

W4GF Statement and Technical Note 54th UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board (PCB) Meeting

The 54th UNAIDS PCB meeting, scheduled for June 25 to 27, 2024, in Geneva, Switzerland, will see the participation of Women4GlobalFund (W4GF), a global network of 350 advocates from 72 countries, primarily in the Global South, dedicated to promoting gender equality. W4GF ensures that Global Fund projects are gender-sensitive, transformative, and address the needs of women and girls in all their diversity. We are committed to empowering women, especially the youth, advocating for meaningful participation in decision-making processes, influencing policies, and demanding accountability. Our focus is on improving health and well-being by addressing urgent needs related to HIV, TB, and malaria, which disproportionately affect women and girls.

W4GF envisions a world where gender equity movements have transformed power and privilege into equity and equality for all. These efforts are crucial for achieving substantive equity and gender equality in all aspects of public health. At the 54th UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board, W4GF is strongly committed to promoting gender equality and human rights in the global HIV response. We emphasise key themes: leadership in the HIV response and sustaining the gains of the global HIV response to 2030 and beyond.

As women and girls in all of our diversity, leaders in the HIV response, W4GF strongly believes in the importance of inclusive leadership to ensure an effective and equitable response to HIV/AIDS. We have seen progress in the inclusion and representation of women and girls in all their diversity and key communities in decision-making bodies, but there is still much work to be done to achieve true gender equity and equality as key elements for meaningful participation.

In several countries in the world and sub-Saharan Africa, women's networks have been crucial in influencing national policies for a gender-transformative HIV response, integrating the specific needs of women and girls in their diversity¹. These initiatives have been successful due to the recognition of specific contexts; by understanding that the effects of HIV are not uniform and that approaches must be adapted to meet the varied realities of women and girls in all their diversity .

Sustaining the Achievements of the Global Response to HIV, W4GF recognizes the significant progress made in the global response to HIV, the result of collective efforts in health promotion, HIV prevention, and improved access to essential treatment. However, there are still persistent gaps

¹https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/41625-doc-AU_GENDER_EQUALITY_WOMENS_EMPOWERMENT_AND_HIV_IN_AFRICA_FULL_REPORT_FRENCH_FINAL.pdf

especially for women and girls in all of their diversity, and there is the need for continued consolidation and improvements to reduce inequalities that lead us to achieve the ambitious targets set for 2030.

In contexts where discriminatory legislation and stigmatising attitudes persist, community health services and civil society meaningful participation have significantly improved access to prevention and treatment comprehensive healthcare services, mainly addressing the needs of key populations such as women and girls, sex workers, transgender women, and LGBTQI+ people.

W4GF has been able to observe and document² first-hand how initiatives³ that integrate human rights and gender-transformative approaches have not only strengthened the quality of care but also strengthened communities' trust in health services. Enabling women and girls to receive care that is tailored to their specific needs and respectful of their dignity is essential. These programs have not only reduced HIV transmission but have also fostered community empowerment and resilience.

Rise of Anti-Gender and Anti-Rights Movements: A Major Challenge for the HIV Response

The alarming rise of anti-gender and anti-rights movements is a major challenge for the fight against HIV, seriously threatening the progress made and undermining the human rights of women, gender diversities and key populations. These movements, often driven by conservative and discriminatory ideologies and practices, are challenging critical advances in the HIV response, human rights, and public health.

The rise of anti-gender and anti-rights movements can be explained by several factors, particularly visible in certain regions of Africa where political and social instability has contributed to restrictive and discriminatory policies. However, this tendency is growing and spreading in all regions of the world.

Here are concrete examples that illustrate this trend in several countries:

- **Uganda:** In Uganda, anti-LGBTQI+ legislation is among the toughest on the African continent. The Anti-Homosexuality Law adopted in 2024⁴ has drawn widespread international condemnation for its criminalization of same-sex relations and its harmful impacts on human rights. This legislation has not only reinforced the stigma of LGBTQI+ people, but has also impacted health programs, including those related to HIV prevention, by discouraging affected populations from seeking health services for fear of discrimination and reprisals.
- **Ghana:** Despite the guarantee of equal rights in the Ghanaian Constitution, daily reality is often marked by deeply conservative social attitudes. LGBTQI+ people face systemic discrimination and constant threats of physical and verbal violence. In 2021, this hostility intensified with targeted attacks on LGBTQI+ activists by conservative groups, highlighting a worrying rise in disregard for gender minority rights.

