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**Press Release
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**EDUCATING GIRLS ON PROTECTION A NECESSITY, NOT AN OPTION, SECRETARY-
GENERAL**

STRESSES IN REMARKS TO WORLD AIDS DAY EVENT

**Real, Positive Change Will Allow Women to Play
Their Role Fully in Struggle against HIV/AIDS, He Says**

Following is the text of Secretary-General Kofi Annan's remarks at the World AIDS Day event at the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in New York, yesterday, 1 December:

I am moved to be here with you tonight, to hear the experiences of women and girls in the age of HIV/AIDS, but equally, to celebrate their achievements in the fight against the epidemic.

Women are our most courageous and creative champions in the fight against HIV/AIDS. In most countries and communities I have visited around the world, it is women's voices that are heard above all others; women advocates and activists who are moved to act selflessly and speak publicly, often risking prejudice, abuse or violence, in order to improve the lives of others.

They have understood that, in the age of AIDS, leadership means daring to do things differently, because this is a different kind of disease. It stands alone in human experience, and it requires us to stand united against it.

The courage that women are showing in this fight is matched only by the toll the disease is taking on them.

Women already bear the brunt of poverty. AIDS makes the poverty trap even easier for them to fall into, and even harder to break.

Women continue to face discrimination on a number of fronts -- from the workplace to laws governing land ownership and inheritance. AIDS puts them at even greater risk.

Girls already make up the majority of children not in school. When AIDS strikes the family, those girls who are attending school are all too often taken out to help run the household and care for sick relatives.

Women now account for about half of all people living with HIV worldwide. In sub-Saharan Africa, almost 57 per cent of adults living with HIV are women.

Why are women more vulnerable to infection? Why is that so, even where they are not the ones with the most sexual partners outside marriage, nor more likely than men to be injecting drug users?

Usually, it is because society's inequalities put them at risk -- unjust, unconscionable risk.

A range of factors conspires to make this so: poverty, abuse and violence, lack of information, coercion by older men, and men having several relationships at one time.

From issues of mortality to issues of morality, women pay a higher price -- including within the bonds of marriage. In some heavily affected countries, married women have higher rates of HIV infection than their unmarried, sexually active peers.

These factors cannot be addressed piecemeal. What is needed is real, positive change that will give more power and confidence to women and girls.

Change that will transform relations between women and men at all levels of society.

Change that can only be brought about through the education of girls, through legal and social reforms, and through greater awareness and responsibility among men.

Change that will allow women to play to the full their role in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Only when societies recognize that educating girls is not an option, but a necessity, will girls and young women be able to build the knowledge, the self-confidence and the independence they need to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS.

Once they leave school, we must work to ensure that they have job opportunities and that they enjoy the rights to land ownership and inheritance which too many of them are denied today.

And we must ensure that they have full access to the practical options which can protect them from HIV -- including microbicides, as they become available.

Friends, empowering women in the fight against AIDS must be our strategy for the future. I am moved that we have with us tonight a number of courageous women who will share their stories. It is among them that the real heroes of this war are to be found. It is our job to furnish them with hope. The fight continues.

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