

EMPOWERING GIRLS TO BEAT HIV/AIDS



Girls are guaranteed the right to health, education and protection from violence, exploitation and discrimination by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women*. When poverty, unequal power relations and lack of services and information increase their risk of HIV/AIDS, these rights are severely undermined.

In 1995, the World Health Organisation said: *“Prevention (of HIV infections), particularly as it relates to the vulnerability of female adolescents and younger girls, should be accorded the highest priority in national strategies.”*

In 2002, the UN General Assembly Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS said, *“...in particular, girls are the most vulnerable.”*

It is now 2004 and how are girls doing?

FACING THE FACTS:

HIV/AIDS TAKES A HEAVY TOLL ON GIRLS

In developing countries the rate of girls’ infection is rising at an alarming rate.

It is reaching or surpassing that of boys in some regions. Of the 40 million people worldwide living with HIV/AIDS, over 50% are women, and 50% of all new HIV infections are among young people aged 15-24. Of these, almost two thirds are girls. In some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, new infections are five times higher for girls than for boys aged 15-19.

Other regions show disturbing increases in the rate of girls’ infection.

In Trinidad and Tobago, it is five times that of boys; in Jamaica it is twice that of older women. In Latin America, the gap between male and female infection rates is rapidly closing. In South Asia, where prevalence rates are lower overall, small percentage increases can represent large absolute numbers. India and Nepal, in particular, are showing disturbing increases among girls and women.

High pregnancy rates also indicate high risk to HIV/AIDS.

For example, about 40% of pregnancies in Latin America and the Caribbean overall occur among girls aged 10-19. In some Indian states, over 80% of prenatal clinic visits are from young women below age 20.

WHY GIRLS ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO HIV/AIDS



Unprotected sex is the most direct and immediate cause of HIV infection. IV drug use is a contributing factor. And entrenched patterns of poverty, violence, unequal power relations and demands placed on girls are also important causes.

Poverty endangers girls' access to health services and good nutrition.

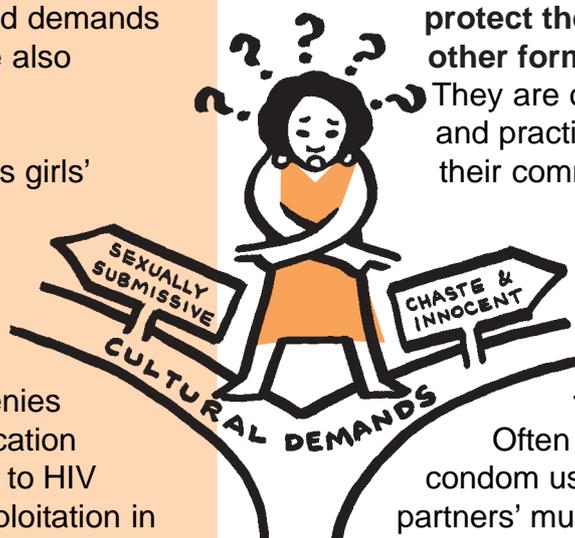
Gender discrimination denies girls' rights to education and exposes them to HIV through sexual exploitation in harmful work settings, such as domestic labour and factories.

Physically, girls are especially vulnerable to HIV infection.

Their vaginal tissues are more fragile than those of adult women, allowing the virus to penetrate more easily.

Girls in many societies have no power to protect themselves from rape, incest and other forms of sexual violence.

They are often unprotected by laws, policies and practices of government as well as by their communities, schools and families.



The widespread practice of age mixing, or girls having sex with older men, including in marriage, hugely increases their risk of HIV infection.

Often girls cannot refuse sex or negotiate condom use and bear the full impact of their partners' multiple sexual encounters. For many girls a 'sugar daddy' seems to offer protection, economic support and stability.

DANGEROUS MYTHS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO HIV INFECTION AMONG GIRLS

- "Unmarried girls are not sexually active"
- "Ignorance about sexual matters is a sign of innocence and purity"
- "Early marriage protects a girl from AIDS"
- "Unprotected sex with a virgin will cure or prevent AIDS in a man"
- "Sex education leads to increased sexual activity"
- "Knowing about or using a condom is a sign of sexual promiscuity"

"We do not have 14-year-old girls sleeping with 14-year-old boys. No, the girls sleep with men who are over 30. They do it out of poverty, to get food to eat."

