

“ If you are going to take care of me and encourage me to produce the next generation, for crying out loud change the traditional mindset and teach me to appreciate myself as part of health service delivery. ”

—Dr. Peninah Ogada, Kenya



UNAIDS/H. Vincent/Weec

The Feminization of AIDS

INEQUITY FUELS SPREAD OF AIDS AMONG WOMEN AND GIRLS

Women and young girls presently comprise more than 60% of those who are living with HIV, and the numbers continue to grow. Yet the global response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic is failing women.

Prevention strategies that focus on abstinence, being faithful and condoms (ABC) do not take into account the societal inequities and human rights violations that make women and girls especially vulnerable to HIV infection. Women lack decision-making power in marriages and societies, face gender-based discrimination, and are too often subject to pervasive violence against women and girls. In addition, the very systems meant to serve the health needs of women mirror the inequities and discriminatory practices of the community at large.

THE PARADOX OF AIDS CARE

The AIDS pandemic has appropriately prompted an international response to what is arguably the greatest health crisis of our time. Yet paradoxically, the emergence of vertical programs that focus solely on AIDS prevention, treatment and care have created healthcare silos that limit access to other essential services and can actually make AIDS prevention and treatment more difficult. We must build on these critical HIV programs by integrating HIV prevention services, counseling and education into all areas of the healthcare delivery system—healthcare services addressing TB, reproductive health, family planning, maternal health, sexually transmitted infections, and trauma care are entry points to the health system for women and girls and can serve as avenues of access to HIV prevention information.

AIDS cannot be prevented or treated in a vacuum and only by giving women access to full healthcare can they enjoy their fundamental right to health.

BEYOND ABC: BUILDING RIGHTS-BASED HEALTH SYSTEMS

The right to health is well established and cited in international covenants, including the UN Millennium Development Goals and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). These covenants recognize the social, economic and cultural determinants of health, and incorporate them into the realization of health goals. Among them, the right to the highest attainable level of health requires governments to provide appropriate and proportionate resources to achieve health goals without discrimination and with universal access.

It is time for the concept of health rights to move out of the academic sphere and become incorporated into health systems' policy and practice. The right to health, in practice, can only be achieved through political will, fact-based policy, adequate and equitable distribution of resources, and an educated and empowered health workforce.

Women are particularly vulnerable to rights abuses in the health system. The right to health requires that health systems be available, accessible, acceptable and of good quality—yet women often face scattered services and incomplete care. To be effective, HIV prevention programs must be comprehensive, scientifically based, and results-oriented, and must actively promote and protect women's human rights.

- HIV prevention strategies must be broad, comprehensive and reflect the realities of women's lives. This means moving beyond ABC.
- The key to fighting AIDS in Africa, preventing maternal and child deaths, and promoting overall health is to build rights-based health systems that provide integrated care.
- Health workers need training to recognize discrimination against women and respond appropriately in terms of health care and referrals to community-based social services.

“ Gender inequality is driving the pandemic, and we will never subdue the gruesome force of AIDS until the rights of women become paramount in the struggle. ”

—Stephen Lewis, former UN Special Envoy for AIDS in Africa

HEALTH ACTION AIDS

The Health Action AIDS Campaign at Physicians for Human Rights mobilizes health professionals to support a comprehensive AIDS strategy and advocates for unprecedented funds and evidenced-based policies to combat the disease. By educating policy-makers about medically and ethically sound initiatives to stem the spread of the pandemic, health professionals can help ensure an effective and sustained US response to the AIDS crisis and save millions of lives worldwide.

Human rights law and professional ethics require patient confidentiality, yet lack of privacy and fear of reprisal or stigma often keep women and girls away from health services. Women seeking care for children and family members should be offered HIV prevention education and information in a confidential and secure manner.

Research has shown that programs with a rights-based focus pay public health dividends in the form of increased service uptake and continuity of care. “Women-friendly” health systems combat stigma and discrimination and provide integrated care with linkages to critical social services.

CRITICAL CONNECTIONS: LINKING HEALTH SYSTEMS AND SOCIAL SERVICES

The right to health mandates that governments address the underlying social determinants of poor health, in addition to ensuring that the health system itself is predicated on the protection of human rights. Yet health systems in developing countries often operate in isolation, and do not provide a bridge between medical care and the social services needed to maintain good health. In order to be effective, health services, including HIV prevention and care programs, need to be linked to community-based services that provide social, economic, educational, and legal protection and empowerment strategies for women. Health systems should require and support ongoing communication between community outreach workers and health workers to ensure follow-up on patient care.

EDUCATED AND EMPOWERED HEALTH WORKERS ARE KEY

An educated and empowered health workforce is an essential element of rights-based health systems. Yet many health workers, themselves products of cultures where gender inequity is the norm, do not get the training or support they need to promote women’s rights and health in their everyday practice.

Healthcare workers need training to realize that women have sexual and reproductive rights, including the right to protect themselves from harm and the right to full and accurate HIV prevention information. In a rights-based health system, health workers are required and encouraged to provide comprehensive HIV prevention messaging and counseling that includes fact-based, non-judgmental discussions of reproductive health, sexual practices and risk behavior. Healthcare workers’ education must include the development of skills needed to identify victims of sexual violence and domestic abuse, and the skills and resources necessary to respond effectively. Appropriate responses include respecting the rights and confidentiality of these patients and making appropriate social service and legal referrals.

Healthcare workers need training to understand the importance of a strong, well-integrated healthcare system that links HIV prevention to all areas of care and services, and they must have access to information regarding community resources that provide social and economic protection for women as well as continuity of essential care and follow-up. Healthcare workers’ education must also include anti-stigma awareness and sensitivity training in order to provide effective and comprehensive HIV prevention and care services.

PHR’s Health Action AIDS Campaign calls on national governments and the international community to provide the financial, strategic and human resources necessary to develop sustainable rights-based health systems that protect and empower women. Health systems must include universal access to prevention of mother-to-child-transmission-plus programs, providing ongoing HIV/AIDS treatment to women and their families. PHR also calls for programs that go “beyond ABC” and provide integrated health services, training in women’s rights for health professionals, and referrals to social services necessary to maintain health.