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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.

As the head of UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, I am normally used to emphasizing the relentless rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in many parts of the world. Not just in Africa where its continued expansion is of deep concern, but also in Asia and increasingly Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. I also tend to explore what we - the world community - can do about it.

Today, however, 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.

Most countries have completely failed to deal with this issue. Gender-based violence is still a taboo subject. In many places it is considered a private matter, not to be discussed publicly. This, ladies and gentlemen, is an unacceptable situation.

Domestic violence, rape and other forms of sexual abuse are gross violations of human rights. They are also closely linked to some of today's most intractable health issues, including the spread of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. But before I describe their health consequences, let me say a few words about the sheer scale of violence against girls and women.

According to the World Health Organization, violence against girls and women throughout the world causes more death and disability among women in the 15 to 44 age group than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and even war. Most recent studies from around the world suggest that between 16% and 52% of women have been physically assaulted by an intimate partner at least once in their lives. This kind of assault is often associated with sexual violence, including rape.

In the United States, for example, a woman is assaulted - usually by her husband - every fifteen seconds. In India, one study suggested that between 18% and 45% of married men acknowledge abusing their wives.

Rape has also become a deliberate weapon of war in many conflicts such as Central Africa and the Balkans. This cruelly imposes on women and girls - some of them less than ten years old - not just pain and humiliation but the threat of sexually transmitted diseases, such as AIDS.

The trafficking of girls and women is yet another tragic context for sexual violence. Every year, hundreds of thousands of women and girls throughout the world are bought and sold into marriage, prostitution, and slavery. The United Nations estimates that four million people are trafficked every year. Overall, however, as many as 200 million may be enduring a form of contemporary slavery today.

Most of the sex trade in women and children takes place in Asia. Nevertheless, Latin American, Caribbean and Eastern European women are becoming increasingly susceptible, especially in impoverished countries of the former Soviet bloc where HIV/AIDS is rising. In Western Europe alone, up to half a million women are being trafficked. Many come from Eastern Europe but also Africa and Asia, with traffickers now making as much from the human trade as from drug smuggling. Once in the hands of these traffickers, women and girls often have little chance of escape. Many are forced to engage in unsafe sex with their customers, severely exacerbating their risk of HIV.

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So the scale of violence is frightening. So is the scale of HIV and AIDS, especially in women. Increasingly, female vulnerability to HIV is showing up in the statistics. Today, of the estimated 33 million people are living with HIV or AIDS, 43% are girls or women.