A Social Worker from Zambia

Girls are often socialized to be chaste and submissive at the same time.

This increases their risk of HIV through sexual compliance and reluctance to communicate their right to say "no" or to discuss their need for safer sex, information and services.

Girls carry a heavy burden of household tasks, especially when they are orphaned. Where they are pulled out of school to work or care for affected families, their life options are reduced. Girls are often forced to survive by providing sex for food or money.

"I understand the importance of using condoms, but I have no income. I have three younger sisters, two brothers and a mother with tuberculosis to take care of. When a businessman from China offered me money to have sex without a condom, I agreed. He told me he had AIDS and that if I were a virgin, he would be cured".

15 Year Old Girl, South Asia

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WHAT GIRLS NEED

- **Education**, including information and vocational and life skills;
- **Support and respect** from families and other adults;
- **Equal status**, treatment and developing skills for gainful work;
- **Access to girl-friendly reproductive health services**;
- **Safety, privacy and protection** from violence, abuse and unwanted sex;
- **Peer support** and social networks;
- **Control over their own bodies**
- **Participation** in decisions about their own lives; and a
- **Role in social change**



WHAT WE CAN DO ● ● ● ● ●

There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to preventing HIV/AIDS. Ensuring girls a safe journey to womanhood requires uncompromising commitment, genuine partnerships, new ideals of masculinity and femininity, resources, and making the safety, healthy development and participation of girls “the highest priority in national strategies.”

NGOs already play a critical role in helping girls reduce their risk of HIV/AIDS. We advocate with governments, mobilize communities, provide services, form coalitions, raise awareness and resources. But we can and must do much more.



Put Girls on the Data Map There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to preventing HIV/AIDS. Ensuring girls a safe journey to womanhood requires uncompromising commitment, genuine partnerships, new ideals of masculinity and femininity, resources, and making the safety, healthy development and participation of girls “the highest priority in national strategies.” NGOs already play a critical role in helping girls reduce their risk of HIV/AIDS. We advocate with governments, mobilize communities, provide services, form coalitions, raise awareness and resources. But we can and must do much more.

Girls are often hidden in data about “young women” aged 15-24, and appear as afterthoughts in the phrase “women...and girls.” HIV data relating specifically to younger girls is virtually non-existent. Girls’ needs are subsumed in the gender-neutral terms ‘children’ and ‘adolescents.’ Risk assessments and programs for young people are often based on boys’ experience as the norm.

An urgent task for all is to collect, analyse and disseminate data that identify the special risk of girls to HIV/AIDS. This includes disaggregation by sex, age and conditions of special risk, such as girls who are pregnant, working in harmful labour situations, living and/or working on the street, in emergency and post-conflict situations, with families affected by AIDS and *all* out-of-school girls. When possible, girls should be involved in designing and evaluating programs on their own behalf.

‘Chatting With My Best Friend’ (*Saathi Sanga Manka Kura*) is a teenage-run weekly radio program in Nepal that discusses personal issues in a frank and entertaining way. It has attracted over three million followers and spawned more than 500 “listener clubs,” which engage in community listening, group discussions, and newsletters to help adolescents protect their sexual health, stop using drugs and alcohol.

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Ensure Economic Equality & Opportunity

Affirmative economic action is critical to level the playing field for girls. NGOs can advocate for laws that equalize inheritance rights and promote policies that provide marketable skills and opportunities for girls. They can promote flexible school hours and establish partnerships with the private sector to provide skilled job training and education for working girls.

Kenya's 'Building Livelihood Options for Adolescent Girls and Boys'

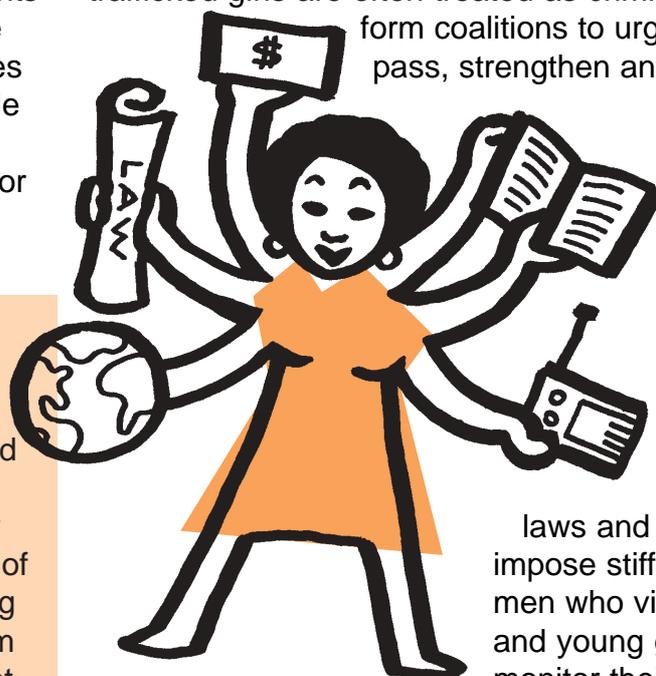
is a partnership between Population Council and K-Rep Development Agency.

