overdoses are the most common causes of death for homeless women in Ontario between the ages of 18 and 44.^{ix} In addition, trans women are often overlooked in the area of violence and appalling forms of stigma and discrimination. In North America, two trans people are murdered per month and violence is considerably higher for those transitioning from male-to-female.^x

Women are eight times more likely to become infected with HIV than men when having unprotected heterosexual sex.^{xi} Furthermore, 51% of females aged 15-19 and 53% aged 20 – 24 do not use condoms.^{xii} In many countries women are less likely to be able to negotiate condom use and are more likely to be subjected to non-consensual sex.^{xiii} In addition, many women and girls have little to no understanding of how HIV and sexually transmitted infections are transmitted and how to protect themselves. Any woman can be exposed to HIV. Due to the commonly held belief that women are not at risk, many women do not receive testing in a timely manner which contributes to disease progression. Late testing is incredibly dangerous and is one of the reasons that "AIDS is the number-one killer of African-American women between the ages of 25 and 34".^{xiv} It is imperative to women's empowerment that they are made aware of risks to their well-being and provided opportunities for necessary testing and support. Knowledge is power. A recent MAC AIDS Fund survey reveals that 73% of women are unaware of their HIV status.

This finding was linked to the dependence of women on their partners to protect them as well as to the presumed absence of risk in monogamous relationships. The survey goes on to say that 50% of women don't believe that they are at risk. Experts polled cited the impact of gender inequity on relationships arguing that "women don't feel powerful enough to fight for their own sexual health".^{xv}

At the end of 2008, it was estimated that out of the 31.3 million adults worldwide living with HIV/AIDS, around half are women.^{xvi} It is suggested that 98 percent of these women live in developing countries.^{xvii} However, the rates of infection in women are increasing across the world; in Canada, women made up over 25% of new HIV infections since 2000, which marks a significant increase in positive HIV tests among women from the 12% recorded between 1985-1997. ^{xviii} The rates of HIV among First Nations women are increasing at an alarming rate especially in young women 15 to 29. This group accounted for approximately 13% of new HIV diagnosis from 1985 to 1995 but accounted for 45% as of 2001. ^{xix} The AIDS epidemic has had a unique impact on women, exacerbated by their role within society and their biological vulnerability to HIV infection. ^{xx}

Steps You Can Take to Promote Women's Health and Combat Stigma:

- Know your HIV status & encourage women you care about to get tested!
- Understand and use prevention tools such as male and female condoms and dental dams!
- Access harm reduction programs! Never share or reuse injection and inhalation equipment!
- Know your risks!
- Educate yourself and women and girls you care about by talking about sexual health!
- Talk about HIV with your community!
- Advocate for systemic change regarding violence against women and stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS!
- Promote the sexual empowerment of women and girls and shared responsibility for sexual health!
- Promote & protect the human rights of women, trans women and girls!

The AIDS Committee of Durham Region is committed to providing support, education and HIV prevention services to respond to the self-identified needs of people living with HIV/AIDS, affected individuals and families, at-risk individuals and the community at-large. To find out more about our programs and services, give us a call at (905)576-1445 or 1(877)361-8750 or visit our website at www.aidsdurham.com.

i United Nations Development Programme. *Human Development Report 1995*. UNDP, New York.

ii Canadian Association of Social Workers. *Women's Income and Poverty in Canada Revisited*. 2004.

iii Centre for Social Justice. *Factsheet: The Growing Gap: Women still get paid less than men*. October 1998.

iv Centre for Social Justice. *Factsheet: The Growing Gap: Aboriginals earn 34 % below national average*, October 1998.

v Statistics Canada, *The Violence Against Women Survey*, The Daily, November 18, 1993.

vi Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, *Fact sheet: extrapolated from Ontario Women's Directorate, Dispelling the Myths about Sexual Assault*, Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1998.

vii Statistics Canada, *Measuring Violence Against Women, Statistical Trends*, 2006.

viii L. Greaves, O. Hankivsky, J. Kingston-Riechters, *Selected Estimates of the Costs of Violence Against Women*. London, Ontario: Centre for Research on Violence against Women and Children, 1995.

ix Carey, Elaine, *Homeless women 'crisis' -- In Toronto, they're dying at 10 times the normal rate*, AIDS, drugs, suicide common causes, researchers find. Toronto Star, April 13, 2004

x Currah, P. and Minter, S. *Transgender Equality: A Handbook for Activists and Policymakers*, 2000.

xi Nauen, Elinor and Bonnie Goldman, *Women and HIV/AIDS: An Overview*. <http://www.thebody.com/content/art45915.html>.

xii Galamboz, N. and L. Tilton-Weaver. *Multiple-risk behaviour in adolescents and young adults*. Statistics Canada: Health Reports, 10(2), 9-20, Autumn 1998.

xiii UNAIDS, *A strategic approach: HIV & AIDS and education and Women and girls*, May 2009.

xiv Nauen, Elinor and Bonnie Goldman, *Women and HIV/AIDS: An Overview*. <http://www.thebody.com/content/art45915.html>.

xv *MAC AIDS Fund Survey Reveals 73 Percent of Women Unaware of their Current HIV Status – False Sense of Security Prevents Women from Taking Control*, PRNewswire, New York, Feb 10, 2010.

xvi UNAIDS, *Report on the Global AIDS epidemic*, 2009.

xvii UNAIDS/UNFPA/UNIFEM, *Women and HIV/AIDS: Confronting the crisis*, 2004.

xviii *Positive HIV Tests and AIDS Diagnoses by Year*. <http://www.avert.org/canada-aids.htm>, Feb 11, 2010.

xix Prentice, Tracey, *Alarming rates of HIV/AIDS for Canada's Aboriginal women*, Volume 8, Number 1/2, Fall 2005

xx [avert.org](http://www.avert.org)