

HIV/AIDS & WOMEN

Even though women tend to engage less in risky behaviours than men, they are physiologically, socially, culturally, and economically more vulnerable to HIV infection. Since the end of 2002, more women are getting infected and are living with the virus than men. Educators must take this into account.

Sex is biological and determined by chromosomes whereas gender is socially defined. Society determines appropriate roles, responsibilities, and behaviours of males and females. These social norms affect relationships between men and women and the sexual choices available to them.

Why women are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS than men



There are many reasons why women are more vulnerable to HIV infection than men. Most of these reasons are related to differences in biology, sexual behaviour, social attitudes, and economic power of men and women.

Biologically, women are two to four times more likely than men to become infected with HIV and other STIs during sexual intercourse with an infected partner. Young girls are even more vulnerable since their reproductive tracts are still immature and considerably more sensitive to being torn or damaged. Therefore, cross-generational sex is an important risk factor.

Cultural and social factors restrict women's choices and therefore increase their vulnerability. There is a large difference in attitudes towards men and women's sexuality. Inequality between the sexes also limits women's opportunities to get information about safe sex and how to protect themselves. The restricted choices and freedoms of women often reduce their access to care and services.

Gender-related social norms can increase women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. For example, women are expected to have only one lifetime partner, whereas men are often encouraged to have more, thereby exposing them to an increased risk of infection. This double standard puts women in an even more vulnerable position. In Asia and Africa many married women contract the disease from their one and only sex partner - their husband.

- Women are more vulnerable to HIV even though they engage in less risky behaviour
- Globally, more women are infected than men and their share is rapidly rising
- Equally educating girls and boys, as well as women and men, is the key to prevention

Very often, **women are economically dependent on men** and lack access to education, paid employment, and other rights. Moreover, some women are forced into sex work by economic necessity. Selling their bodies for money, food, or other things that fulfil their and their families' basic needs is sometimes an attractive alternative.

For many women, **sexual intercourse is not a question of choice but of survival**. As a result, they have very little control over how and when they have sex. Fear of physical abuse or abandonment by their partners makes it difficult for many women to negotiate safer sex.

What the education sector should do to address gender inequalities and empower women

Educating girls and young women is one of the most effective ways to prevent HIV transmission.

Studies show that a complete primary education, which equips people to process and evaluate information, is the minimum threshold needed for young people to benefit from HIV/AIDS prevention programmes.

Education is also crucial to give the most vulnerable groups in society – especially young women – the status, independence, and confidence they need to assert themselves in relationships, so that they can act on what they know about staying safe. Therefore, the education sector needs to:

- ❑ Empower women through ensuring equal access to education, from primary to tertiary level
- ❑ Keep girls and young women in school, for example, by providing safe water and sanitation
- ❑ Focus on life skills education in and out of school for girls and boys as well as women and men
- ❑ Provide access to livelihood skills education to help ensure equal wage-earning opportunities
- ❑ Increase awareness of the particular vulnerabilities of women among all education staff
- ❑ Curb harassment, violence, and sexual abuse in schools

How men can make a difference

The ultimate goal of prevention programmes for women and girls is not to save them but to give them what they need to save themselves. Focusing on men as well can help to complement such prevention programmes.

- ❑ Raise awareness of the relationship between men's behaviour and HIV/AIDS
- ❑ Educate boys and men to respect girls and women, to engage in responsible sexual behaviour; to share in the responsibilities of protecting themselves, their partners, and their children; to care for those infected
- ❑ Counteract the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, for example, by reviewing and changing male roles and masculine identities and through discussion of gender roles, rights, responsibilities, and power relations

