

GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AND HIV/AIDS

The links between HIV/AIDS and gender based violence are becoming increasingly apparent based on the findings of various studies conducted primarily in the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa. Findings show an increased risk of HIV/AIDS among women victims of gender based violence and also show that being HIV positive is a risk factor for violence against women. This relationship has grave consequences for global health and human development, especially with regard to adult women, adolescents, and girls, who are most affected by sexual violence and are consequently more susceptible to HIV/AIDS.

The importance of examining the connections among gender equity, various types of gender-based violence, and HIV/AIDS is apparent within the context of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and especially with regard to MDG 3, the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. Increasingly, as gender violence and gender inequality are cited as determining factors in women's risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, urgent inter-programmatic efforts are needed to increase women's access to health, health care, and their ability to make decisions regarding their health if we are to curb the growing rates of HIV/AIDS infection among women and reduce their susceptibility to HIV infection due to sexual violence.

The feminization of the HIV/AIDS epidemic

The global proportion of HIV-positive women has increased significantly over the last five years, and this process is most visible in countries where the virus spreads mainly through heterosexual intercourse, as is the case in most parts of the Caribbean and Central America.² By the end of 2004, 440,000 people in the Caribbean and 1,700,000 people in Latin America were estimated to be living with HIV.¹ Among female sex workers, HIV prevalence ranges from less than 1% in Nicaragua and 2% in Panama, to 5% in Guatemala and more than 10% in Honduras.

- In 1997 women constituted 41% of HIV positive people, in 2002 this number had risen to almost 50%.¹
- By the end of 1999, women constituted 25% and 30% of HIV positive adults in Latin America and the Caribbean, respectively. Currently, these percentages have increased to 30% and 50%.²
- In the Caribbean, approximately 3,000 children are born annually to HIV positive mothers. As the number of HIV-infected women increase, so does the number of HIV infected children.³

HIV/AIDS and gender based violence

The relationship between gender-based violence¹ and HIV/AIDS infection are especially evident in the areas of sexual abuse of children and adolescents, sexual violence between partners, the positive relationship between sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and domestic violence, and the reciprocal relationship between sexual violence and HIV/AIDS.

- More than 36% of all girls and 29% of all boys have suffered child sexual abuse. (PAHO/WHO, 2003)
- In some countries almost one out of four women reveals having been violated by her partner at some point in the relationship. (PAHO/WHO, 2002)
- The sexual exploitation of girls and women is one of the most extended forms of gender violence and an ongoing factor in the spread of HIV/AIDS.
- In a survey conducted in the Dominican Republic, the proportion of women who had a STD 12 months prior to the survey was 3.7% among those who had suffered violence and 1.0% among those who had not suffered violence. (Kishor, S. and Johnson, K. *Profiling domestic violence: a multi-country study*. ORC Macro. Maryland, June, 2004)

Glossary

- **Violence against women** is any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.
(UN Economic and Social Council, 1992)
- **Trafficking in persons** means the recruitment, transportation, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.
(UN Convention Against Transnational Crime, 2000),

Quick Facts

- In Trinidad and Tobago, the rates of HIV/AIDS are five times higher for girls than for boys between the ages of 15-19.⁴
- In Nicaragua (1998) the ratio between men-women infected with HIV/AIDS was 7:1, in 2003 it was 3:1.¹
- The proportion of women who have suffered violence at the hands of her partner has been recorded at 11% in Colombia, 10% in Nicaragua, 17% in Haiti, and 23% in Mexico and Peru.⁵
- More than 50,000 women of the Dominican Republic are working abroad in prostitution.⁶
- According to the 2000 DHS in Haiti, the percentage of men between the ages of 15-49 who were aware of HIV prevention methods such as using condoms was 69% while the ratio among women of the same age was 46%.

Positive association between HIV/AIDS and gender violence

Several studies undertaken in the U.S. and South Africa indicate a positive relationship between HIV/AIDS and domestic violence.^{8,9} A multi-centric study in Latin America and the Caribbean profiling domestic violence showed a positive association between STIs and domestic violence. (See figure 1)¹⁰

STI prevalence in women



figure #1

Violence as a result of HIV/AIDS

When women reveal that they are HIV-positive they face the risk of abandonment by their partners, families, and friends as well as violence due to their HIV+ status.

- A study conducted in the U.S. in 2000 showed that 20.5% of HIV-infected women reported physical abuse (OMS, 2000)
- In various studies, some sex workers reported an increase in violence against them by their clients, since clients often blame the sex workers for their contraction of HIV/AIDS. (Propuesta de Proyecto sobre Las redes de atención a la Violencia doméstica y sexual como punto de entrada para el tratamiento y prevención del VIH/SIDA, June 2005, Gender, Ethnicity and Health Unit, PAHO, Washington, DC.)

Next steps

In the 1990s, the Gender, Ethnicity, and Health Unit (GE) developed “The critical path,” a qualitative research protocol which was implemented in several countries in the Region focused on the survival strategies that women used and the institutional responses they found in national health and justice systems, and in their communities in order to overcome domestic violence. During the process of implementing the protocol, integral community care networks were established for women survivors of domestic violence, as well as laws, standards and protocols to address the problem. These networks provide an entry point for the GE Unit, jointly with the HIV/AIDS Unit at PAHO to examine the relationship between sexual violence and HIV/AIDS and establish strategies for promoting the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS among victims of sexual and intra-family violence.

The pilot project will begin in July 2005 in three countries in the Region with the objective of increasing the access to treatment with antiretrovirals and strengthening preventive patterns in female survivors of sexual and domestic violence. For more information about this project, contact Farah Nageer, nageerfa@paho.org, or Dyns Luciano lucianod@paho.org.

CHALLENGES

- The collection of baseline data on the relationship among STIs, HIV/AIDS, and gender based violence
- Integration of interventions for HIV/AIDS prevention and/or treatment into the networks of care for intrafamily and sexual violence
- Education of personnel in formal and informal sectors
- Education of the general population in the countries of the Region

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