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ESSENTIAL ACTIONS

ON GENDER AND AIDS



This pamphlet draws from Draft Gender Guidance for National AIDS Responses, which was presented to and noted by the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board at its 22nd meeting in April 2008. The guidance was developed in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including representatives of governments, civil society, the UNAIDS Secretariat, UNIFEM and the ten UNAIDS Cosponsors. The draft guidance, which also contains background information and programme priorities for different epidemic settings, will be further refined and adapted through country level pilot and assessment activities over the course of 2008 and 2009.

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Gender Dimensions of HIV	4
Essential Actions: Overview	7
1 : Know your epidemic in gender terms	8
Recommendation 1: Gather adequate and strategic information.....	10
Recommendation 2: Assess the response in gender terms	12
2 : Act to address gender equality in HIV programs	14
Recommendation 3: Integrate gender into national strategy and action plans, including budgeting and allocating funds.....	16
Recommendation 4: Design specific interventions to address the gender dynamics of the epidemic.....	18
Recommendation 5: Measure gender-related outcomes and impacts with appropriate indicators and targets	20
3 : Link action on gender and HIV with broader gender equality goals	22
Recommendation 6: Promote reciprocal capacity building among HIV and gender actors	24
Recommendation 7: Promote gender-related action to achieve AIDS-related and broader gender equality goals.....	26
Conclusion	28

INTRODUCTION

More than 25 years into the AIDS epidemic, gender inequality and unequal power relations between and among women and men continue to be major drivers of HIV transmission. Approximately 60% of the people living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa are women and girls, as are about 50% of people living with HIV worldwide. Intimate partner violence, challenges in negotiating safer sex and other manifestations of gender inequality are closely associated with the risk of women being infected with HIV.¹ Gender inequality and harmful gender norms are not only associated with the spread of HIV but also with its consequences. Women and girls bear a disproportionate burden of responsibility for families affected by AIDS, and women who disclose their HIV-positive status have often faced greater stigma and suffered more extreme negative reactions than men. Gender norms and expectations also influence male sexuality, risk-taking and their vulnerability to HIV. To meet the goal of Universal Access to HIV prevention, treatment and care by 2010 and the Millennium Development Goal of halting and beginning to reverse the spread of HIV by 2015, it is essential that gender inequality is addressed as a central element of our collective response to AIDS.

Essential Actions on Gender and AIDS outlines a series of steps and processes for country-level stakeholders to accelerate and expand action on gender equality in order to strengthen national responses to AIDS. It emphasizes the importance of setting gender and AIDS programme priorities and stresses that these priorities will vary according to the configuration of a country's epidemic and its local contexts. One of the lessons learned in assessing gender and AIDS efforts is that a key feature of effective programming is an understanding of how harmful gender norms and gender inequality contribute to the spread of HIV, and how HIV differentially affects women, men, girls and boys.

Understanding the gender dimensions of HIV from the perspective of planning, programming and monitoring and evaluation, helps to foster a sustainable response to AIDS. Effective action for HIV prevention requires concerted and far-reaching action to challenge and change harmful gender norms and inequality

between women and men, as well as focused action to make community environments safer, especially for young women and girls. HIV prevention also requires addressing how gender dynamics influence people in key populations and at risk groups, such as sex workers and their clients, people who inject drugs, and men who have sex with men and their female partners. Identifying and supporting the needs of discordant couples is also important, as is paying attention to the differential impact of HIV on women and men, either as people living with HIV or as care-givers or family members.

Experience shows that while attention to gender equality and the needs of women and girls is slowly increasing, such activities remain limited, under-funded and not well integrated into national AIDS responses. Gender-related projects are frequently 'added on', rather than firmly anchored within national AIDS programmes. Often there is insufficient connection made between analysis of the gender dynamics driving HIV epidemics and the planning, budgeting and monitoring of AIDS programmes. In this context, three critical challenges stand out:

- Analysing the influence of gender inequality, discrimination and harmful gender norms, both on the dynamics of how HIV is transmitted and on the impact of the AIDS epidemic itself, in order to inform national AIDS strategies, plans and budgets.
- Identifying, selecting, funding and scaling up an appropriate mix of policies, programmes and interventions for particular social and epidemiological contexts, including those that focus specifically on gender and those that integrate attention to gender within other actions, such as targeting programming specifically to girls and boys in efforts to reach at-risk youth.
- Increasing the capacity of National AIDS Coordinating Authorities and partner institutions to effectively plan and implement programmes that address gender dimensions of AIDS, and to build synergy between AIDS programmes and broader gender-equality programmes.

Many of the issues most relevant to women, girls and gender inequality are also pertinent to men who have sex with men, transgender communities, and lesbian, gay and bisexual groups. Some countries choose to include attention to these populations within gender and AIDS analyses and strategies, while others prefer parallel processes in order to ensure adequate resources and attention to their separate needs. Addressing and understanding the specific impact of gender norms in relation to HIV and men who have sex with men is an important aspect of effective programming. Gender norms affect this population directly and also contribute to the broader epidemic because many men have sex with both men and women.

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