

Vulnerability of Women to Contracting HIV

Abuses of Economic Rights

Economic inequalities between women and men often force women into submissive roles that require them to become economically dependent on men. Some economically dependent women who fear abandonment by their spouses stay in risky relationships in which they lack control over their sexual activity and the ability to protect them from the transmission of HIV. Women who are financially dependent on men are more likely to work in the sex industry, which drastically increases their chances of becoming infected with HIV. Additionally, forced prostitution is prevalent in poorer countries, where women often have no alternative but to exchange their bodies for money.

Abuse of Political Rights

Women are also more vulnerable to HIV infection because of their inability to exercise political rights within their respective cultures. Women are often unable to participate equally in the decision-making processes within their communities. In these circumstances, it is unlikely that policies will be implemented to protect women against the spread of HIV and empower them to control their reproductive health. Women's under representation in political processes translates into unequal access to education and health services because male policy makers often do not prioritize women's needs.

Cultural Beliefs

While progress has been made in terms of women's economic and political rights, some cultural beliefs shape behavior that contributes to the increase of HIV infection among women. One traditional belief is that "good women" are sexually passive and ignorant about sex. Within this cultural paradigm, men are expected to dominate sexual relationships and make reproductive decisions for both partners. While men are encouraged to experiment with their sexuality with partners outside the confines of the marital relationship, women are expected to remain faithful to their husbands. In particular, the practice of polygamy exposes men to a high risk of contracting HIV, which in turn increases the risk that their female partners will become infected.

Another harmful cultural belief that makes women vulnerable to contracting HIV is the value placed on virginity. In some cultures, people believe that if a man has sex with a virgin woman he will be cleansed of his infections. Young, virgin girls and women are at a higher risk of being raped by men influenced by this common misperception. These girls and women are especially vulnerable to HIV because of the distinct injuries that result from forced sexual activity and the likelihood that their perpetrators have had multiple sexual partners.

Some cultures place a similar value upon fertility. A woman's ability to become pregnant can elevate her status within her community and help sustain economic survival for herself and her family. Women who link their self-esteem with their ability to become pregnant frequently believe that the use of contraceptives diminishes their fertility. This link between fertility and self-esteem places women in jeopardy of contracting HIV because they sacrifice their own reproductive health to bear children for their husbands. In this respect, researchers in Kigali, Rwanda found that when women learned they were HIV-positive, often their concerns focused on their continued ability to have children rather than the effects of the disease on their personal health.

Noman Farooq
Senior program Associate
PAKISTAN NATIONAL AIDS CONSORTIUM
House No 441, Street 57, Sector I 8/3 Islamabad

Email: noman@pnac.net.pk

www.pnac.net.pk
www.aidspnac.org