

## **GENDER AND HIV AND AIDS**

HIV and AIDS affect the whole society, men, women, and children alike. Yet the past years have shown an increase of infections among women and especially young women. There are biological factors but also social and cultural factors, why a woman is at higher risk of getting infected with HIV than a man. In addition to the risk of HIV infections, women are more involved than men in taking care of sick patients, such as family members, children, or other community members. Communities, households and families have to work together in minimizing the risk of women becoming infected and in reducing the workload of and supporting women who provide care for the sick.

### **What is gender?**

The term *gender* refers to the roles that men and women have in society while the term *sex* refers to the biological organs that make a man or a woman.

## **Gender and HIV and AIDS**

### **How is gender related to HIV and AIDS?**

Almost as many women as men are now dying of AIDS-related illness. However, there are important differences between women and men. There are cultural, social and economic determinants, as well as biological factors, that increase a woman's risk of an HIV infection.

#### **Cultural factors**

Cultural practices may increase a woman's risk of an HIV infection, e.g., widow inheritance or widow cleansing or the myth that having sex with a virgin will free an HIV-infected man from the virus. Gender stereotypes that expect women to be sexually inexperienced and uninterested in sexual practices create silence around women and sex. This limits women's access to information as well as to prevention measures and services for care and treatment.

#### **Social factors**

Violent acts such as forced sex and rape contribute to the transmission of HIV.

#### **Economic factors**

Poverty is a root cause for the continuous spread of the HI virus in Africa, and women are more affected by poverty. Often women are financially dependent on men and women and may have to 'pay back' with sexual favours. Others sell their bodies to support themselves and their children.

#### **Biological factors**

Due to a larger skin surface of the female sex organ and the risk of micro tears in the tissue of female sex organs during penetration, women have a higher risk of contracting

HIV through sexual intercourse. Men also discharge a larger amount of body fluids and their fluids contain a higher quantity of viruses.

The term “widow inheritance” is used when a widow is taken into the household of the brother-in-law after her husband dies and all of his inheritance goes to his brothers. The women are then treated as other wives. The term “widow cleansing” refers to a ritual in some areas of Africa where one man is usually responsible for “cleaning” women from the spirit of their dead husbands through sexual intercourse.

### **Are norms and cultural practices a factor in HIV transmission among women?**

Yes. In most societies, different perceptions and expectations for men and women determine how they behave sexually. Women seeking information about safe sex or suggesting the use of a condom are considered promiscuous or adulterous. In cultures that place a high importance on virginity, some young, unmarried women may engage in high-risk behavior, such as anal sex, to maintain their virginity. In contrast, men are pressured to be sexually experienced at an early age in order to prove their masculinity.

This often involves visiting commercial sex workers and/or having more than one sexual partner, placing the men and their partners at risk of an HIV infection or infections with other STIs.

### **Does the tradition of FGC contribute to the spread of HIV among women?**

Female Genital Cutting (FGC) can contribute to the transmission of HIV in several ways.

One is the use and sharing of instruments used during the process of mutilation, if these instruments are not adequately sterilized. Secondly, as the female sex organs are narrowed, subsequent intercourse can cause rupture of the scars and cause injuries through which the virus will enter the body.

Medical risks aside, FGC has been recognized as a form of violence against women and is therefore a violation of human rights. FGC should be strongly discouraged.

### **Why do young girls get the HI virus?**

Young girls are at increased risk of contracting an HIV infection due to several factors.

Early marriage may expose girls to an increased risk of STIs and HIV infection, especially because often their sexual partners or husbands are older and have had other sexual partners. Social norms that accept extramarital and pre-marital sexual relationships for men, combined with women’s inability to negotiate safe sex practices with their partners, make HIV infection a risk even for women who have only had one partner in their entire lives. For these women, “remaining faithful” is no protection. Finally, poverty, lack of education and limited income-earning opportunities often force young women into commercial sex work, exposing them to a high risk of HIV infection and other STIs.

Studies have also shown that many young women know little about their bodies, contraception, and STIs. Many women fear to seek information on sex or condoms, as this would label them as sexually active, regardless of the true extent of

their sexual experience. Their knowledge on the importance and means of protection are limited, so they are more likely unknowingly to engage in risky behavior.

### **What age group is more likely to get the HI virus?**

The fact is that all groups are at risk of being infected with the HI virus when they are sexually active. What matters is the extent to which someone puts himself or herself at risk. That means if people do not protect themselves with condoms when having sex with many different partners or with someone with an unknown HIV status, they are at high risk.

