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Commission on the Status of Women, Forty-third Session, Panel on Women and Health:

HIV/AIDS and Violence against Women

By Peter Piot, Executive Director, UNAIDS (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS)

Madam Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I very much welcome the opportunity to speak here today.

I would like to focus on a particularly insidious aspect of the AIDS epidemic. It is also one which is only now beginning to receive the international recognition it deserves. I am referring to violence against women and its impact on the merciless spread of this global disease.

Female vulnerability to HIV is showing up in the statistics. Today, of the estimated 33 million people living with HIV or AIDS, 43% are girls or women. Why are women so vulnerable to HIV? Biologically, females are far more likely to contract a sexually transmitted disease through intercourse than males. This makes the consequences of unprotected sex far more serious and life-threatening to women.

But women's vulnerability has social roots, not just biological ones. For millions of women and girls, their subordinate position in numerous societies can make it difficult if not impossible for them to protect themselves from HIV. They often cannot insist on fidelity, demand condom use, or refuse sex to their partner, even when they suspect or know he is already infected himself. And they often lack the economic power to remove themselves from relationships that carry major risks of HIV infection.

Physical and sexual violence can occur everywhere, from the bedroom to the refugee camp, and it can result directly in HIV infection. But let us not forget. Even the threat of violence can lead to AIDS. It may not kill immediately, like a bullet, but it can kill slowly, by killing dialogue about sex and life. And by undermining women's ability to protect themselves.

Let me say a few words about those at highest risk -- adolescents, particularly girls. Today, over half of all new HIV infections worldwide occur in those under 25 years old. Studies in Kenya show that nearly one girl in four between the ages of 15 and 19 is living with HIV. In many countries, girls are becoming infected much earlier than boys.

Many of these infections result from violence. In Santiago, Chile, three percent of young women report that rape was their first sexual experience. Even young children may contract HIV from forced sex, often with close acquaintances, such as family members or 'trusted' friends. Mothers often know that their children are being abused, yet are afraid to speak out.
But I want to stress that the health consequences of abuse are not limited to the obvious risk - getting infected with HIV by the abuser. Children who are abused are wounded in their self-esteem; they feel dirty, ashamed, they lose faith in others. Later in life this may lead to many kinds of AIDS risk behaviour such as drug use, prostitution and unprotected sex. A recent US survey showed that young women who were sexually abused as children are twice as likely to place themselves at risk through unprotected sex with multiple partners.

For boys too, physical abuse as a social norm is carried over from generation to generation. Boys who watch their fathers abuse their mothers are more likely to become abusers themselves, thus perpetuating the cycle.

Which brings me to a point that often gets lost when we talk about violence and AIDS. Yes, girls and women are subordinate, and this is an enormous problem. But let us not lose sight of the other side of the coin – what society sees as acceptable male behaviour. The international community may look on male violence against women as legally intolerable, but it is still considered an acceptable part of life in many societies, including by its victims.

Sexual violence as a social norm may even be strengthened by national courts. A recent rape case decision by an Italian court threatens to drag back women's rights twenty years by claiming that a woman wearing jeans must have taken them off willingly to have sex - she cannot have been raped by the man she was accusing.