

Give women power over AIDS

Rebekah Webb is European Coordinator for the Global Campaign for Microbicides, an international coalition of over 300 NGOs working to advance the goal of new HIV prevention options, especially for women.

This International Women's Day, some 2,800 women will die of AIDS and an estimated 3,400 more will become newly infected.

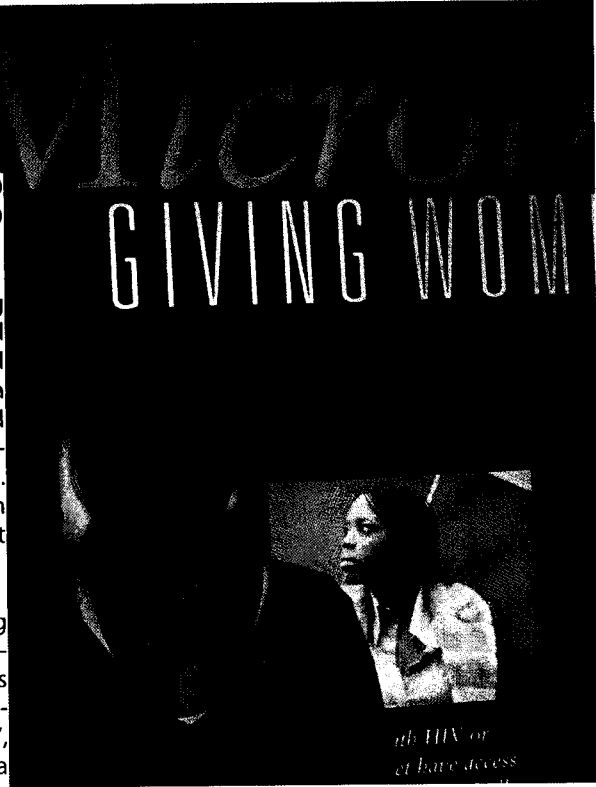
In South Africa alone, several hundred young women under the age of 24 die of AIDS each and every day. One in four of them are already infected by the time they celebrate their 22nd birthday - at a rate of three times faster than their male friends and peers. Often these women leave behind small children who are taken in by elderly female relatives. This high level of fatalities in the sub-Saharan region among this particular generation thwarts any effort towards gender equality before it can even begin.

This is why this country is now host to an increasing number of international studies to find an HIV prevention method that women can use that meets their sexual and reproductive health needs. The collective name for such approaches is 'microbicides', so-called because of the aim to protect against a wide range of microbes - including sexually transmitted bacteria and viruses - that pose serious and long-term health risks. A microbicide would mostly likely be formulated as a vaginal gel, cream, foam, or ring, much in the same way that modern-day contraceptives are.

Research from around the world shows that social, cultural, and economic factors - linked to sexual violence and coercion, as well as unequal access to education, economic options, and legal protection - increase women's vulnerability to HIV. Among young women surveyed in Harare (Zimbabwe), Durban and Soweto (South Africa), 66% reported having one lifetime partner, and 79% had abstained from sex at least until the age of 17. Yet, 40% of these young women were also HIV positive, and most had been infected despite staying faithful to one partner. Similar trends are seen in Asia; in India, for example, the majority of women are getting infected within monogamous relationships, and many have been infected by their husbands. The clearly devastating impact of the AIDS epidemic on women has highlighted that much more should have been done at an earlier stage to accelerate the development of women-friendly alternatives to male condoms.

'The best time to plant a tree is yesterday, the next best time is today'

The search for a microbicide did not really begin until the mid-90s when the first clinical trials began in



countries as diverse as Finland, South Africa and India. The pharmaceutical sector decided that the project was not attractive enough for them to invest, which considerably delayed progress. In 2008, twelve candidate microbicides are currently in human trials, but it is typical for hundreds of product leads to fail for every one that succeeds. Much has been learned in the last 14 years about the mechanics of sexual transmission - how the virus attaches and infects cells. A next generation of products now entering the research pipeline may therefore have a good chance of success.

