



W O M E N ' S  
R E S E A R C H  
I N I T I A T I V E  
O N H I V / A I D S  
*A program of The Well Project*

## **Unleashing our Potential: Transforming How we Engage Women and Girls, Advance Gender Equality, and Respond to HIV**

### **Executive Summary**

On July 16-17, 2015, the ATHENA Network and the Women's Research Initiative on HIV/AIDS (WRI) convened a meeting to address the importance of engaging women and girls in the global response to HIV. The meeting was held at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle, WA. Attendees included women living with HIV, policymakers, researchers, funders and advocacy organizations (see Appendix A for complete list of attendees). Dawn Averitt, founder of the WRI, and E. Tyler Crone, co-founder and coordinating director of ATHENA hosted the convening and charged the group with addressing the following objectives:

- Understand why the HIV epidemic continues to flourish in women and girls and why strategies-to-date have not adequately mobilized women and girls to be a part of the solution
- Identify successful approaches to operationally engage women and girls in all our diversity across the entirety of the HIV movement, including key decision-making
- Develop a set of action items to seed implementation of the identified approaches
- Enhance alliances to more effectively coordinate ongoing efforts to engage women and girls and advance gender equality
- Identify tactics to highlight and demonstrate successful practices and lessons learned in the operational engagement of women and girls at the center of the HIV response to share with the broader health and development fields

Over the course of the two-day meeting, the group engaged in break-out sessions, plenary talks, brainstorming exercises, and large-group discussions. These sessions included:

- Two-minute "TED Talks" by participants to share what drives them and inspires them
- An engagement-defining exercise focused on identifying novel approaches
- Dialogue on the specific/unique needs of women in all of our diversity, including young women, transwomen, and young women born with HIV
- Discussion on what networks of women living with HIV and women's organizations see as opportunities and pitfalls in the current global landscape and architecture
- A description of DREAMS, a program run by PEPFAR, the Gates Foundation, and the Nike Foundation, which aims to ensure that girls have an opportunity to live **Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored and Safe lives**

- Details of Gates Foundation programming efforts focused specifically on women and girls, sexual and reproductive health, and HIV as well as a broad overview of the gender equality initiatives emerging from the office of Melinda Gates
- Background on the National Institutes of Health HIV research in women and girls, including current epidemiological data
- A dialogue with U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator & U.S. Special Representative for Global Health Diplomacy, Ambassador Deborah L. Birx.
- Young women asking their wish for action from each of the partners in the room
- Personal and institutional commitments moving forward

A number of themes emerged across these discussions and topics:

- The need for increased and enhanced leadership training and mentorship for young women living with HIV
  - The importance of “safe spaces” for women to express themselves and learn
- The need to ensure that women’s voices, in all their diversities, are included “at the table” in discussions and decisions around research, funding, treatment, prevention, and advocacy
  - The need to develop a framework for “meaningful engagement” with women and girls
  - The importance of addressing those diversities and their unique needs, including young women, transwomen, women born with HIV, women who use drugs, women who engage in sex work, women with disabilities
- The need to develop programming and messaging that leverage and reflect women’s communication styles, approaches, and indigenous expertise
- The continuing and pervasive role of stigma and discrimination as manifestations of gender-based violence
- The unintended consequence that large funders have had on the “professionalization” and “scaling-up” of grassroots global efforts, such as the need to shift their skill sets from on-the-ground expertise and lived experience to “going after the money”
- The importance of addressing concomitant issues with HIV, such as gender-based violence in all its forms
  - The need to engage horizontally across women’s organizations
- The need to identify and develop unique funding mechanisms that can reach both community-led and intentionally small-scaled international organizations who don’t have the capacity or the need for larger funding
- The need to recognize the key importance of funding women’s-rights-focused advocacy work at all levels. This is in the context of global chronic under-funding of women’s rights organizations (AWID 2015) and the critical importance of autonomous women’s rights movements to effect reductions in violence against women (Htun and Wheldon 2012)
- The need to address or reframe the continuum of care for women – moving beyond treatment, to a holistic definition of health, as articulated by WHO in 1948, including social and mental health issues, quality of life, etc.

- The need to actively work to expand the evidence base to include the long term experience of women's advocates and organizations

## NEXT STEPS

The meeting concluded with consensus to move forward on two action items as specific meeting follow up:

1. We will reach out to this group to propose an action plan for disseminating the needs identified in this convening and ways in which we can fuel on-going dialogue in the global community about meaningful engagement of women and girls in the HIV response.
2. A small group of representatives of this group should collaborate to identify a mechanism to respond to the clear need to reinvigorate the grassroots movement among women and girls by supporting in country programs and women on the ground in their own communities.

In addition, each participant made a commitment to go back to their community and continue their work to bring women and girls in all of our diversity in to the center of the HIV response.