² https://drive.google.com/file/d/1uQzwzYlrFa6VcxRPAis3HWg3NqXwQld_/view

³ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/12X5F4Cs2skgjb1Nrsa7pnfnP831uMTJ7/view>

⁴ <https://afriquexxi.info/Loi-anti-homosexualite-en-Ouganda-bataille-rangee-entre-interets-etrangers>

Currently, Ghana is in the midst of a heated debate over anti-LGBTQI+ rights, with legislative proposals aimed at toughening already restrictive laws. This tense political-social context amplifies the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ people who are fighting for their recognition, safety, and fundamental rights in the country. This situation underscores the critical importance of local and international efforts to defend and promote LGBTQI+ rights in Ghana, while highlighting the need for urgent action to combat intolerance and promote inclusion⁵.

- **Kenya:** Kenya has also been the scene of heated debates around the rights of LGBTQI+ people. Although the country's Supreme Court has made landmark decisions in favour of LGBTQI+ rights, such as recognizing LGBTQI+ organisations as legal entities, society remains deeply divided on the issue. Activists face constant threats and physical attacks because of their work to defend human rights and gender equality⁶.
- **Tunisia:** In Tunisia, despite progress in some areas of women's rights, human rights defenders, including feminists, face increasing repression. Authorities imposed restrictions on the activities of civil society organisations, leading to arbitrary arrests and criminal prosecutions of activists⁷. This crackdown is aimed at silencing feminist voices and limiting their ability to advocate for women's rights, including access to sexual and health services.
- **Peru:** Peru's presidency signs decree in 2024 that classifies transgender people as mentally ill, further opening the door to the promotion by some conservative groups of the widely discredited practice of conversion therapy, aimed at changing a person's gender identity or sexual orientation; as well as encouraging hatred and discrimination in the environment of access to health services. This decree is another blow in a country where equal marriage and civil unions are illegal; transgender identity is not legally recognized; there is no legislation recognizing hate crimes; and where transgender women face widespread discrimination and violence⁸.
- **Ecuador:** In February 2024, the plenary of the legislature passed to second debate Article 216.1 of the Integral Organic Penal Code reform, which aims to criminalise the intentional transmission of infectious diseases, such as HIV. This measure not only violates human rights, but also undermines efforts to guarantee universal access to health care and perpetuates the stigmatisation and discrimination of people living with HIV, especially women from the key populations⁹

These examples clearly show how restrictive government policies and actions contribute to the marginalisation and exclusion of gender minorities and human rights defenders, in the most unequal regions of the world. These measures not only exacerbate inequalities but also undermine HIV

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68353437>

⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/kenya/report-kenya/>

⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/news/2022/03/tunisia-looming-curbs-on-civil-society-must-be-stopped/>

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/peru-protesters-slam-new-insurance-law-that-deems-transgender-people-mentally-2024-05-18/>

⁹ <https://www.hivjustice.net/news-from-other-sources/ecuador-new-bill-proposes-1-3-years-in-prison-for-transmission-of-an-infectious-disease/>

prevention and treatment efforts, limiting access to essential health services and reinforcing stigma, discrimination and inequalities.

Devastating Impacts on the HIV Response

The anti-gender and anti-rights movements have profound and direct consequences on the HIV response, undermining several key aspects:

- In 2023, only 10 of the 126 countries where the Global Fund invests in programs were classified as 'open', meaning where civil society could operate freely. In 97 of the 126 countries, the community-led and civil society organisations the Global Fund relies on to increase its impact and effectiveness face various levels of risk, including of surveillance; intimidation by both state and powerful non-state actors; bureaucratic harassment; deregistration; closure; and, in some cases, violence¹⁰
- By restricting access to SHRH services, these movements severely hinder HIV prevention and limit access to essential treatment, especially for the most vulnerable populations. For example, policies that restrict access to comprehensive sexuality education and contraception increase the risks of HIV transmission and vertical transmission. Women and girls face increased barriers to accessing the information and services needed to guarantee their reproductive health rights and prevent HIV. According to WHO, human right violations, gender inequality, harmful cultural practices and marginalisation of underserved individuals and populations worsen the impact of HIV and lead to sexual and reproductive ill-health. As a result, some populations at risk of or living with HIV such as women and girls, transgender and gender diverse people, and indigenous communities are disproportionately affected and have adverse health outcomes¹¹.
- Reinforced by stigmatising narratives, these movements fuel the marginalisation of people/women living with HIV and key populations. Stigma hinders access to testing, treatment and support services for people at risk of and living with HIV, discouraging the search for essential healthcare. In addition, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity creates additional barriers for LGBTQI+ people in accessing HIV services and affects their overall well-being. Reports indicate that individuals experiencing high levels of stigma are more than twice as likely to delay enrolling in care, which severely undermines efforts to reach and treat these populations¹².
- In addition, the persistence of these movements also restricts access to HIV self-testing. In many countries, restrictive policies, criminalisation of gender diversities and sexual practices, and the stigma associated hinder the distribution, promotion and use of HIV self-tests, which are crucial for confidential HIV testing, especially among women and girls. This additional barrier further complicates the fight against HIV and undermines progress towards 2030 UNAIDS goals. WHO has strongly recommended HIV self-testing, noting that it is safe, accurate, and effective. WHO guidelines emphasise that self-testing can significantly improve access to testing, particularly in

