



WOMEN: MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF HIV/AIDS

"...gender equality and the empowerment of women are fundamental elements in the reduction of the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV/AIDS..."

Article 14, Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS, United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS, June 2001



United Nations Population Fund



GENDER AND HIV/AIDS

Women and young girls are disproportionately vulnerable to HIV. Their physiological susceptibility – at least 2 to 4 times greater than men's – is compounded by social, cultural, economic and legal forms of discrimination. Infection in women and girls is fuelled by:

- Poverty, low status, and unequal economic rights and educational opportunities that can place women and girls at greater risk of sexual exploitation, trafficking and abuse.
- Gender power relations which limit women's ability to negotiate safe sex or refuse unwanted sex.
- Gender-based violence and sexual exploitation such as rape and abuse of young women and girls, especially in emergency and conflict situations.
- Older men who often seek younger sexual partners. Even in marriage this age discrepancy can increase a girl's risk of infection.
- Certain gender norms such as those that encourage men and boys to engage in risky, early or aggressive sexual behaviour increase the vulnerability of both men and women.
- Cultural practices that deprive women of a means of protecting themselves from HIV infection, including early and forced marriages.



Photo: UNFPA

Young people urgently need the knowledge, skills and services to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS.

Adolescence is a time when girls and boys are choosing their identities, laying the foundation for the women and men they will become. To establish enduring patterns of healthy behaviour, values such as tolerance, respect for the opposite sex and equality must be instilled early on. Young women and girls, young men and boys, are the key to defeating the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Human rights, gender equality, and women's empowerment provide the foundation for combating HIV/AIDS and are at the heart of the international response outlined in the UNGASS Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS.

The Declaration calls upon Member States to take measures to eliminate discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS and marginalized populations at risk of infection. It stresses the need for national strategies that lead to the empowerment of women and increase the capacity of women and girls to protect themselves from HIV infection.

Photo: UNFPA

"Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation...As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development, and peace."

Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General
"A World Free of Violence Against Women," 1999



DISPROPORTIONATE BURDEN ON WOMEN

Behind every tragedy of death and illness from AIDS, there is a care giver – usually a woman – who has borne not only the impact of the loss of loved ones, but also the enormous cost of time, energy and resources to provide this care. HIV/AIDS creates a further distortion of gender inequalities both at the beginning and at the end of a woman's life cycle. Loss of household income due to sickness and death forces older women to re-enter the productive sector; and adolescent girls to leave school to help the family or to supplement the household income. Loss of income, additional care-related expenses, the reduced ability of caregivers to work, and mounting medical fees and funeral expenses collectively push affected households deeper into poverty.

EMPOWERING MEN AND WOMEN TO PREVENT HIV/AIDS

Addressing gender relations and power dynamics between women and men, and

how they impact on sexual relations and decision-making is critical for HIV prevention. Empowering women to be able to control their sexual and reproductive lives and providing access to the means, including male and female condoms, to prevent STIs and unintended pregnancy, can contribute significantly to quelling the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The female condom provides women with an option where they may have greater control in negotiating condom use.

As partners, fathers, friends, community members and leaders, men and boys can:

- Be role models for their families and society by advocating respect for women and protecting partners.
- Promote and practice safer and healthy behaviours.
- Practice open communication to build equal and safe partnership.

Photo: Digital Stock



About 200 million women become pregnant each year and need information, counselling and services to help the 99% who are HIV negative remain so, and address the needs of those who are HIV positive. By preventing HIV infection in pregnant women, prevention of transmission to children is assured.



Photo: UNFPA

Women confront a number of gender-based obstacles to prevent becoming infected with HIV, and if positive, to prevent transmission to their offspring:

- Women may be unable to negotiate safe sexual practices, including condom use to prevent infection and/or unintended pregnancies.
- Women may be unable to access pre-natal health services as their partners often control the household financial or transportation resources, as they cannot take time off work, or because they cannot leave their dependents to travel to a clinic or hospital.
- Fear of rejection, stigmatization, violence or abuse may prevent women from utilizing HIV voluntary counselling and testing services, disclosing their HIV status, accessing HIV prevention programmes targeting pregnant women, mothers and their children, or engaging in safer infant feeding practices.

