



## PRESS STATEMENT

Kampala, Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020

### **HIV/AIDS AND COVID-19: THE NEED TO IMPROVE THE LEGAL ENVIRONMENT FOR KEY POPULATIONS AND OTHER VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES**

*Commemoration of World AIDS Day 2020*

**Kampala  
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COVID-19 has dramatically changed the global landscape, and disproportionately affected Key Populations and persons living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV). As we commemorate this World AIDS day we need to deeply think about the future, and how to address the two pandemics without backtracking on gains already made.

The theme for this year is 'Global solidarity, shared responsibility.' This is a call to action for all stakeholders to play an active role in the fight against HIV/AIDS and in particular to view global health responses in a new way and ensure that health is fully financed, health systems are strengthened, access to services and medicines is available to all, human rights are respected and the rights of women and key populations are at the center. Just like the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, this is a responsibility for all countries, rich or poor.

Uganda has made important strides towards the 90-90-90 global target, with 89% of people tested and knowing their status, 94% of all people with diagnosed HIV infection receiving sustained Antiretroviral therapy (ART) and 90% of

all people receiving ART having viral suppression. This calls for celebration.

However, despite these efforts, Key Populations still remain behind with much HIV higher prevalence rates than the general population. Whereas the general prevalence rate has been noted at 5.7%, that for Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) remains high at 13%, sex workers 37%, and injecting drug users at 16.7%. What these groups share in common is criminalisation. Uganda needs to decriminalise same sex relations, sex work and individual drug use and adopt positive measures towards protection of these groups if the fight against HIV is to fully succeed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the vulnerabilities and inequalities that are faced by marginalised groups in society. The imposed lockdown measures made it difficult for PLHIV to access their ART medicines especially for those that had to travel long distances from their homes. HRAPF has documented over 152 human rights violations from January 2020 to June 2020, of mainly the right to liberty, freedom from

torture, cruel and inhumane treatment, and the right to a fair hearing. These violations include those that resulted from the arrest of 22 youths from a homeless shelter in Kyengera, and subjecting them to acts of torture both at arrest and while on remand in prison, due to their suspected sexual orientation and gender identity. These violations were unjustified and relied on the pretext of enforcing COVID-19 related restrictions.

Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF) calls upon the Government of Uganda to take bold steps in ensuring an equal society for all, the right to health for all, and creating a conducive socio-legal environment for their sustainability, more so during this period of COVID-19. Removing legal barriers to HIV prevention and treatment should be the first step.

*Taking human rights to all*

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