

## Gender and HIV

Gender roles and relations have a significant influence on the course and impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in every region in the world. Understanding the influence of gender roles and relations on individuals' and communities' ability to protect themselves from HIV and effectively cope with the impact of AIDS is crucial for expanding the response to the epidemic. Sex is a biological definition and gender is socially defined. It is what it means to be male or female, and how that defines a person's opportunities, roles, responsibilities and relationships. These meanings vary by culture, by community, by family and by relationship with each generation and over time. A gender based approach to understanding HIV/AIDS examines the ways in which gender influences:

- Individual risk and vulnerability to HIV
- The experience of living with HIV/AIDS
- The impact of an individuals' HIV related illness and death within a family or community
- Responses to the epidemic at individual, community and national level.

Of the estimated 42 million people living with HIV/AIDS in the world, women now constitute almost half of this number. In Africa, more women than men are infected, but in Pakistan, the ratio male-female infection is 7:1. This is because in every country the epidemic evolves differently and also because early in the epidemic more men than women are likely to be infected. Because of the particular vulnerability of women, the risk of women contracting HIV is rising worldwide. More than four-fifths of all infected women get the virus from their male sex partner, often by their one partner (their husband). The remainder become infected from blood transfusions or from injecting drugs with a contaminated needle.

### **The vulnerability of men and women** **Biological vulnerability**

- The risk of becoming infected with HIV

during unprotected vaginal intercourse is as much as 2-4 times higher for women than men. One major reason for this is that women have a larger surface area of mucosa (the thin lining of the vagina and cervix) exposed to their partner's secretions during sexual intercourse.

- Semen infected with HIV typically contains a higher concentration of virus than a woman's sexual secretions.
- Younger women are even more at risk because their immature cervix and scant vaginal secretions put up less of a barrier to HIV, and they are prone to vaginal mucosa lacerations.
- Tearing and bleeding during intercourse, whether from rough sex or rape multiply the risk of HIV infection
- Anal intercourse, which is sometimes preferred to vaginal intercourse because it is thought to preserve virginity and avoid the risk of pregnancy, also increases risk of infection. Anal intercourse often tears the delicate anal tissues and provides easy access to the virus. Men having sex with men and being the receptive partner, are therefore also much more vulnerable to infection than the penetrating partner.

### **Social and economic vulnerability**

- Gender norms often determine what women and men are supposed to know about sex and sexuality, and hence limit their ability to accurately determine their level of risk and to acquire accurate information and means to protect themselves from HIV. In many societies it is inappropriate for women to seek out or have extensive knowledge about sexuality or reproductive health. Men, in contrast, are expected to be well informed about matters related to sex, although many are not. Masculinity norms can make it especially difficult for men to admit this lack of knowledge. This applies even more to men having sex with men, as this is in many cultures deemed unacceptable.

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This makes it difficult to seek and obtain information and services related to sexual health and protective measures.

- In many societies, the feminine ideal is characterized by women's passivity, ignorance and expectations that they will defer to men's sexual needs, while sexual prowess, multiple partnerships and control over sexual interactions define masculinity. Women are often powerless to exercise control over when sex takes place and under what circumstances: they are constrained to take measures to protect themselves or insist their partners do so. Between men and women, sexuality and sexual practices are often not discussed and both lack the language or experience to start doing so. Discussions about safer sex and condom use will also bring up the issue of infidelity.
- Women have a more limited access to education, health care, independent incomes, property and legal rights. Very often, women rely on men (fathers, brothers, husbands) for their economic and social status. Men's vulnerability is increased when they engage in mobile occupations or temporary migration to support their families.

## **The influence of gender on the impact of AIDS**

- In places where HIV is associated with sex between men or with drug use, the nature of the illness is often denied or those infected are abandoned for fear of being associated with the disease. Where HIV is seen as a sign of sexual promiscuity, the stigma is much higher for women than for men: they are much more likely to be expelled from their homes and families.
- The impact on the family also varies if the infected person is male or female. When the man falls ill, there is likely to be a drop in household income; when the woman falls ill, there is more likely to be a problem with food security as

often women are the primary source of food for the household.

- In societies where women are not allowed to own property or where inheritance remains on the male side of the family, the death of the husband often means that the woman (and children) will lose their home and land – and with this their source of income. In order to survive, their only means to do so may be by becoming engaged in survival sex, thereby perpetuating the cycle of transmission of HIV.
- The burden of caring for the sick generally is carried by women, they are also much more likely to care for their sick husbands or male family members. This may mean that female children are taken out of school for care giving.

## **What can programmes do to increase gender sensitivity?**

- Promote gender awareness in prevention activities: include discussions on gender roles, sexuality and relationships. Focus on developing life skills that change gender related norms that increase vulnerability.
- Promote prevention technologies (condoms) in a gender sensitive manner. Ensure easy access for both men and women and promote responsible attitudes towards sexuality and family. Focus on prevention technologies that empower women.
- Expand and integrate HIV and STI services in existing services such as family planning, primary health care, maternal-child care services, and make them men and women and adolescent user friendly.
- Increase access of women/girls to education as this increases access to information and women's ability to make informed decisions
- Increase access of women to economic resources through training reducing their economic dependency.
- Adapt legislation that increases women's and children's vulnerability to infection and promote a rights based

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approach to reduce the impact of  
gender and HIV related discrimination  
Adapted from Gender and HIV/AIDS, UNAIDS,  
1998