



Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)

Check against delivery

**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
(CEDAW) – General discussion on girls’ and women’s right to education**

58th Session of the
Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
Geneva, 7 July 2014

Madame Chairperson, Excellencies, and esteemed colleagues,

UNAIDS welcomes the opportunity to address the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women on the critical issue of girls' and women's right to education. The development of a General Recommendation on the Right to Education provides a timely opportunity to strengthen the important aspect of Article 10 of CEDAW in relation to health education, which includes comprehensive and age appropriate education on sexuality and sexual and reproductive rights. Such education can help transform harmful gender norms, empowering young women and girls to make more informed choices and reduce their risks and vulnerabilities.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, AIDS continues to be the leading cause of death of young women of reproductive age; young women being eight times more likely than men to be living with HIV.ⁱ Globally, young women aged 15-24 account for 22% of all new HIV infections.ⁱⁱ It is, therefore, a pressing priority to address gender inequalities and harmful gender norms that generate unsafe sexual practices and reduce access to HIV and sexual and reproductive health services for men, women and transgender persons.

Young women worldwide have less comprehensive and correct knowledge about HIV than their male counterparts. Only 28% of young women have knowledge about HIV transmission, in comparison with 36% of young men.ⁱⁱⁱ They are also less informed about condom use and sexual and reproductive rights. This is further compounded by the fact that many young women and girls are denied their right to education when they are compelled to leave school for reasons such as family obligations and early and forced marriage. The absence of a formal education means that young women miss the opportunity to access information about human rights – including sexual and reproductive rights. This limits their ability to take part in the decision-making process with regards to their own health and increases their vulnerability to HIV, violence and discrimination.^{iv}

To end the AIDS epidemic, education on sexuality and sexual and reproductive rights should include – among other things – lessons on gender equality, rights, sexuality and citizenship in addition to information about HIV, violence prevention and interpersonal relationships.^v Education is an important example of a social and behavioural change programme that can reduce the risk of HIV transmission and promote the development of social, physical and legal environments that are conducive to risk reduction.^{vi}

In this context UNAIDS applauds the initiative of Ministers of Health and of Education from 21 countries of Eastern and Southern Africa for adopting a Commitment on comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health services for young people—in partnership with young people.

To conclude, UNAIDS thanks CEDAW for this opportunity to ensure that access to quality and comprehensive education on sexual and reproductive health and rights is included in the General Recommendation on the Right to Education and that State party reports are monitored for their inclusion of this critical dimension to education. UNAIDS stands ready to support the CEDAW in this process.

Thank you.

ⁱ UNAIDS. *Fact sheet – Women, girls, gender equality and HIV*. 2012.

ⁱⁱ UNAIDS. *UNAIDS World AIDS Day report 2011*. 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ UNAIDS. *People left behind report - Young women and girls*. 2014.

^{iv} UNAIDS. *People left behind report - Young women and girls*. 2014.

^v UNAIDS. *People left behind report - Young women and girls*. 2014.

^{vi} UNAIDS. *Background note on Agenda number 9 – Thematic segment: HIV, adolescents and youth*. PCB (33)/13.22. 2013.