

HIV/AIDS



HIV/AIDS: THE GENDER DIMENSION

Globally, women make up nearly half the 37.2 million adults (aged 15-49) living with HIV.¹ However, where heterosexual sex is a dominant mode of HIV transmission, women, particularly young women, are at greatest risk. In sub-Saharan Africa, 57 percent of those living with HIV are female. In the Caribbean, young women aged 15-24 are almost twice as likely to be infected as young men. And in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe, young women are three-to-six times more likely to be infected than men of the same age group.

There are multiple reasons for the growing feminization of the AIDS epidemic. Women are more vulnerable to HIV infection than men – biologically, socially and economically. Women often lack the power to refuse sex or to negotiate safe sex in their intimate relationships. And when they do have unprotected intercourse, women face a greater risk of becoming infected than men. Moreover, most women and girls still lack basic information on how to protect themselves.

Sexual violence is a driver of the epidemic among women, and older men often seek out young women for sexual relations. For married women, a significant risk factor is the present or past sexual behaviour of their husbands, over which women have little, if any, control. For women with limited opportunities, transactional sexual relationships can be an important survival mechanism. This ‘survival’ sex is often inter-generational, taking place between a girl or young woman and an older man, who is more likely to be HIV-positive than a partner the girl’s own age.

AIDS is not only a threat to women’s health and survival. It also increases their domestic burdens. Women and girls provide the lion’s share of home-based care for those who are ill, as well as support for affected families. Female-headed households are more likely to take in children orphaned by AIDS, in effect providing a social safety net for families whose members have died. Tending to the sick and dying can be traumatic and exhausting in itself. But it also leaves women less time to earn an income or learn new skills, and girls less time to attend school. This reduces educational and economic opportunities and independence, and increases vulnerability to exploitative relationships.



1 Statistics in this fact sheet are drawn from the UNAIDS publication *AIDS epidemic update, December 2004*, available at http://www.unaids.org/wad2004/EPIupdate2004_html_en/epi04_00_en.htm

ADDRESSING THE FEMINIZATION

OF THE EPIDEMIC

AIDS is a manifestation of inequality. In many developing countries, its spread is embedded in a socio-economic context in which men have greater social, economic and legal status and access to resources, and women have comparatively little power, limited legal rights, less access to information, and fewer ways to earn a living. Tackling the spread of HIV among women and girls consequently requires an understanding of the structural causes of inequality and addressing them head-on. Several areas of intervention are key:

- Empowering women and girls, and advancing women's human rights;
- Addressing obstacles that limit women's access to treatment and care, including stigma and fear of social censure, ostracism and violence at the hands of intimate partners;
- Addressing unequal property and inheritance rights that can leave women impoverished and vulnerable to exploitation and violence when husbands or parents die;
- Enlisting men as partners in social change, particularly in terms of challenging gender stereotypes that disempower women and encourage multiple sexual partners for men and sexual ignorance for women; ending sexual violence; and preventing HIV infection by using condoms;
- Ensuring that data on the epidemic are disaggregated by sex to better understand who is most affected;
- Supporting women and girls who are caring for orphans;
- Promoting women's leadership and involving women living with HIV in responding to the epidemic.

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

HIV/AIDS Group, Bureau for Development Policy, UNDP (<http://www.undp.org/hiv>).

The Gender and HIV Web Portal, sponsored by UNIFEM and UNAIDS, available at: <http://www.genderandaids.org>

UNDP IN ACTION: ETHIOPIA

Community Conversations is a methodology that gives people and communities a way to discuss previously taboo subjects and find their own solutions to coping with AIDS. UNDP and local partners have been implementing Community Conversations in two districts in southern Ethiopia, Alaba and Yabel, since 2002, and the initiative is spurring remarkable shifts in attitudes and behaviours.

With the help of trained local facilitators, communities openly discuss cultural norms and practices that foster the spread of HIV. They tackle sensitive issues with strong gender dimensions – sexual relations, polygamy, harmful traditional practices – and explore how they contribute to the spread of the epidemic. Together, they find ways to lessen its impact.

Stephen Lewis, special envoy of the UN Secretary-General for HIV/AIDS in Africa, describes the effect of Community Conversations as 'highly improbable but startling'. He adds: "It is astonishing to witness the communities talk about the most sensitive elements of their culture and society and see behavioural change happening in such a short time.... To see men and women discussing together is truly amazing. What helps to spread the virus is the secrecy and refusal to talk about issues of sex, polygamy, abduction, etc."

As a result of Community Conversations, young girls are refusing to undergo the long-standing practice of female genital mutilation/cutting, communities are abandoning bride-sharing, men and women are visiting the HIV testing centre despite the previous stigma attached to doing so, and communities are banding together to support children orphaned by AIDS. UNDP and the Government of Ethiopia are currently in the process of scaling up the initiative, with a goal to reach all 550 districts before 2006.

Source: Adapted from an article in UNDP's CHOICES magazine, July 2004 supplement, available at: <http://www.undp.org/hiv/docs/Choicesspring7904.pdf>