

Women at Risk: Why we need prevention options for women



Global Campaign
FOR Microbicides

HIV/AIDS has become a women's epidemic.

- Worldwide, over 7,000 women a day become infected with HIV.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, 58% of the 26.6 million people living with HIV/AIDS in 2003 were women.
- In some African and Caribbean countries, teenage girls are 5 times more likely to be HIV positive than their male peers.
- In Botswana, an estimated 54% of all women between the ages of 25-29 are HIV positive.
- In Russia and Asia, where HIV rates are escalating, a third of all new infections are among women. In the United States and Canada, nearly 25% of new HIV infections occur in women.
- Other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) represent a tremendous health burden for women around the world.

Women's bodies are biologically more vulnerable to infection and its consequences.

- During and after unprotected intercourse, mucous membranes in the vagina are exposed to infectious fluids for a prolonged period.
- Younger women are at even greater risk, since the cervix is physiologically less mature and therefore more vulnerable to infection.
- Women who do get an STD may not know it, since these diseases are often asymptomatic in women. This can mean that women go without diagnosis and treatment for a long time, which has serious long-term consequences for their health. Untreated STDs can cause infertility, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), ectopic (tubal) pregnancy, infant mortality, and cervical cancer.
- Having an STD makes a woman more vulnerable to HIV. Some STDs cause lesions, making it easier for HIV to enter the body. Even without lesions, the body responds to infection by increasing the number of disease-fighting CD-4 cells in cervical secretions. These cells are also the target of HIV, and their increased presence means increased risk.

Social and economic inequities keep many women from protecting themselves.

- Current prevention strategies that emphasize mutual monogamy and male condoms require cooperation by women's male partners. Women can influence but don't control men's sexual or drug-using behavior.
- Violence, coercion, and economic dependency in many women's relationships make it difficult or impossible for women to "negotiate" condom use or to leave a partnership that puts them at risk.
- In many societies, women and girls are discouraged from learning about their bodies and about sex in general. Often, women must leave all sexual decision-making to men.
- Gender-based social norms can lead men to seek multiple partners, while women bear the burden of shame and stigma associated with disease.
- Increasing economic inequality and eroding social support networks have driven many women into commercial sex work to support their families.
- Many women want to get pregnant, and for some their social status and security is based on their ability to bear children. No existing prevention method also allows conception.

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

Women need education, economic opportunity, and social support.

Women need a transformation of gender relationships so that they are able to protect their health and rights within partnerships.

Women need HIV and STI prevention methods they control, such as female condoms and microbicides.