



*News Release*

## Women and Girls' Growing Risk of AIDS

*Conference takes global approach, heeds global warning*

**March 1, 2005, Halifax, Nova Scotia** – Women and young people – especially girls – are at a higher-than-average risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, both globally and here in Nova Scotia. Their disproportionate – and alarming – vulnerability is the focus of a one-day conference being held on the eve of International Women's Day. The conference is co-sponsored by the Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, and the Saint Mary's University International Development Graduate Student Society with financial support from the Canadian Association for Studies in International Development.

The March 7<sup>th</sup> conference, *Gender Inequality and HIV/AIDS: Lessons for International Development in the New Millennium*, will look beyond the biological factors to the social and cultural factors that come into play in this pandemic. "Women's lower social and economic status combined with societal expectations about appropriate male and female behaviour have led to a situation where women and girls are at higher risk for HIV/AIDS," says Barbara Clow, executive director of the Centre of Excellence.

In Canada, nearly 25 percent of new infections occur in women – up from just 12 percent a few years ago. These changing patterns echo those of the some hardest hit regions of the world, including southern Africa where girls are five times more likely than boys to be living with HIV. "HIV/AIDS is a gendered epidemic, in both the developed and developing worlds," says Dr. Clow. "We need to share experiences and expertise that will enable us to develop research, policies, and practices that address the gender dimensions of HIV/AIDS and combat the epidemic around the globe."

June Larkin of the University of Toronto's Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Studies will deliver the keynote address. Dr. Larkin is Principal Investigator for GAAP (Gendering Adolescent AIDS Prevention), a participatory research program that develops gender-sensitive prevention tools. GAAP is led by faculty members from the University of Toronto and McGill and research collaborators in South Africa. Its projects have included Taking Action – an arts-based HIV prevention symposium with sessions on hip hop, graffiti, and photography – and a plan to connect youth in Toronto and South Africa through the worldwide web.

“International collaboration is important,” says Dr. Larkin. “We have a lot to learn from South Africa in terms of how they’ve handled the epidemic and where they are now.” We must also heed a warning. “HIV/AIDS rates among youth are relatively low in Canada,” she says, “but a decade ago they were also low in some of the countries where HIV is now endemic.”

Other speakers include Dr. Walter Schlech of Dalhousie University’s Faculty of Medicine, Peter Delefes of the Nova Scotia-Gambia Association, and Audrey Campbell of McMaster University . Conference participants will share research and personal experience, and the day will wrap up with a call for action: *where do we go from here?*

The Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health is one of four national Centres of Excellence for Women’s Health funded by the Bureau of Women’s Health and Gender Analysis, Health Canada. The Centres are dedicated to conducting policy-oriented research aimed at improving the health status of Canadian women by making the health system more aware of and responsive to women’s health issues. In 1999, the Centre joined with the Commonwealth Secretariat to develop the International Institute on Gender and HIV/AIDS. The inaugural Institute was launched in southern Africa in June 2004 and further Institute events are planned for the Caribbean and southeast Asia.

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For more information, to arrange an interview or to attend part of the conference, please contact:

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