

No Celebration for HIV-Positive Women on International Women's Day

HIV/AIDS leading cause of death among women of reproductive age

March 8, 2010 Women across the globe have little to celebrate this International Women's Day in relation to HIV/AIDS, following recent devastating reports demonstrating the brutal impact of HIV/AIDS and poverty on women worldwide. The World Health Organization's 2009 report entitled *Women and Health: Today's evidence for tomorrow's agenda* showed that, globally, HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age. WHO states that "within countries, the health of girls and women is critically affected by social and economic factors, such as access to education, household wealth. Such differences are not confined to developing countries but are found in the developed world."¹

A 2010 report to the United Nations, *No Action: No Progress*, showed there is systematic erosion of women's and girls' human rights in Canada over the last several years. It called for urgent action against Canada's persistent failure to provide adequate social assistance to poor women and girls and to address endemic violence against Aboriginal women and girls.² Poverty and violence have profound impacts on women and HIV/AIDS.

"There is little to celebrate when women are dying from HIV/AIDS due to their overall low status in society," said Louise Binder, an HIV-positive Canadian and international women's advocate and Chair of the Canadian Treatment Action Council (CTAC).

"Canada has pockets of the third world within its borders," added Colleen Price, CTAC Board member.

A startling example is Saskatchewan. In 2008, the province's HIV rate was the highest in the country at 20.8, more than twice that of Ontario (10.3), British Columbia (9.5) and Quebec (9.8).³ The number of new HIV infections in Saskatchewan has risen from 26 in 2002 to 173 in 2008. Women were 46% of the new infections. Young women infected far exceeded young men among 15–9 year olds, with 10 females versus 3 males, and among 20-29 year olds, with 28 females versus 15 males. The majority of new HIV infections were among Aboriginals.⁴

"Aboriginal women are overrepresented in the Canadian epidemic, with numbers increasing annually. We, Aboriginal women, represent the bottom rung in the HIV response, translating into a total funding disparity and continued marginalization. Lip service in the form of the apology from the federal government rings hollow in the face of the continued impacts of colonialism that have direct links to Aboriginal women's HIV prevalence rates," added Doris Peltier, an HIV-positive Aboriginal women's advocate and Aboriginal Women and Leadership Coordinator with the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network (CAAN). "These numbers impact on the future of our nations — the women.

The funding disparity must be addressed by governments through greater commitments to Aboriginal women's healing and wellness."

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Endorsed by: Canadian Treatment Action Council, Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development

¹ World Health Organization, *Women and Health: Today's evidence for tomorrow's agenda*, 2009.

² Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, "No Action: No Progress: Report on Canada's Progress in Implementing Priority Recommendations made by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2008", February 2010.

³ Public Health Agency of Canada, *HIV and AIDS in Canada: Surveillance Report to December 31, 2008, 2009*.

⁴ Saskatchewan Ministry of Health, Population Health Branch, "HIV and AIDS in Saskatchewan", 2008.