Young men and women are often at a higher risk than adults. They are just starting to learn about sexual relationships and ways of protecting themselves from HIV and other STIs, and access to information and to condoms is often limited for young people. Additionally, in young girls the inner lining of the vagina is more fragile than in mature women; skin may tear during sexual intercourse and the virus may enter the body of a young girl more easily.

### **Why do there seem to be so many females living with HIV?**

Often women living with HIV are more visible in society, for example when they stand up for the rights of people living with HIV (PLHIV) or organize support for other infected people. Women are also more likely to get an HIV test than men, e.g., as part of antenatal care. This does not mean that there are more women who are living with HIV than men.

### **Between men and women, who brings the virus?**

It is known that HIV can infect any person, a man or a woman. Persons with high-risk behavior (unprotected sex, use of contaminated needles) might get infected with the virus and might then transmit the virus to his or her partner. Married men are more likely to have additional sexual partners outside their marriage; they might bring home the virus while the wife has no idea that she is at risk.

### **Why women are often blamed for bringing the virus?**

In many societies men are the heads of the household and the sole decision-makers, while women have a lower position. This order of men and women in society has many negative effects on the lives of women and also their sexual lives. From the position of superiority male family members might blame the women, in order to save the good reputation of their male relative. In addition, women learn for the first time about their infection by blood tests during antenatal care visits. This might encourage the idea that she brings the problem home. However, it is true that men or women can bring the virus into a relationship if their behavior is risky (multiple partners, unprotected sexual intercourse, use of contaminated needles).

### **Why are some women forced to re-marry after their husband dies?**

When a husband dies, leaving a wife and children behind, it is often the assumption of the community that a woman cannot and should not live on her own. Although

many women can support themselves and their families, re-marrying might help a woman to be accepted in society and prevent stigmatization. However, being forced into a marriage is a violation of rights and should be condemned.

### **Why are women not participating in decision-making?**

Women are not always excluded from participating in decision-making. In Tanzania, for example, there is a large proportion of women in administrative and political positions at different levels. They participate in decision-making along with their male counterparts.

It is important that women have a similar voice in their families and especially in their sexual relationships. Many factors can hinder a woman from demanding the use of a condom or from saying that she does not want to have sex when a husband/partner demands it. This is when she is economically dependent on a man, when she has to feed a family, when she has not learned to say 'no'. Both men and women have to learn to respect each others' opinions and discuss issues on equal terms.

### **What is the plan to discourage traditions that hinder women from making decisions about sex?**

There are many traditions that Tanzanians have been following for a long time, and some of them reduce women's rights in decision-making, especially about sexual matters. Changing habits and behaviors will take time and will only occur when people understand the need for change. It is essential to provide opportunities for women and men to discuss sexual matters and to understand rights of their partners. Men need to be educated on gender equality and to give women the opportunity to discuss their feelings and opinions, listen to women's voices and respect women at home. More women need to have access to education so they can become financially independent.

### **Is gender violence an important factor in the transmission of HIV?**

Gender violence is a very important factor in the transmission of HIV. In many cultures, male dominance is demonstrated and maintained through forcing a woman to have sex.

Women who have been forced into unprotected sex or have been raped are more likely to contract HIV. Rough, forced sex causes more lesions in vaginal and anal tissue through which the HIV virus can enter the body. In many situations, when women ask their partners to use condoms, the partner may think they have been unfaithful, which may result in physical or emotional abuse of the women, or even forced eviction from the household.

### **Are there gender differences in the social and economic consequences of stigma?**

Both women and men living with HIV experience discrimination and stigma. However, there are gender differences in the way stigma affects women and men. Women are often accused of having had extramarital sex or being promiscuous or adulterous (whether or not this was the case) and receive less support. Women often have to re-marry after their husband dies to avoid stigma, which apart from the psychological stress can put them at greater risk of getting infected. Women often lose all their possessions after their husband's death because it is taken over by family members and in many cases the woman is left to take care of herself. Men, on the other hand, may be under pressure to keep their HIV status secret for fear of losing the job and not being able to support their families.

### **Why do women suffer more rejection, finger pointing and blame for the transmission of HIV?**

One major reason for such behaviour is ignorance. In many cultures, men are regarded as decision makers and as more knowledgeable than women. Cultural norms and traditions may encourage extramarital practices for the man. This, together with masculine behaviour, leads people to think that women are the only ones who bring HIV into the household.

