



Women and HIV/AIDS

Women and girls increasingly bear the burden of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Globally, the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age is HIV/AIDS.ⁱ By the end of 2008, women comprised half of the adults living with HIV and AIDS, and the number of women living with HIV had increased by nearly 2 million since 2001 to 15.7 million.^{ii,iii} In sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls already account for nearly 60 percent of people living with HIV.^{iv}

HIV infections among women and girls are growing at an alarming rate. HIV infections among women and girls are increasing in every region of the world. Every day more than 3,000 women and girls become infected with HIV.

Women are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection. Due to a mix of biology and culture, women are more susceptible to HIV infection than men. In some parts of the world, young women (aged 15-24) are three times more likely to be infected than young men of the same age.^v

Marriage, once thought to be a refuge from the epidemic, is now known to be a significant risk factor. Being female, married and poor are often the most significant risk factors for acquiring HIV. Many new HIV infections occur in women who are married or in long-term relationships with one partner.

The burden of caring for those with HIV falls to women and girls, making them even more vulnerable. Nearly 90 percent of the care for people living with HIV is provided by women and girls.^{vi} Many female caregivers have little time to earn an income, produce food, go to school or support families. These women and girls, along with their families, are more likely to be malnourished, in poor health, or economically destitute — all factors that further increase their risk for HIV infection.

There is an urgent need for new female-initiated prevention options. Current HIV prevention options are not doing enough to protect women. Many women lack the power to insist their male partners use condoms or remain faithful. Abstinence is not a practical option for women who are married, who want to have children or who are at risk of sexual violence. Safe and effective microbicides could provide women with a powerful new tool to protect themselves from HIV and would complement existing prevention methods.

"Give women and girls the power to protect themselves from HIV. We are already facing a recession of care. We cannot allow HIV to contribute further to this burden."

Michel Sidibé
Executive Director, UNAIDS

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ⁱ WHO, "Women and Health: Today's Evidence, Tomorrow's Agenda," November 2009

ⁱⁱ UNAIDS/WHO "AIDS Epidemic Update," November 2009

ⁱⁱⁱ UNAIDS/WHO "AIDS Epidemic Update," December 2007

^{iv} UNAIDS/WHO, "AIDS Epidemic Update," November 2009

^v Ibid.

^{vi} The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS, "Support Women Caregivers: Fight AIDS," 2007

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