

FACTORS INCREASING THE PREVALENCE OF HIV/AIDS AMONG WOMEN

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Introduction

Today more than twenty years into the epidemic, women account for nearly half the 40 million people living with HIV world wide. The proportion of HIV cases that are women has tripled from about 8% to 27% since 1985. From 2000 to 2004, the number of men living with HIV has increased by 7% while the number of women infected has increased by 10%.

Abuse, violence, lack of information, coercion from men, economic dependence and poverty, inadequate health care, migrant labour, gender discrimination, the prevalence of sex trade, injecting drugs and migration are the multitude of factors that influence its spread.

It is increasing in many developing countries, including among adolescents. 2.2 million are under the age of 15. Women in particular are vulnerable to HIV infection, because of the high risk sexual behaviour of their partners. For women, the symptoms of HIV infections are often hidden making them more difficult to diagnose than in men

Commercial sex workers are not given the choice to opt for safe sex. Many women are powerless to take steps to protect themselves. The pitiable fact is that none of them come into this profession out of choice. It is only to survive and to bring up their children they continue in the profession once they are thrown into it. Such women are reluctant to use condoms when the customer is willing to pay more for not using condoms.

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Challenges

- Poverty and need of money. Women assume more family care responsibilities and are more likely to sacrifice their health care in order to care for their family, especially their children.
- Fear of suspicion of one's moral character even though the disease is contracted otherwise. This can happen without any fault or lapse on the part of the person concerned. Fear of discrimination.

Awareness and education at all levels designed to opt for safe sex and to eliminate the stigma and discrimination remains the crux of the solution.

Introduction

When the whole world is committed to the goal of "Health for all by 2000 A.D", no one can afford to remain indifferent on the issue of AIDS. The very word AIDS has caused panic in the whole human race. By now knowledgeable people are aware of the fact that the disease is called Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome and is caused by a virus named HIV or Human Immuno-Deficiency virus. But the illiterate poor women are totally ignorant. Some others have wrong notions or misconceptions.

The number of women with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) infection and AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) has increased steadily worldwide. By the end of 2005, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), 17.5 million women worldwide were infected with HIV.

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The proportion of HIV cases that are women has tripled from about 8% to 27% since 1985.

From 2000 to 2004, the numbers of men living with HIV has increased by 7% while the numbers of women infected has increased by 10%. 25 million children will be orphans by 2010 because of AIDS.

To confront the growing problem of HIV infection and AIDS in women, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) has made woman-focused research an important component of the Institute's AIDS research program.

Abuse, violence, lack of information, coercion from men, economic dependence and poverty, inadequate health care, migrant labour and gender discrimination are the multitude of factors that influence its spread.

Other factors that may increase the risk include drug use, such as heroin or crack/cocaine, severe inflammation of fetal membranes, prolonged period between membrane rupture and delivery. Experts say that Asia is a fertile ground for the epidemic to spread at high speeds due to the prevalence of the sex trade, injecting drugs and migration.

Some women infected with HIV report more than one risk factor, highlighting the overlap in risk factors such as inequality in relationships, socioeconomic stresses, substance abuse, and psychological issues. For example, in the North Carolina study of HIV infection in black women, the participants most commonly reported that their reasons for risky behavior were financial dependence on male partners, feeling invincible, low self-esteem coupled with the need to feel loved by a male figure, and alcohol and drug use.

It is increasing in many developing countries, including among adolescents. 2.2 million are under the age of 15. Women in particular are vulnerable to HIV infection, because of the high risk sexual behaviour of their partners. For women, the symptoms of HIV infections are often hidden making them more difficult to diagnose than in men and the health consequences are often greater, including increasing the risk of infertility. The risk of transmission from the infected men to women is greater than infected women to men and many women are powerless to take steps to protect themselves.

Commercial sex workers are not given the choice to opt for safe sex. The pitiable fact is that none of them come into this profession out of choice. It is only to survive and to bring up their children they continue in the profession once they are thrown into it. Such women are reluctant to use condoms when the customer is willing to pay more for not using condoms. A report by the U.N. “women and AIDS-confronting the crisis” talks of a south African woman who was traumatized by her husband when she asked him to use condoms. “If you want me to use condoms while I have sex, then I will not give you money for food” is all that the husband needed to say to put her in her right place”. This attitude also applies to Nammakal in Tamilnadu, where gender discrimination takes a heavy toll.

Thus because of varying types of abuse, women are three times more likely than men to contract HIV. It gradually destroys the body’s immune system, making the infected person more vulnerable to other illnesses.

It’s obvious that women are being impacted by HIV at an alarming rate. But why is this? If HIV does not discriminate, how can these statistical differences be explained? The sad truth is that women are more vulnerable to HIV infection in many ways.

Why Are Women Vulnerable to HIV?

There are vulnerabilities to HIV that are unique to women. These help to account for the differences in infection rates between men and women worldwide. Some of those vulnerabilities include:

Physical Differences - The incidence of heterosexual transmission in the United States has been on the rise since 1985. At that time, about three percent of all known cases were heterosexually transmitted. That figure today is about 27 percent. Finally, 70 percent of all new HIV infections are a result of heterosexual sex; worldwide, 90 percent of all infections are heterosexual. Women are especially susceptible to heterosexual transmission physically because the mucosal lining of the vagina offers a large surface area to be exposed to HIV-infected seminal fluid.

Gender Inequities – Especially in developing countries, prevailing gender inequities leads to higher-risk behaviors. For instance, in many cultures women are not free to refuse sex or to insist on safer sex using condoms. Men assume a position of power and control over women, minimizing the amount of input and consent from women. In addition, women have less access to employment and education in these developing countries. Often, the sex trade is one of the few options for women trying to earn money and support themselves and their children. Finally, sexual violence against women is very high in some areas, again exposing them to high-risk behaviors without their consent.

Challenges to Women

- Poverty and need of money.
- Women have less access to HIV care and affordable medical insurance.
- Women are more likely to postpone health care due to illness or lack of transportation than men.
- sexual violence against women is very high in some areas, again exposing them to high-risk behaviors without their consent
- Women assume more family care responsibilities and are more likely to sacrifice their health care in order to care for their family, especially their children.
- Fear of suspicion of one's moral character even though the disease is contracted otherwise. This can happen without any fault or lapse on the part of the person concerned.
- Fear of discrimination.

Survival Among HIV Infected Women

Women whose HIV infections are detected early and receive appropriate treatment survive as long as HIV-infected men. Although several studies have shown HIV-infected women to have shorter survival times than men, this may be because women are less likely than men to be diagnosed early.

In an analysis of several studies involving more than 4,500 people with HIV infection, women were 33 percent more likely than men to die within the study period. The investigators could not definitively identify the reasons for excess mortality among women in this study, but they speculated that poorer access to or use of health care resources among HIV-infected women as compared to men, domestic violence, homelessness, and lack of social supports may have been important factors.

Hence calls for action to address the triple threat of gender inequality, poverty and HIV is the need of the hour. The solution for saving women from the brunt of AIDS is a matter of great concern now.

Actions

Though education is a vital ingredient, it should go beyond the normal rhetoric and include providing awareness about AIDS.

Educational institutions are to be made safe for girls from abuse by fellow students.

Female controlled prevention methods including microbicides and female condoms are to be made available.

Information, Education and counseling on HIV and the supply and distribution of condoms should become integral components of all reproductive health care services

In spite of the policies and programmes many women refrain from getting tested due to the fear of discrimination. To actually seek treatment and thereby admit their HIV status needs a lot of courage. Awareness and education at all levels designed to opt for safe sex and eliminate the stigma and discrimination remains the crux of the solution

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