

IMPACT OF HIV /AIDS ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN

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Introduction

At the beginning many people thought AIDS was a disease striking mainly men. A decade ago, women were less affected. But a terrifying pattern has since emerged. All over world women face higher risks of being infected by AIDS as well as increasingly bearing the brunt of its impact. Almost half of the adults living with HIV and AIDS today are women. Over the past two years the number of women and girls infected with HIV has increased in every region of the world with rates rising particularly rapidly in Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America. In 2006 A total of 39.5 million people now live with HIV/AIDS, 2.2 million of are under the age of 15, 4.3 million people were infected with HIV, 5,300,00 were under the age of 15, every 12,000 people contract HIV -500 every year, 2.9 million people died from AIDS, 3,80,000 of them were under the age of 15, that is one child dying per minute, 15 million children around the world have been orphaned by AIDS, losing one or both parents to the disease. Women are vulnerable largely because of the behaviour of others, through their limited autonomy and external factors, including social and economic inequities beyond their control. AIDS epidemic not only destabilizes the families, societies, and consumer markets but also depletes valuable human resources, threatens occupational safety, pressures social protection systems, undermines national investments and negative impact on economic growth. Thus education of women needs to be an ongoing process, because each generation of young people needs to be informed about how they can protect themselves from HIV as they grow up.

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HIV/AIDS in India

India has a large population and population density, low literacy levels and consequently low level of awareness, and HIV/AIDS is one of the most challenging public health problems ever faced by the country. India's national epidemic is made up of a number of local epidemics and in some places they occur within the same state. The epidemics vary, from state with mainly hetero sexual transmission of HIV (85%) often via interaction with sex workers; to some state where intravenous drug use is the main route of transmission. Both tracking the epidemic and implementing effective programmes poses a series challenge to the authorities and communities in India.

The spread of HIV in India has been diverse, with much of India having a low rate of infection and epidemic having most extreme in the southern half of the country and in the far north-east. The highest HIV prevalence rates are found in Maharashtra in the west; Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in the South; and Manipal and Nagaland in the north-east. As of August 2006, 90% of all nationality reported AIDS cases have been found in 10 of the 38 states, union territories. The greatest numbers were in Maharashtra and Gujarat in the West; Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in the South and Manipur, West Bengal, in the North-East. In the Southern States the infections are mostly due to heterosexual contact, while infections are mainly found amongst injecting drug users in Manipal and Nagaland. UN AIDS reports that the estimated number of HIV infections is between 2 million and 3 million.

AIDS Data End of August 2006

Gender Cumulative AIDS Cases

Male	:	88,245
Female	:	36,750
Total	:	124,995

TRANSMISSION	CATEGORIES	NUMBER CASES%	
Sexual	1,06,669	85%	
Mother to Child	4,775	4%	
Blood and Blood Products	2,563	2%	
Injecting Drug Users	2,930	2%	
Other (Not Specified)	8,078	6%	
Total	124,005	100%	
AGE GROUP	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
0-14	3,313	2,283	5,596
15-29	23,905	15,876	39,781
30-49	54,204	16,701	70,905
≥	6,823	1,890	8,713
Total	88,245	36,750	124,995

According to a recent study conducted by the National AIDS control organization National Council of applied economic research and the programme HIV infected women are around two million or 39% of the nations estimated 5.2 million HIV-positive people and a large number of cases occur among monogamous women whose husbands or partners have multiple sex partners.

The Impact of AIDS on Women and Children

The Impact of AIDS is still not fully understood, particularly when the long term is considered the epidemic comes in successive waves, with the first wave being HIV infection, followed several years later by a wave of opportunistic diseases and later still by a wave of AIDS illness and then death. The final wave affects children, societies and economics at various levels from the family and community to the national and international levels.

Impact of Women

Most sexually transmitted HIV/AIDS infection in females occurs either inside marriage or in relationships women believe to be monogamous. Young married women are at higher risk of infection than unmarried women of same age. Many women are unable to refuse sex across the world between one fifth and half of the girls and women report that their first sex encounter was forced. Women and girls are physiologically mere and gender -based inequities compound their risks. They are more likely to be poor and powerless, have less education less access to land, credit or cash and to social services.

The situation of women is compounded by the dominated of strong patriarchal authority where culturally sons rather than daughters are given preference to inherit land and property. Economic dependence on men and lower levels of education inhibit women from leading lives independent of marriage. Thus powerlessness resulting from some of these cultural prescriptions has made women highly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS transmission.

