

Gender Equality in AIDS Prevention:

Why we need prevention options for women

HIV/AIDS is rapidly becoming a women's epidemic in high prevalence areas.

According to UNAIDS:

- Approximately 7,000 people become infected with HIV every day. Half of them are women.
- Worldwide, young women are 1.6 times more likely to be living with HIV/AIDS than their male counterparts.
- Young women make up over 60% of 15- to 24-year olds living with HIV/AIDS.
- In 2007, 61% of the people living with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa were women and girls. The majority had only one mode of exposure to HIV: sex with their intimate partners.
- Nearly one in three South African women aged 25 to 29 are living with HIV.
- In Kenya, young women between 15 and 19 years are three times more likely to be infected than their male counterparts, while 20- to 24-year-old women are 5.5 times more likely to be living with HIV than men in their age cohort (National AIDS/STI Control Programme, 2009).

Women are biologically more vulnerable to infection and its consequences.

- Women are at least twice as likely as men to contract HIV from unprotected vaginal intercourse.
- Vaginal and cervical membranes are exposed to infectious fluids for hours (sometimes days) after sex. Younger women are at greatest risk because the immature cervix (the base of the uterus at the back of the vagina) is more vulnerable to damage and infection.
- Women are often asymptomatic when they have a sexually transmitted infection, which leads to low detection rates. These women may go untreated, thus increasing their risk of HIV acquisition.

Gender inequities prevent many women from being able to protect themselves.

- Millions of women lack the social and economic power to insist on existing HIV-prevention measures such as condoms, abstinence, or mutual monogamy. Male and female condom use requires the tacit cooperation, if not outright participation, of a woman's male partner.
- HIV risk escalates among adolescent girls because of their physical vulnerability and their susceptibility to rape, forced marriage, trafficking, economic dependence, and coercion.
- Cultural and gender norms are barriers to women's empowerment, limiting their autonomy in decision-making regarding their sexuality.
- Economic conditions and gender-based violence renders millions of women of all ages unable to "negotiate" condom use or to abandon partners who put them at risk. Millions live in societies that permit them no role in sexual decision-making, condone male infidelity, and assign to women the burden of shame and stigma associated with infectious disease.
- Increasing economic inequality and eroding social support networks drive many women to sell or trade sex to support their families.



Expanding HIV prevention options, especially for women
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- Many women want to get pregnant for their own reasons and/or to achieve the status and security that, in many societies, can only be attained through motherhood. Since condoms are contraceptive, women now have to choose between childbearing and HIV prevention.

HIV prevention strategies must address women's needs and vulnerabilities.

Women need education, economic opportunities, and social support.

Women need gender equality in order to protect their health and rights.

Women need HIV and STI prevention tools they can control.

The Global Campaign for Microbicides is a civil society organization working to ensure the ethical and accelerated development of, and widespread access to, new and existing HIV-prevention options—especially for women.

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