Public funding remains the limiting factor in the progress to find a safe, effective and affordable microbicide. In 2002, European funding for microbicides represented only 2% of the total global public spending on research. Now, thanks to the tireless efforts of community-based advocates, a handful of European governments, including the UK, the Netherlands and Ireland, are among the most important donors in the field. Yet of the 27 member states, only eight have invested in microbicide development to date. Many wealthy countries, such as France, Germany, Italy, Finland and Austria have yet to pledge significant resources to the global effort. Only if the current European contribution is doubled and sustained over the long-term are we likely to see real progress towards this public health and gender equality goal.

The Political Gender Gap – Making a Difference?

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Why, despite the fact that women make up 50% of the population, do we only make up an average of 18% of elected government officials worldwide. Why, when women have had the vote for near a hundred years in some countries, are we in so few positions of power? At the end of the day, what implications does this gender-gap have on our societies – are women in elected office actually making any difference to the well being of the women they represent?

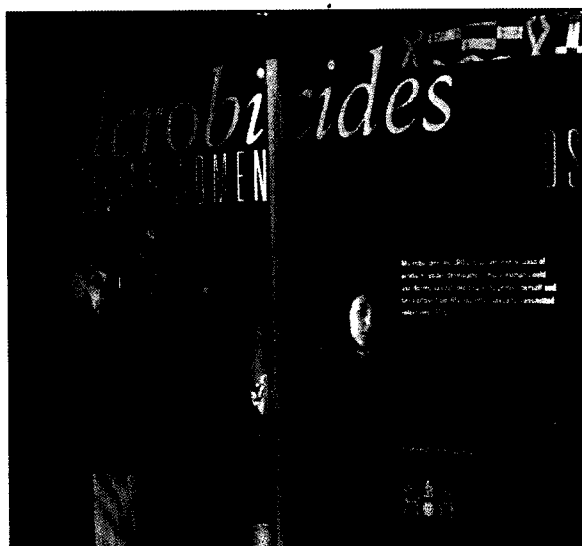
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The Global Campaign for Microbicides, which operates a small secretariat of two staff in Brussels, is committed to raising awareness of the need for microbicides, and subsequent investment, across the EU. For more details on how you can contribute to the search for a microbicide, please contact them at +32 (0)2 507 1221 or email rwebb@path.org.

What you can do:

- q Wear a red ribbon during the week of International Women's Day to show your concern about the high numbers of women dying from AIDS.
- q Ask your government what it is doing to support the research and development of microbicides.
- q Learn more about the work of the Global Campaign for Microbicides and their affiliates in your area by visiting: www.global-campaign.org

All statistics quoted in this article are from UNAIDS.



Caption: Anne van Lancker Socialist MEP, speaking at the opening of the microbicides photographic exhibit in the European Parliament on 7th November 2006.

Across Europe women's participation in politics is widely promoted with women frequently being encouraged to run for public office. One may be forgiven for thinking therefore, that the hurdles to women's equal representation have been overcome. However this is not the case, sometimes the most difficult hurdles to overcome are invisible. Limited educational and occupational opportunities continue to prevent many women from obtaining the skills and resources deemed necessary to compete successfully for public office. Yet even in areas of the world where equality in education and the workforce have balanced out, a massive deficit of women in elected office remains. Whether we like it or not, demands associated with women's traditional roles of wife and have resulted in the apparent choice of most women to either stay clear of the political arena altogether, or, if politically active, to refrain from running for office. It must be recognised that the unsociable hours, frequent travel and generally unpredictable nature of politics, heavily deter mothers from seeking to run for office.

If a woman does decide to seek election, she faces a greater number of challenges than her male counterparts. Lucky though we are as socialists that our parties fight for our equal representation, an inherent bias remains in nearly all sectors that is discouraging to women. Selectors believe male candidates are more likely to be successful in the general election because they always have been successful. This bias is not confined to the selection process – voters use candidate gender to make inferences about candidate traits, beliefs, and issue positions. Voters evaluate the same candidate differently solely because of the candidate's gender: female candidates are perceived as better able to handle compassion and women's rights issues, and more likely to be liberal, democratic, and feminist; male candidates are perceived as better able to handle crime, defence, and foreign policy issues. In the realist orientated world that surrounds us, such "feminine" traits are often seen as incompatible with strong leadership – a trait that many voters look for in their favoured candidate. Nevertheless, voter discrimination against female candidates seems to be on the decline.