Worsening Poverty

As HIV/AIDS strikes the life time of society that women represent, a vicious cycle develops. Most of the world's women are poor and most of the world's poor are women. Women make up almost two thirds of the world's illiterate people and are often denied properly rights or access to credit. Women's economic vulnerability and dependence on men increases their vulnerability to HIV by constraining their ability to negotiate safe sex. As a result of AIDS, poorer women are becoming economically disempowered and less secure. They are often deprived of inheritances or even adequate health services. In rural areas AIDS has caused the collapse of coping system that has been touted as the redeeming mechanism for mitigating the impact of AIDS on households, families and communities.

Why are Women Vulnerable to HIV?

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. Again anatomical differences between men and women mean transmission from men to women is easier than the other way around. And especially in developing countries, prevailing gender inequities leads to higher risk behaviour. 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 and higher 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 behaviour without their consent.

What Challenges Do Women Face?

Obviously, HIV infects any one who has the disease, whether male or female. An HIV diagnosis, while not death sentence, will most certainly be a life-changing event. However there are some challenges that are unique to women:

- There is an increased risk of reproductive illnesses including vaginal yeast infections, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and cervical cancer.
- Because women often have lower incomes than men or work, lower paying jobs with minimal benefits, 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 are men.

House Hold Impacts

Research in New Delhi India found that average monthly expenditures exceeded income among families of people with HIV, partly because of a doubling in purchases of medicines, while these families spent less on entertainment and on children's education to cope with rising care, support and treatment, costs due to HIV, most were also forced to sell assets and borrow from friends and relatives. Households belonging to the poor and less educated or unskilled groups, as well as female members of households, face a proportionately greater economic burden due to AIDS.

Impact on Children

The impact of AIDS on children continues to mount in various parts of the world. Currently children under 15 accounts for one in six AIDS related deaths world wide and one in seven new HIV infections -the vast majority of through mother-to-child transmission of the virus (UNICEF 2005). After illness and death itself, the harshest impact on children is the loss of their parent's affection, support and protection, separation from siblings is frequent as orphans from large families are often sent to live in different households. In addition to the psychological trauma suffered by those children, poverty and social dislocation, as well as stigma and discrimination, may also be added to their woes and in turn increase their vulnerability to HIV. According to UNICEF 2003 from 15 percent to over 25 percent of the children in a dozen sub-Saharan African countries will be orphans -the vast majority of them will have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS.

As today's young adults die in growing numbers, they will leave growing numbers of orphaned children. By 2010, HIV/AIDS will have robbed an estimated 20 million children under the age of 15 of one or both parents, nearly twice the number orphaned in their age group in 2001. There lonely under socialized youngsters are bewildered, angry, sad, frantically seeking nurture and affection, often hungry, homeless, significant numbers living with grandmothers or in child-headed households, countless numbers unable to go to school, a school being the single most valuable and supportive environment they could possibly be unable to go

to school because they can't afford the school fees or the uniforms or the books. The orphan crisis is a crisis without parallel, it is an impending calamity. As scenarios are developed, "**the orphan crisis**" is certainly a key driver that countries have to plan and strategize for.

There has to be action on those factors which make women vulnerable, action for economic empowerment of women, action on property and inheritance laws, prevention, and care. By 2020, countries have to place focus on

- **Preventing** HIV infection among girls and young women
- **Reducing** violence against women
- **Protecting** the property and inheritance rights of women and girls
- **Ensuring** equal access by women and girls to care and treatment
- **Supporting** improved community-based care with a special focus on women and girls
- **Supporting** on-going efforts towards universal education for girls
- **Promoting** access to new prevention options for women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, men and women must work together, to counter gender discrimination and subordination of women. By 2020, to protect women from HIV infection, ways of empowering women must be found. The time is now!! Central to this is the participation of policy makers and other people in the power who need to recognize the link between women economic empowerment and social status and their vulnerability to HIV infection. Empowerment of women is at the centre of the response to build. How will this be achieved? Stephen Lewis (2004) strongly asserts:

“Empowerment (of women aimed at reducing HIV/AIDS infection)... it is time country by country...support the struggle for gender equality... women should call press conferences, demand audience, with the political and religious authorities, form coalitions, demonstrate, boycott... the cause of women will have to be advanced. Gender inequality and AIDS is a preordained equation to death”.