

# AFRICA RENEWAL

United Nations Department of Public Information

## Gender violence hampers AIDS fight

*Activists in Zambia fight a 'deadly link'*

By **Reginald Ntomba**

*Lusaka*

**M**aria is living with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Antiretroviral medicines (ARVs) are now more widely available and are supposed to make her life better. But her continued therapy is under threat because she fears that if her husband discovers her HIV status he will become verbally abusive or even divorce her. As a result, Maria says, she has had to hide her life-prolonging ARV drugs and only takes them when her husband is not around. Because she hides her tablets, she has sometimes forgotten to take them.

According to the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), there are 33.2 million people worldwide living with HIV. Of those, 15.4 million are women. In Africa, women account for between 59 and 61 per cent of all adults living with HIV. Gender violence is one factor that makes women more vulnerable to infection, and it also hampers treatment.

Maria's tale is one of the many cases documented by *Human Rights Watch* (HRW) in two of Zambia's nine provinces. The international non-governmental organization (NGO), headquartered in New York, warns that if gender violence is not addressed, the government's comprehensive programme to provide free ARVs through the public health system will be frustrated. By the end of 2007, reports Finance and National Planning Minister Ng'andu Magande, 137,000 people were receiving antiretroviral therapy, up from 75,000 in 2006.

"Unless the Zambian government introduces legal and health-system reforms and removes the barriers to HIV treatment that women face," says Nada Ali, author of the HRW report, "gender-based abuses will continue to shatter the lives of countless Zambian women in acute need of antiretroviral treatments and contribute to avoidable losses of health and lives."

### **A human rights violation**

According to the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), "Violence against women is one of the most widespread violations of human rights." In November 2007 UNIFEM launched a "Say No to Violence Against Women" campaign.

Activists in Southern Africa are now drawing attention to the contribution of gender violence to other ills, such as the AIDS pan-

dem. Says Malawian women's rights activist Tiseke Kasambala, there is a "deadly link" between abuses of women's rights and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The Zambian chapter of *Women and the Law in Southern Africa* (WLSA), a research and advocacy group, argues that unless such violence is addressed, combating HIV/AIDS will be an even more arduous task. "Violence against women has affected treatment of HIV/AIDS and this is worrying," says Mrs. Matrine Chuulu, the chapter's national coordinator.

NGOs are leading the fight against gender violence by lobbying the government to strengthen legislation and by providing various services to abused women. The Zambian chapter of the *Young Women's Christian Association* (YWCA), with funding from the European Union, runs a crisis centre for battered women and provides such services as psychotherapy and legal advice. According to data collected by the YWCA, in the 874 cases of gender violence reported since 2006, nearly half of the women (427) were found to be HIV-positive.

### **Strengthening laws**

Currently Zambia does not have legislation criminalizing gender violence, but the government is moving in that direction. In 2005 it amended the penal code to prohibit indecent assault, sexual harassment and trafficking of women and children. President Levy Mwanawasa notes that despite such efforts to strengthen the law, "the scourge of gender violence has continued in our homes and communities."

In a state of the nation address to parliament in early January, President Mwanawasa said that the government would soon introduce "a bill specifically dealing with gender violence." The government, he added, will also speed up efforts to incorporate the goals of the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) into national law.

It is time to "move the agenda from talking to action," says the UN Secretary-General's special envoy on HIV/AIDS in Africa, Elizabeth Mataka. It is especially important to make people aware of the need to tackle gender violence. Police and laws, by themselves, will not solve the problem, she adds. It is also vital to mobilize society and "carry the community along." ■