

Women and HIV/AIDS

Gender inequalities are a major driving force behind the AIDS epidemic. Women and adolescent girls are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS than men and boys, not only because they are biologically more susceptible to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, but also because they often lack power to negotiate the terms of sexual relations or economic independence. Adolescent girls, powerless to negotiate sexual terms or avert abuses such as forced marriage or trafficking, are at greatest risk.

The numbers and rates of infection among women are rising compared to those of men. Prevention of HIV infection is key to reducing the prevalence of AIDS among women, but men must become motivated to help save women's lives by changing their own risky behaviors, respecting women, and involving women in policy decisions.

Women and girls are at higher risk than men and boys.

HIV and other sexually transmitted infections show "biological sexism": women's bodies are more susceptible to the viral and bacterial agents that cause them. Men transmit infections more efficiently to women than vice versa. Men are eight times more likely to transmit HIV to female partners through unprotected sex than women are to transmit the virus to men.¹ In many societies, women cannot insist on fidelity from their partners, demand condom use or refuse sex, even if they are too young for sex or know their partners are HIV-positive. Here are the facts:

- In 1997, 41 percent of HIV-positive adults were women; in 2001 the rate had risen to 44 percent.²
- The average HIV infection rates in teenage girls are over five times higher than those in teenage boys. Among people in their 20s, rates are three times higher in women.³
- Of sub-Saharan Africa's 28 million HIV-positive people, 55 percent are women²: there are 2 million more infected women than infected men.
- Studies in several countries found that some rural widows resorted to commercial sex to survive, because they had no legal right of inheritance to their husbands' property.²
- Women may be blamed for bringing AIDS into the house. Those known or thought to have HIV may be evicted, ostracized, dismissed from work, or even beaten or killed.
- AIDS risk increases from some traditional practices, such as female genital cutting, early and forced marriage, or the "inheritance" of widows among brothers.
- Domestic violence, rape and other forms of sexual abuse are not only violations of human rights; they are closely linked to the spread of HIV/AIDS.
- Emergency and conflict situations increase rape and sexual violence rates, spreading HIV infection.

Education programmes benefit women in many ways.

- After volunteers distributed contraceptives, including condoms, and information on HIV/AIDS to 80,000 women in

Kazakhstan and Almaty, the abortion rate fell, contraceptive use rose, and rates of maternal and infant mortality declined.⁴

- For young girls who are not yet sexually active, abstinence may be the best approach to preventing HIV infection, as it also saves them from other sexually transmitted infections, and from unwanted pregnancies and complications of pregnancy.
- Education on AIDS transmission may deter the practice in which older men seek young girls or virgins as sexual partners for safety from HIV or as “cures” for it.

Safe pregnancy practices:

Quality care before childbirth and safer delivery practices not only save women’s lives, they help reduce transmission of HIV during pregnancy, delivery or breast-feeding.

- Pregnant women must be able to learn their HIV status and should have priority access to courses of anti-retroviral drug therapy.
- When combined with infant feeding counseling and support, such drug therapy can halve the risk of infant HIV infection.
- Measures to keep blood supplies safe, provide emergency medical services including obstetric care, and to educate women on nutrition and child care also help improve a community’s general health.

Men have a key role to play.

Allocation of resources and decision-making in government programmes important to women, such as education and reproductive health, are largely in male hands.

- In Ukraine, a UNFPA programme trained 210 military psychologists in HIV prevention and counseling, and they then reached 20,000 soldiers with seminars, posters and free condoms.⁴
- A sexual double standard prevails in many cultures, encouraging male sexual experimentation while demanding female innocence. A belief that contraception is a woman’s responsibility frees men from taking action against AIDS, including refusing to wear condoms.

The cultural models that train boys for manhood must turn them away from practices that subordinate and denigrate women or encourage risky sexual and drug-using behavior. Programmes involving boys and men in family planning decisions, AIDS-fighting actions and peer training can raise their awareness of the need for change.

- In Hong Kong, a UNFPA-supported programme used a soccer star, a TV celebrity, a cartoon character and a kung fu master in TV and radio spots to promote condom use.⁵
- Teachers UNFPA supported at three Thailand schools taught critical thinking, self-awareness, social responsibility and gender awareness to students as young as 11.⁵
- Along the Guatemala-El Salvador border, hundreds of truck drivers and sex workers have received counseling, training and informational magazines, posters and audiocassettes on preventing the spread of HIV.⁴
- The UN Population Fund sponsored a 2000 TV and radio campaign in Uganda using trained peer educators, a popular song and traditional media to encourage men to use condoms against HIV and to support their partners’ access to family planning and prenatal care.⁴

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1. UN Population Fund, *AIDS Update 1999: A Report on UNFPA Support for HIV/AIDS Prevention*, UNFPA, New York, 2000

2. UNAIDS, *AIDS Epidemic Update*, New York, 2001

3. UNAIDS, *Report on the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic*, 11 population-based studies, UNAIDS, New York, 2000

4. UN Population Fund, *Preventing Infection, Promoting Reproductive Health: UNFPA’s Response to HIV/AIDS*, UNFPA, New York, 2001

5. UN Population Fund, *Partners for Change: Enlisting Men in HIV/AIDS Prevention*, UNFPA, New York, 2000