They forget that the man might also be responsible for bringing the virus. This leads to finger-pointing, rejection and blame of women as being responsible for the spread of HIV.

### **Why are women not respected when it is known they are infected?**

Women are often disrespected because HIV and AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease while women are supposed to be sexually inactive. It is immediately assumed that a person got the virus by sleeping around- yet there are other means of infection. Women are more likely to be tested through antenatal care when they are pregnant. The husband is often not tested and so his status is not known. As women have less power in families and at home they might get chased out of the house because it is not acceptable for a woman to have extra-marital relationships, while it is the norm for men.

### **Why do men refuse to go for HIV testing?**

Most people fear HIV testing. Men may be under pressure to keep their HIV status secret for fear of dismissal from work, and then being unable to provide for their families. Also, many men might not know about the benefits of knowing their HIV status, for example, in order to get information on how to live healthy, on starting ARV therapy on time and improving health status, planning for the future life of themselves and their family. Many men fear the test because they know that they have had several sexual partners in their life and some may even think they know already that they are infected even if it is not the case.

Even though a person's partner or spouse is infected, this does not mean that they are infected as well. Therefore it is important for a husband to find out his own HIV status (see counseling topic in the next section of this book), and never to draw

conclusions from the test result of his pregnant wife. There is no other way of knowing one's HIV status than to go for a test.

### **Why have female condoms not been available until now?**

Female condoms are available in Tanzania, but are not as easily found as male condoms. They are mainly distributed by organizations such as UNFPA and AMREF. The price is higher than male condoms because production is more costly. Also, the use of condoms is still decided by men and not women, so currently the demand for female condoms is still low. Male condoms are distributed by the Medical Stores Department (MSD) which procures and distributes male condoms to the district level, where the District Medical Officer (DMO) is responsible for further distribution to health facilities. As of now, female condoms have not been included in this process.

### **At what age do women or men stop getting infected with HIV?**

There is no age or time limit when a woman or a man cannot get an HIV infection. Anybody at any age can get infected with the virus if they do not protect themselves.

### **Can uncircumcised boys get the HI virus?**

Both circumcised and uncircumcised boys and men can get the HI virus when they put themselves at risk through their behavior. Research has confirmed that HIV is more easily transmitted to uncircumcised men. So it may be right to say that the removal of the foreskin may be a protecting factor in the transmission of HIV. However, it is not correct to say that male circumcision prevents an HIV infection. Men always need to protect themselves and alter high-risk behaviour to prevent an HIV infection.

### **What can be done to promote women's liberation and decision-making?**

There are several strategies which promote women's liberation and decision-making at the national, district and household/family levels. One strategy is to respect gender as an important factor in all policies, guidelines and programmes. Another is to create more opportunities for education of women, as well as reviewing some of the laws like the Marriage Act, Land Act, Human Resource Deployment Act, or others that traditionally disrespect the rights of women.

It is also important to provide opportunities for women to easily access capital for income-generating activities. Another crucial point is that we need to change our mindset about power relations between men and women and respect women's opinions and decisions.

### **What can be done about traditional beliefs and religions which undermine women's position in society, and what is the role of CMAC?**

Cultural factors remain one of the key obstacles to successfully prevent HIV infections. One factor is the inferior role assigned to women by society. All activities for the prevention of HIV and AIDS should be thoroughly checked to make sure that there is no discrimination against women and that measures address the special needs of women and men. The CMAC should aim toward a change of attitudes and a reduction of high-risk behaviour. Discussions and drama performances can be held with all members of society, including religious leaders, to point out the difficulties that women have in having a say in the family and deciding about their sexuality.

TACAIDS developed a "Minimum package for HIV and AIDS planning for Local Government Authorities" which was utilized for the first time during the planning cycle for the financial year 2008/09. This package provides the Local Government Authorities (LGAs) with a variety of possible activities. The Minimum package for HIV and AIDS planning at district level suggests the following activities be planned by the CMAC:

- Train women through behavior-change communication to be able to negotiate safe sex.
- Train men through behavior-change communication to promote life skills and male responsible behavior in sexual and family dynamics and roles.
- Develop an action plan with assigned roles and responsibilities for political and religious leaders.
- Disseminate messages on gender-specific HIV and AIDS prevention, and reduction of stigma and discrimination.