

# Break barriers in HIV/Aids fight

**A**s Uganda commemorated the Candlelight Memorial Day last week under the theme "Ending Aids by 2030: Embracing the role of women," it was a moment to reflect on both progress made and challenges that remain in the fight against HIV/Aids.

It was noted that despite decades of effort, the epidemic continues to disproportionately affect women, particularly adolescent girls and young women, who bear the heaviest burden of infection. Yet, these same women are also the most powerful agents of change in turning the tide.

Dr Nelson Musoba, the director general of the Uganda Aids Commission (UAC), emphasised the dual role of women. While systemic inequities place them at higher risk, women have historically driven the uptake of prevention services, led community-based interventions, and propelled the success of mother-to-child prevention programmes.

"We need to move from viewing women as vulnerable to empowering them as leaders of the response," he said, a call that must guide both policy and community action.

The statistics are sobering. Uganda registers approximately 37,000 new HIV infections annually, with young people aged 15 to 24 accounting for the majority. National adult prevalence sits at 4.9 percent, but women's infection rates, at 6.4 percent, remain almost double that of men.

While men lag in accessing treatment, women face additional barriers rooted in poverty, gender-based violence, and cultural practices such as early marriage and widow inheritance. These factors not only increase vulnerability but also perpetuate cycles of stigma and marginalisation.

UNAIDS Country Director Jacqueline Makokha noted the importance of women-led and community-based interventions.

Evidence shows that in sub-Saharan Africa, nearly two-thirds of new infections among women and girls are preventable through targeted, community-driven strategies.

Initiatives such as outreach programmes to marketplaces, as highlighted by Maery Mungati of Village Journeys Africa, bring services directly to women who cannot access traditional health facilities. This pragmatic approach ensures no woman is left behind, whether during pregnancy, breastfeeding, or post-delivery.

Ending Aids by 2030 demands more than statistics. It requires bold leadership, public solidarity, and an end to stigma. Dr Ruth Ssenyonyi, UAC Board chairperson, notes that empowering women to challenge harmful social, cultural, and political norms is not only a moral imperative but a strategic necessity. Women are, as she says, the "authors of life" and must occupy the forefront of this battle.

As Uganda moves toward a future free of Aids, the message is clear. Investing in women's leadership is not an optional strategy but the decisive path to ending the epidemic. By empowering women, dismantling barriers, and fostering community-led responses, the nation can finally turn hope into reality, achieving a generation that is Aids-free.

## The issue:

HIV/Aids.

## Our view:

Investing in women's leadership is not an optional strategy but the decisive path to ending the epidemic.

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