

Youth Advocates for Microbicides: Changing the Future of HIV Prevention

Youth and HIV

As of 2008, an estimated 33.4 million people were living with HIV, 5.5 million of whom were young people 15-24 years of age (UNAIDS, 2008). Forty percent of new infections are amongst 15-24 year olds, most of them female (WHO/UNICEF 2007). In Sub-Saharan Africa, 3.2 million young people are living with HIV, and three young women are infected for every young man (UNAIDS, 2006). Gender inequality limits the ability of young women (especially those who are married) to negotiate condom use and access services.

This disproportionate impact of HIV and STIs on young women is due both to biological and socio-economic factors. An adolescent's cervix is physiologically less mature than an adult's and, therefore, more vulnerable to infection.

In many societies, girls are discouraged from learning about their bodies. They don't have adequate or accurate reproductive health information, nor do they have the negotiating skills or power to protect themselves from HIV.



Because of cultural and economic factors, young women are often involved in cross-generational relationships that can increase their risk for HIV infection. Some women are married at an early age, usually to older men. Older and more sexually experienced men also seek out young girls for sex. Some girls engage in sexual relations with older men in exchange for school fees, gifts, or money. Cultural norms in many settings give women little, if any, power to determine the circumstances in which sex occurs, including whether or not condoms are used.

What are microbicides and how could they help protect young people/young women?

Microbicides (mī-KRO'-bī-sīdz) would provide young women with a method of protecting themselves from infection with HIV and possibly other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) that is under their direct control. As gels, creams, suppositories, films, or lubricants applied topically to the vagina—or delivered via a vaginal ring--microbicides are being designed to prevent HIV. Because they would be applied before sex and would not require active partner cooperation, microbicides would offer a whole new prevention option to women unable or unwilling to insist on condom use.

A wide range of microbicide candidates are under development¹. Scientists are currently testing more than dozens of possible products, but no safe and effective microbicide is yet on the market. Lack of resources and the political will to adequately fund microbicides research have been slowing their development. Due to these barriers, only a few microbicide candidates are in the last stages of testing to determine whether they are effective (which can take up to 4 years). If a trial shows that a microbicide does work, at least another two to four years will be required for individual countries to go through their own regulatory processes to make the microbicide available. Due to these individual country processes, it must be noted that a microbicide will not be available in all countries at the same time and not all people within a country will get it at the same

¹ For more information on the exact number of candidate products in the pipeline, please visit www.avac.org/ht/d/sp/i/3507/pid/3507

time. It is likely to be made available to some women and not others during introduction and scale-up². It is now more critical than ever that the voices of youth are heard.

The Need for Youth Involvement in Microbicides Advocacy

Young advocates all over the world are raising their voices in the growing public demand for microbicides. Youth involvement is important in shaping microbicides research and ensuring access to safe and effective microbicides as soon as possible. In particular, youth can get involved in advocacy around the following critical issues:

- Young people need increased access to comprehensive reproductive health education and more opportunity for unbiased, informed discussion about ways to protect their health.
- Very few microbicide acceptability studies focus on the needs, behaviours, and preferences of youth. Youth advocates need to continue to push microbicides developers to explore and address the particular needs of younger users.
- Clinical trial advisory bodies and capacity-building initiatives deal with how a clinical trial takes place, who participates in the trials, and how the entire community is involved and affected. Young voices must be included in these important community involvement functions.
- Research on safety and efficacy of microbicides for younger women is critical. At the same time, youth participation in clinical trials is complicated by ethical, legal, and practical issues. Youth advocates can be part of national and international dialogues that help policy makers, researchers, and communities decide how to resolve these dilemmas in ways that protect young people without excluding them from important research.
- Younger potential users need to play a key role in determining how microbicides will be introduced to the youth market. Marketing messages and strategies should be designed with youth input and targeted specifically to youth in order to assure rapid uptake and correct and consistent product use.
- Once microbicides are on the market, they must be affordable and easily accessible to young women and men so they can protect themselves from HIV. Younger advocates need to target donors and their governments to make sure that youth needs will be included in distribution and pricing strategies.

The Global Campaign for Microbicides (GCM) 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. Visit our website: www.global-campaign.org or email: info@global-campaign.org

² For more information on introduction and scale-up, please visit [http://www.ipmglobal.org/pdfs/english/ipm_publications/2008/IPM_PolicyReport\(English\).pdf](http://www.ipmglobal.org/pdfs/english/ipm_publications/2008/IPM_PolicyReport(English).pdf) Global Campaign for Microbicides. 2010. Reproduction encouraged.

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