

# Gender Equality in AIDS Prevention:

## *Why we need prevention options for women*

### **HIV/AIDS is rapidly becoming a women's epidemic.**

- Approximately 6,800 people become infected with HIV every day. Half of them are women. 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 (UNAIDS).
- In India, there are approximately 1 million women living with HIV, representing 40% of the HIV positive population.
- Among African youth (15-24 years old), three quarters (76%) of those who are HIV positive are female. In some countries, girls are 5-6 times more likely to have HIV than their male peers.
- In Eastern Europe, women (many of them younger than 25 years of age) bear a growing part of the HIV burden - they accounted for 41% of new reported HIV infections.

### **Women are biologically more vulnerable to infection and its consequences.**

- Women are at least twice as likely as men to contract HIV from unprotected intercourse.
- Vaginal membranes are exposed to infectious fluids for hours after sex. Younger women are at greatest risk because the immature cervix is more vulnerable to damage and infection.
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) often go undetected, and therefore untreated, in women. STIs increase women's vulnerability to HIV. In addition, untreated STIs can lead to infertility, ectopic (tubal) pregnancy, infant mortality, and cervical cancer.

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

- Millions of women lack the social and economic power to insist on 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.
- Violence, coercion, and economic dependency render 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.
- Many women want to get pregnant - for their own reasons and/or to achieve the status and security that, in many societies, they can only attain 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 opportunity, 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.*



*Expanding HIV prevention options, especially for women*  
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