

## HIV and Women and Girls: Promoting Gender Equality and Rights

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### OVERVIEW

Nearly 30 years into the HIV epidemic, persistent gender inequality and human rights violations that put women and girls at greater risk of infection continue to hamper progress to prevent the spread of HIV and increase access to anti-retroviral treatment. Women comprise half of all adults living with HIV worldwide, and over 60% in sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition to women's and girls' biological susceptibility to HIV, many interacting socio-cultural, economic and legal challenges compound their vulnerability to infection. Widespread discrimination, injustice and epidemic levels of violence against women and girls are exacerbated by the HIV epidemic, rendering them yet more vulnerable to violations of their human rights and harming society as a whole. Young women are particularly vulnerable. In Southern Africa, girls are 2 to 4.5 times more likely to become infected with HIV than boys.

Most of the women who suffer from HIV and AIDS are in the prime of their productive lives. Simply being identified as HIV-positive may result in discrimination, gender-based violence, unemployment, abandonment or the loss of other human rights and freedoms. The AIDS response can serve as a catalyst to bring about socio-cultural, political and legal transformations to promote, protect and fulfill the rights of women and girls.

### MOUNTING A GLOBAL RESPONSE

The vulnerability of women and girls to HIV, at both global and national levels, is gaining attention. Major multilateral financing mechanisms and bilateral donors are making specific efforts to address the HIV-related needs of women and girls. By weaving human rights and gender equality into the global AIDS response, we can ensure that women and girls not only have the knowledge and power to protect themselves from HIV infection, but also take their rightful, equal place as advocates, leaders and policy makers who drive change. Often, national strategies fail to include programmes with sufficient budgets that address gender inequalities.

An Agenda for Women and Girls (one of the priorities of the UNAIDS Joint Action for Results) has been agreed upon by the international community with 26 actions for:

- Promoting gender equality;
- Empowering women to fully exercise their human rights;
- Reducing the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV;
- Increasing access to sexual and reproductive health, including commodities like condoms
- Working to end all forms of violence against women, and other practices that put women and girls at risk, such as early marriage;
- Preventing mother-to-child transmission;
- Advancing the rights and sexual and reproductive health of women living with HIV;
- Involving men to change behaviour that puts their partners at risk.

## **INVOLVING MEN AND BOYS**

Men and boys must play a greater role in addressing gender inequality. There are now many programmes, even at small scale, that affirm that men and boys are a force in challenging and recasting stereotypes of masculinity, eliminating violence against women, and taking their share of responsibility for HIV prevention within intimate relationships.

## **PROTECTING MOTHERS AND CHILDREN**

AIDS is now the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age and this consequently also has an enormous impact on infant and child health and survival. The UN has developed a comprehensive approach to prevent mother-to-child transmission, based on four components: 1) Primary prevention of HIV among women of childbearing age; 2) Prevention of unintended pregnancies among women living with HIV; 3) Prevention of HIV transmission from a woman living with HIV to her infant; 4) Provision of appropriate treatment, care and support to women living with HIV and their children and families.

## **KEY DATA <sup>1</sup>**

- Half of all adults living with HIV worldwide are women (over 60% in sub-Saharan Africa).
- In Southern Africa, girls are 2 to 4.5 times more likely to become infected with HIV than boys, compounding other vulnerabilities such as poverty, humanitarian and food crises and the increased economic and care needs of AIDS-affected households.
- Violence against women and girls is widespread – a World Health Organization (WHO) study in 11 countries found that between 15% and 71% of women aged 15 to 49 years had experienced physical or sexual violence by a husband or intimate partner. Globally, 20% of girls and 10% of boys experience sexual abuse as children. Young women in many countries indicate that their first sexual experience was forced.
- The percentage of pregnant women living with HIV who received antiretroviral treatment to prevent mother-to-child transmission increased from 9% in 2004 to 45% in 2008.

## **EXAMPLES OF PROGRESS**

- In several countries, UNAIDS, UNIFEM, UNDP, WHO and UNFPA are working with partners to address intimate partner transmission of HIV (transmission occurring via sex within marriage and long-term partnerships).
- UNFPA, together with partners, is working to scale up efforts in 22 high priority countries to improve mother and child survival and eliminate mother-to-child transmission.
- UNFPA, IPPF and Young Positives, as partners in the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS, have developed 25 country-level “Report Cards” which seek to strengthen HIV prevention strategies for girls and young women. These Report Cards aim to increase and improve the programmatic, policy and funding actions for HIV prevention for young women and girls and are targeted to national, regional and international decision makers.

*Updated July 2010*

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<sup>1</sup> UNAIDS Action Framework: Addressing Women, Girls, Gender Equality and HIV, August 2009