Combating the prevailing view that girls are children incapable of making decisions and managing their own business, the program assists out of school adolescent girls with savings and credit programs. Assessment showed their high capacity for responsible savings and management.



Develop and Use Legal Frameworks to Protect Girls

Few laws protect girls from rape, incest and other forms of sexual violence, and those that do are often ignored. Girls are afraid to report rape, and trafficked girls are often treated as criminals. NGOs can form coalitions to urge governments to pass, strengthen and enforce laws and policies that protect girls and their rights, such as prohibiting early marriage and other cultural practices that violate girls' rights and increase their risk of HIV. NGOs can advocate for laws and policies that impose stiff penalties for adult men who violate adolescent and young girls. NGOs should monitor their enforcement and support training for police, judges and other law enforcement officers and teachers. Girls should be supported to give confidential testimony, prepare data and participate actively in processes affecting them.



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Build Partnerships with the Media to Promote Social Change

The media is an effective instrument for social change. NGOs can form partnerships with media to promote behaviour change and create new norms of masculinity and femininity. Celebrities and government officials can denounce men who abuse girls. Girls as well as boys can be shown as leaders, and boys and men shown as faithful partners and nurturing parents. Girls can participate in planning, writing and producing media activities.

A successful peer education program

began by talking about daily lives, gender roles and stereotypes before moving to protection from HIV. Young female factory workers in Thailand did not recognize their own risk because they were not "sex workers." Among the Innovative strategies used by the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts were a romance novel about a young female factory worker who became infected with HIV and comic books that helped girls discuss condom use with boyfriends.

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Mobilize and Provide Education: Skills & Knowledge

Education is the best counter to misinformation and the best means to provide girls with skills, knowledge and opportunities to live their lives free of HIV/AIDS. NGOs should keep advocating for increased access and attendance, especially in secondary school, where the gender gap is often especially high. Emphasis should be placed on permitting and encouraging girls who are pregnant or mothers to attend school.

NGOs can raise awareness and advocate for school safety, nutrition, curricula and training that promote quality education, HIV and reproductive health information and life skills for girls. They can disseminate convincing evidence-based messages to parents and policy makers that timely and relevant sex education, including frank discussions among families, produces delay and safe sex, not experimentation and promiscuity.

NGOs can pressure school authorities to train teachers to be better informed, more comfortable with sex education and respectful of girls. NGOs should see to it that school-based life skills programs address girls' needs, for example, developing their negotiating skills, promoting respect by male peers and parenting classes for both boys and girls.

Many NGOs have special expertise and experience to provide non-formal and life-skills education for out-of-school girls. Targeting programs to their specific needs might include providing street girls or girls in refugee and IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps with food and shelter before approaching them with information about HIV/AIDS and developing trust on which HIV prevention can be based.

Girls should take part in designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programs. Let us ask girls what they want, listen to their answers and facilitate their participation as partners and leaders.

This brochure focuses on factors that increase girls' risk of HIV/AIDS. It suggests solutions to help protect girls and enable them to protect themselves from this pandemic.

It is one of a series to help NGOs protect the needs and rights of girls through action and advocacy.

**Girls are defined as
"all females under the age of 18"**



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Produced by
**NGO Working Group on Girls/
NGO Committee on UNICEF**

3 United Nations Plaza
New York, New York 10017
telephone (212) 326-7713
fax (212) 824-6466
e-mail wggs@girlsrights.org

Visit our website at:
www.girlsrights.org

Other resources:
www.unaids.org
www.unicef.org
www.who.int

Written by: Sara Ann Friedman
Designed by: Regina Doyle