¹⁰ CIVICUS Monitor (2023).

¹¹[https://www.who.int/teams/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-research-\(srh\)/areas-of-work/hiv-linkages-with-sexual-and-reproductive-health](https://www.who.int/teams/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-research-(srh)/areas-of-work/hiv-linkages-with-sexual-and-reproductive-health)

¹²<https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/10/567682>

settings with high HIV prevalence and among populations with lower testing rates¹³. A systematic review and meta-analysis published in BMC Medicine found that HIVST increased the likelihood of testing among female sex workers (FSW), compared to standard testing methods¹⁴.

W4GF Recommendations to the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board

Acknowledging the worrying rise of these movements and policies, W4GF recommends a series of urgent actions:

1. Increasing the technical and financial contributions of UNAIDS in countries where there are persistent gender inequalities and human rights violations, ensuring sustained support or the integration of gender-transformative and human rights programmes, including sexual and reproductive rights, into Global Fund grants in all countries facing anti-rights movements and gender inequalities. This includes the active participation of women and girls organisations, movements, civil society organisations and human rights defenders in decision-making processes like the CCMs to ensure that policies and programs reflect the needs and realities of the most vulnerable populations.
2. Improving and financing jointly, strategic partnerships with the Global Fund, philanthropic foundations, civil society organisations (CSOs), women-led organisations, movements, networks, parliamentarians and ambassadors to strengthen human rights and public health advocacy. These partnerships can include joint advocacy initiatives, capacity-building programs, and lobbying actions to influence national and international health and human rights policies.
3. Establishing robust mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of funding for community-based and women-led organisations, movements and networks, which are essential for a sustainable response to HIV. This includes diversifying funding sources and investing in organisational capacity, supported by strong technical support from UNAIDS and other key technical partners.
4. Supporting technically and financially the effective implementation of Global Fund programs; promoting gender equality and strengthening the social inclusion of women, girls, and gender diversities in all aspects of the HIV response. This includes, for instance, promoting programmes to train health care providers on the specific needs of women, girls and gender diversities, as well as jointly conducting gender assessments, financing and supporting Community-led monitoring processes and sustaining the meaningful participation of women and girls in their diversity in the planning and implementation of national HIV responses connected to Global Fund programmes.
5. Developing and implementing advocacy and awareness-raising strategies and processes in collaboration between UNAIDS, WHO, UNWomen, UNFPA, the Global Fund and other stakeholders to publicly denounce and condemn acts of gender-based violence, discrimination against sexual orientation and gender identity. This means working collaboratively and closely

¹³ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-CDS-HIV-19.36>

¹⁴ <https://bmcmecine.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12916-020-01835-z>

with Governments, civil society and communities, reinforcing connections between the media, legal institutions, and observatories, promoting the guarantee of human rights.

6. Support and advocate jointly with the Global for commitments that strengthen civic space and the meaningful engagement of women-led organisations, community-led and civil society organisations in regional and global political forums.
7. Launch a global communication and awareness campaign to counter anti-gender and anti-law narratives. This campaign aims to influence Governments towards the adoption of human rights and gender-transformative health policies and raise awareness of the public about sexual and reproductive rights, deconstruct stereotypes, and promote an inclusive understanding of human diversity. Strategies include using social media to reach a large audience.

In conclusion, W4GF calls for coordinated, efficient and sustained action and global solidarity to counter the rise of anti-gender and anti-rights movements. Our recommendations are essential to sustain gains in the HIV response, improve and foster gender-transformative healthcare services, and ensure a more equitable and inclusive future for all - with strong health and community systems.

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