

Women and HIV/AIDS



UN ESCAP

"...the fight against HIV/AIDS... I have taken on as my personal priority. It's spreading dramatically and disproportionately among women, which stresses the importance of girl's education. When it comes to fighting AIDS, as with so much else, I believe in girl power."
-Kofi Annan-

HIV/AIDS: FACTS AT A GLANCE

Globally:

- **40 million people** were living with **HIV/AIDS** at the **end of 2003**.
- **Over 3 million** lives were lost to AIDS in 2002, including those of an estimated **610,000 children**.
- About 5 million people acquire HIV **each year**. Of these, 800,000 are children.

In Asia and the Pacific:

- **1 in every 5 new HIV infections** worldwide occurs here.
- Over **eight million people** were living with the virus in the region at the end of 2002, of whom **2.6 million** were young people **aged 15 – 24**.
- **Over half a million people** died of AIDS in the **Asia-Pacific region** in 2002.
- Fully **one million** acquired HIV in the **same year**.

What would happen if targeted prevention is not scaled up now?

- **68 million people** in the **45 worst affected countries** will die between 2000 and 2020 -- earlier than they would have in the absence of AIDS
- In the **Asia-Pacific region**, the need for treatment and care would increase as the **18.5 million new infections** expected **by 2010** enter more advanced stages of the disease.

► Gender Dimensions of HIV/AIDS

- Globally, there were **19 million women** among the **40 million people** living with HIV/AIDS at the **end of 2003**.
- Women account for a smaller percentage of the total number of people living with HIV/AIDS in the **Asia-Pacific region**. But that ratio is narrowing in a number of places.

Below are results of some localized studies in parts of the Asia-Pacific region:

- **Only 35 per cent of women** were able to **refuse** their husbands **sex**, in one country.
- In one city, low earnings clearly disempowered women in long-term relationships from negotiating their sexual relations.
- **90 per cent** of HIV-infected **women**, in yet another country, were found to be married, monogamous and having had only one partner in their lives, indicating that their husbands were the source of their infection.

- **42 per cent** of **new infections** in 2000, in yet another country, were among women infected by their husbands or regular sex partners. In that same country, in 1990, about 10 per cent of HIV transmission occurred from husbands to wives; a decade later, that proportion had jumped to 50 per cent.
- Surveillance data for 2002, in yet another country, indicate that over **40 per cent** of new infections are transmitted to **wives from their husbands**; and another 25 per cent from mothers to their children.

► Why are the numbers of **women** with HIV/AIDS increasing worldwide?

- **Physiologically** women are **twice** as likely to contract HIV from men than the other way around.
- **Traditional attitudes** place women in a subordinate position to men – this contributes to the greater vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS infection.
- Lack of **employment opportunities, poor access to education, low economic status and prevailing norms and cultures compound the situation.**
- **Gender inequalities** in access to health care curtail women's ability to access preventive and curative health services, and antiretroviral support.
- In societies where misconceptions about masculinity prevail, **men** are encouraged to display their **sexual prowess** through having multiple sexual partners, and by indulging in alcohol and other substances that may lead to **unprotected sex and violence.**
- **Young women and girls** are particularly **susceptible** to rape and sexual coercion because they are more likely to be perceived as free of the virus.
- In some societies, the **mistaken belief** exists that **having sex with a virgin can cleanse** a man of infection --- this **myth** increases the vulnerability of girls to the virus.

► What makes **women** more vulnerable to the virus?

- A "culture of silence" surrounding sex in many societies demands that "**good women**" remain ignorant about sex and **passive** in sexual interactions. This makes it **difficult** for women to inform themselves about their bodies, modes of HIV/AIDS transmission and to negotiate safer sex.
- The same "**culture of silence**" **stigmatizes** women seeking treatment for sexually transmitted infection.
- The expected norm of virginity for unmarried women in many societies **limits** the ability of women to seek information on HIV/AIDS for **fear** of being perceived as **being sexually active.**
- Using barrier methods or non-penetrative sex poses **dilemmas** in societies that consider **virginity and motherhood** as a feminine ideal.
- **Violence against women**, including trafficking of women and girls, may **lead to sexual coercion.**
- Women's **economic dependency** increases their vulnerability.
- The **low** economic and social **status** of women in many societies restricts their ability to discuss issues of infidelity, leave risky relationships, negotiate condom use or to **refuse sex.**

The effectiveness of responses to HIV/AIDS depends on the measures against gender inequalities that both drive and are entrenched by the pandemic



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