

Fact Sheet on Women and HIV/AIDS

Globally, the leading cause of death and disease among women of reproductive age is HIV/AIDS.ⁱ Women comprise some 50% of people living with HIV, the vast majority of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa.ⁱⁱ In the most severely affected countries, three young women are infected for every young man.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nearly 25 years into the epidemic, gender inequality and a lack of respect for the human rights of women and girls remain principal drivers of the HIV epidemic. The majority of women who become infected with HIV do not voluntarily engage in high-risk behaviour. Instead they are vulnerable as a result of the behaviour of others, or because they lack the tools, information and resources needed to protect themselves.

Women and girls are disproportionately vulnerable to HIV infection as a result of a variety of factors:

- Women and girls are at **increased risk of HIV infection biologically**. In unprotected heterosexual intercourse, women are twice as likely as men to acquire HIV from an infected partner.^{iv}
- **Gender inequalities** affect women's ability to protect themselves against HIV and AIDS. Women and girls around the world experience systematic and deep-rooted discrimination based on their sex, reducing their opportunities, influence, rights and responsibilities. For example, less access to education and economic opportunities result in women being more dependent on men in their relationships. Economic and social dependence on men then limits women's power to refuse sex or negotiate the use of condoms.^v Unequal property and inheritance rights further exacerbate women's vulnerability to HIV.^{vi}
- Survival strategies of women and girls in conditions of poverty such as **intergenerational sex, sex work** and **early marriage** also leave women more vulnerable to HIV infection.^{vii}
- Research shows that **gender-based violence** against women and girls increases their chances of becoming infected with HIV. Fear of violence also often makes it difficult for women to disclose their HIV status or to access essential AIDS services.^{viii}
- Cultural norms of **power and decision-making** in regard to when and how sex takes place in heterosexual relationships limits women's ability to negotiate safer sex.
- In many parts of the world, research has shown that **marriage and long-term relationships** can represent an important HIV risk for women. They acquire the virus from partners who become infected through sexual activities outside the marital relationship or injecting drug use.^{ix}
- The impact of the HIV epidemic falls more heavily on women, as they assume the **burden of care** for ill family members.^x Opportunities to advance their education and achieve financial independence are reduced as time is absorbed carrying out their family duties.

- The experience of women living with HIV and AIDS is often worsened as a result of prevalent gender norms. For example, women living with HIV face greater **stigma and discrimination** than men, whilst women who have been infected by their husbands are also often blamed for their husband's illness.^{xi}

Reducing the impact of HIV infection urgently requires measures to address these specific vulnerabilities of women in different contexts.

ⁱ World Health Organization. 2009. *Women and Health: today's evidence tomorrow's agenda*. Geneva: WHO. <http://www.who.int/gender/documents/9789241563857/en/index.html>

ⁱⁱ UNAIDS. 2008. *Report on the global AIDS epidemic*. Geneva: UNAIDS.

ⁱⁱⁱ UNICEF. 2008. *The State of the World's Children*. New York: UNICEF. <http://www.unicef.org/sowc08/docs/sowc08.pdf>

^{iv} UNAIDS. 2009. 'Women and girls'.

<http://www.unaids.org/en/PolicyAndPractice/KeyPopulations/WomenGirls/default.asp>.

^v UNAIDS. 2009. 'Women and girls'.

^{vi} UNDP. 2009. 'HIV and women's inheritance and property rights'.

<http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/updates/hiv-www-news/womens-inheritance-and-property-rights-are-essential-to-effective-aids-response.en?src=print>.

^{vii} UNAIDS. 2008. *Addressing the vulnerability of young women & girls to stop the HIV epidemic in southern Africa*. Geneva: UNAIDS. http://www.unaidsrsta.org/files/Young-women-and-girls_08.pdf.

^{viii} The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS. 2005. 'Stop violence against women, fight AIDS'.

<http://womenandaids.unaids.org/themes/docs/UNAIDS%20VAW%20Brief.pdf>.

^{ix} International Women's Health Coalition. 2008. 'Women and risk of HIV/AIDS infection'.

<http://www.iwhc.org/storage/iwhc/docUploads/Women%20and%20HIV%206.4.08%20final%20update.pdf>.

^x UNAIDS/UNFPA/UNIFEM. 2004. 'Women and HIV/AIDS: Confronting the Crisis'.

<http://www.unfpa.org/hiv/women/report/chapter4.html>.

^{xi} Carr, R. 2008. 'Walking the Walk'. In *Promoting Gender Equality in HIV and AIDS Responses: Making AIDS more effective through tracking results*. New York: UNIFEM.