WOMEN, WORKPLACE AND HIV/AIDS

The workplace provides an opportunity to instill positive norms and standards to safeguard employees from HIV infection and care for those who are infected or affected by HIV/AIDS. Employers can effectively address HIV infection within the work community by avoiding work patterns that separate workers from their families for prolonged periods of time; providing education on HIV/AIDS; enforcing non-discriminatory hiring practices and 'zero tolerance' policies on violence or harassment against women; supporting STI diagnosis and treatment; and providing antiretroviral drugs to workers and their families.

THE WAY FORWARD

HEALTH AND ACCESS TO SERVICES

- Promote the highest attainable standard of mental and physical health, including by: empowering women to make decisions in relation to their sexual and reproductive health, and providing access to information, prevention and treatment services for HIV/AIDS.
- Increase women's ability to access maternal and child as well as reproductive health services including effective programmes that prevent HIV transmission to pregnant women, mothers and their children.

RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

- Promote the human rights of women including equal rights to legal capacity and equality within the family in matters such as inheritance, divorce, child custody, property and employment rights.
- Combat sexual and economic exploitation of women and girls.
- Combat stigma and discrimination in relation to gender, poverty and HIV/AIDS. Laws, policies, strategies and practices should address all forms of discrimination.

WORK AND INCOME

- Increase women's access to income-generating possibilities including economic provision for those who take care of the sick.
- Review workplace policies and practices to ensure that they are non-discriminatory, do not allow for sexual harassment, promote health and family well-being and provide for information on HIV/AIDS.

PREVENTION AND EDUCATION

- Empower women to negotiate safer sex including condom use.
- Make high-quality affordable male and female condoms consistently available; address myths, misperceptions and fears about condoms including addressing gender perspectives of these attitudinal barriers; develop and implement dual protection strategies, oriented especially to young people.
- Incorporate gender issues into HIV/AIDS education – its policies, management, resource allocation, curriculum, staff training, educational provisions such as



learning and behaviour change communication material.

- Develop models for integrating routine enquiry about violence and other potential barriers to disclosure, as well as support for safe disclosure of HIV positive status to sexual partners into voluntary counselling and testing programmes.
- Promote the involvement of men in preventing HIV transmission in pregnant women, mothers and their children.

TREATMENT, CARE AND SUPPORT

- Provide treatment, care and support to HIV-positive women, their children, partners and families.

- Provide social protection mechanisms, such as stipends, for caregivers or for families impacted by AIDS to help relieve women's heavy burden of caring for sick and dying, and the poverty that often results.

RESEARCH

- Incorporate gender dimensions into monitoring and evaluation efforts including development of appropriate gender-sensitive indicators and collection and analysis of data disaggregated by age and sex.
- Support continued development of prevention methods including microbicides.

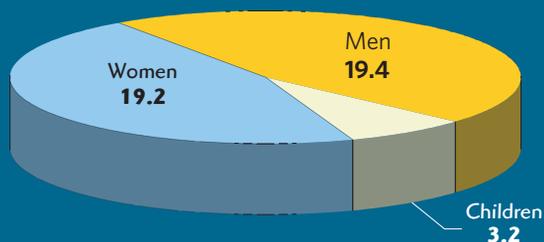
Photo: UNFPA



Women are increasingly becoming infected with HIV:

In 1997, 41% of adults living with HIV/AIDS worldwide were women; by 2001, this figure had risen to 50%.

Proportion of Men, Women and Children Infected with HIV Globally (in millions)



Source: UNAIDS Epidemic Update 2002

"By 2005, implement measures to increase capacities of women and adolescent girls to protect themselves from the risk of HIV infection ... within a culturally and gender-sensitive framework."

Article 60, UNGASS DoC

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For more information:



United Nations Population Fund
www.unfpa.org/hiv



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