

The Continuum of Care

“Women need the power to protect themselves from HIV infection. They need information; they need services and they need to be empowered to exercise their right to control their lives and their sexuality. Women need to be empowered to say no.”

—Dr. Thoraya Obaid, Executive Director
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

An effective response to the global HIV/AIDS pandemic must involve those living with or at risk of the disease in every level of the solution—individual, community, national and international.

The UN Population Fund provides support for preventive measures against the spread of the infection, and leadership and advocacy for effective, affordable treatment and care of affected people and their families. This continuum of care involves partnerships to build capacity for better responses, to promote effective policy and a supportive structure of laws and regulations, and to secure adequate resources.

At the individual level:

An effective response to HIV/AIDS must provide all people, especially adolescents, with the information, skills and means they need to make responsible choices about sex; and must offer ways to prevent infection, treat the affected, and care for their families.

- Women are most vulnerable where they lack power to negotiate the terms of sexual relations—condom use, age of first encounter, and spacing of children—or the power to reject unsafe, unwanted or forced sex.
- Men and boys must be sensitized from an early age to respect girls and women and to recognize gender equality and their own responsibility for adopting safe sexual practices so as to prevent HIV infection.

Reproductive health care for pregnant women is a UN Population Fund priority. It can prevent the spread of HIV to them and their partners and also halt mother-to-child transmission, which is the most significant cause of HIV infection among children under age 10.

- Pregnant women must be able to find out whether they are HIV-positive and must have access to counseling and anti-retroviral drug therapy.

- Measures are needed to ensure a safe blood supply, reduce maternal and child mortality, and provide overall health care to slow HIV transmission.

Young people need education and services to allow informed choices and enable safe sexual behavior, including abstinence and delayed sexual initiation, and later on, fidelity, the use of condoms and prevention of pregnancy.

At the community level:

The continuum of care must include programmes to prevent HIV from spreading, to alleviate the poverty that both fosters and follows AIDS, and to guarantee universal access to reproductive health information, services and commodities.

- Repeated studies find that although prevention programmes are complex and difficult, involving social norms and ancient taboos, they do work if they are focused and sustained. They can stabilize or decrease HIV infection rates by inducing safer behavior.
- Poverty alleviation must be a part of every anti-AIDS programme because the poor are the most vulnerable to infection, through lack of education and resources.
- AIDS also pushes the poor deeper into poverty as households lose their breadwinners, and savings are consumed by the costs of medicine and funerals and caring for family members' orphans.
- AIDS-weakened farmers reduce their cultivation of labor-intensive crops and investments in irrigation and soil enhancements, lowering food production, endangering national food security, and increasing poverty levels.

At the national and international level:

Advocacy and leadership must be mobilized to move policy, funding and other resources toward sexual and reproductive health care, condom programming and research priorities.

- Global resources for reproductive health are not keeping pace with regular needs, let alone the needs created by the AIDS pandemic. UN Population Fund resources, for example, remain below 1995 levels.
- If the new special global fund for health and AIDS reaches its goal of investing US \$7-\$10 billion per year for ten years in low- and moderate-income countries, it would represent a quintupling of current spending in those areas.
- Prevention and care campaigns must be country-specific and sensitive to the local cultural and social context.

As part of its core mandate—to ensure universal access to high-quality sexual and reproductive health services by 2015—the UN Population Fund and its partners initiated the Global Strategy for Reproductive Health Commodity Security to create reliable supplies.

—March 2002

1. UN Department of Public Information, "Calculating the cost of an effective global campaign against HIV/AIDS," Fact Sheet, New York, 2001