



Parliamentarians for Women's Health

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NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ICRW Joins with African Parliamentarians to Battle HIV/AIDS

WASHINGTON, D.C. – June 21, 2005 – The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and four key international partners will join forces with African parliamentarians to accelerate efforts to help women fight HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases in East and southern Africa.

The three-year initiative, funded with a \$3.4 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, will work with select parliamentarians in Botswana, Kenya, Namibia and Tanzania to bolster women's and girls' access to health services, including HIV/AIDS treatment, prevention and care.

A PROJECT BY:



The groundbreaking project seeks to expand parliamentarians' skills and knowledge on women's health by providing technical assistance and facilitating linkages to communities and women living with HIV and AIDS. National and regional conferences on critical women's health issues also will be organized.

In addition to ICRW, the international partners engaged in the project include: European Parliamentarians for Africa (AWEPA); Center for the Study of AIDS at the University of Pretoria (CSA); International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW); and Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative (EGI).

“Political will and leadership are fundamental to improving women's access to health services,” ICRW President Geeta Rao Gupta says. “The uniqueness of this project is that it brings together the parliamentarians as national leaders, the project partners – with their extensive field expertise – and women and communities living with HIV and AIDS.”

While significant progress has been made in combating HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, international organizations stress that much more must be done.

Research by ICRW and others reveals that entrenched cultural and social barriers continue to prevent women from gaining access to health services, even with the best-designed health interventions. Removing these barriers is a first step in improving the overall health of people living in sub-

Saharan Africa, especially in halting the spread of HIV, the research indicates.

“In African countries, HIV and AIDS are exacerbating a host of pre-existing health and other problems relating particularly to women,” CSA Director Mary Crewe says. “This project allows for parliamentarians to gain additional resources to think through innovative and creative ways to solve a whole range of problems through research, working with existing laws and legislation, and through wider community outreach.”

In many parts of Africa, women’s and girls’ health needs are woefully underserved, particularly HIV and AIDS prevention, treatment and care. Today, nearly 60 percent of adults living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa are women, according to UNAIDS. In Africa, women serve critical roles in their families and communities as food producers, income earners, caregivers and community leaders. When infectious disease impacts women and girls, it not only impairs their health, it also weakens their families, communities and nations.

“This project will provide a bridge between African parliamentarians and key global initiatives advocating for increased access for women to critical health care services,” EGI Executive Director Mary Robinson says. “Courageous and informed African women parliamentarians can make an enormous difference in pushing for legislative, budgetary and behavioral change at the community and national level. We are delighted to join with ICRW and our other partners in this pioneering project.”

Many past and current efforts to increase women’s access to health services have fallen short due largely to underlying economic, political, social and cultural constraints. Elected officials at the national level are often underused and not fully engaged in addressing these issues because they frequently lack the information and facts needed to effectively deal with women’s health issues.

“Parliamentarians are well-placed to promote gender-sensitive health policies, legislation and budgets, and serve as role models on these important issues,” AWEPA President Jan Nico Scholten says.

The project also will support parliamentarians’ efforts to interact more effectively with constituencies at national, regional and international levels, with a focus on creating opportunities for the parliamentarians to work with and learn from civil society groups, especially those led by HIV-positive women.

“Much has and will continue to be learned about fighting HIV/AIDS and addressing important social issues like poverty by listening to the women and girls who are living with HIV and AIDS,” ICW East Africa Regional Coordinator Lillian Mworeko says. “This project will raise the cause of HIV-positive women of Africa,” she adds. “Women are the mother of the nation, and deserve the care, support and treatment policies that favor our well-being.”

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The International Center for Research on Women is a leading international research organization based in Washington, D.C.

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