

Women, HIV/AIDS and the world of work



Inequality and vulnerability

Over 40 million people are living with HIV/AIDS. Most are working men and women, the mainstay of families, communities, enterprises and economies. The epidemic is changing the labour force and jeopardizing development, with experienced, skilled workers dying, children having to work and an increased burden on women. Discrimination against people with HIV threatens fundamental principles and rights at work, and undermines efforts for prevention and care.

About half those living with HIV are women, but women are now becoming infected at a faster rate than men. In a number of countries in Africa and the Caribbean, infection rates among young women (under 24 years) are two to six times higher than among young men. Many women experience sexual and economic subordination in their personal relationships and at work, and so cannot negotiate safe sex or refuse unsafe sex. Education is also a key defence against infection, but girls are the first to be taken out of school to help with care or to earn needed income.

Twice as many affected households took a girl out of school as a boy, according to a survey in three South African provinces (UNAIDS).

The traditional domestic and nurturing roles of women mean that they bear most of the burden of care - this not only adds to their workload but undermines the vital productive, reproductive and community roles they play.

A 2003 UN Population Division study in Tanzania found that women whose husbands were sick spent up to 45% less time doing agricultural or income-earning work than before illness struck.

The workplace mirrors, and sometimes exacerbates, gender inequalities and discrimination present in society as a whole. Women are often in positions of weakness and dependence at the workplace.

Research in Kenya's export industries found that women experienced violence and harassment as a normal part of their working lives: over 90% of those interviewed had experienced or observed sexual abuse at their workplace (International Labour Rights Fund).

Poverty contributes to the spread of HIV, and women make up the majority of the world's poor, reflecting their more limited access to employment, property, credit and income.

"The greater the gender discrimination in societies and the lower the position of women, the more negatively they are affected by HIV."

(ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work)

"More equal gender relations and the empowerment of women are vital to preventing the spread of HIV infection and helping people manage its impact."

(ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work)

ILOAIDS

The ILO Programme on HIV/AIDS
and the world of work

www.ilo.org/aids

Acknowledging issues, finding solutions

Women face particular problems, including:

- Discrimination, unequal property and inheritance laws, and the lack of education opportunities limit women's income-earning possibilities and help perpetuate inequality between men and women.
- Women who have lost partners to AIDS or who have been abandoned because they are HIV-positive are often deprived of financial security and economic opportunities.
- The impact of poverty forces women to resort to sex for survival or to continue in relationships with men who refuse to practise safe sex.
- The power imbalance in the workplace exposes women to the threat of sexual harassment.
- Women's double burden is intensified when the family is affected by HIV because they have to provide care in addition to maintaining or boosting household income.
- Certain types of work situation may increase the risk of HIV infection:
 - women who travel for their work or who migrate to find work, and the spouses of migrant or mobile workers
 - women who are in a small minority at the workplace
 - female domestic workers, especially those who live at their place of work
 - women in sex work.

Taking action

In many places, women are leading the community response with prevention and care initiatives. Far from being victims, their resilience is inspiring and their efforts should be supported. Action taken to strengthen educational, economic and political opportunities for women, and reduce the obstacles to equality, will also serve to protect them from AIDS and its impact.

Governments, employers, and trade unions have vital leadership roles to play in changing attitudes and practice in the world of work and the community at large. The social factors that disadvantage women - including laws, statutory benefits, taxation, and the lack of child-care provision - must be challenged and changed. Women who are more financially independent will be better able to negotiate the conditions of sexual relationships, and better educated women will be in a stronger position to protect themselves.

Employment policies and practices should be reviewed to address gender inequality in the context of HIV/AIDS by:

- **opposing discrimination** at work and promoting equal opportunities;
- providing **workplace education** for men and women that includes sexual and reproductive health, men's and women's social and economic roles, family responsibilities, working time;
- avoiding **work patterns** that separate workers from their families for prolonged periods and providing facilities for rest and recreation, or family accommodation, as necessary;
- ensuring that **business practices** do not encourage risky behaviour, e.g. encouraging alcohol abuse, entertaining clients through sex services;
- **zero tolerance for violence and harassment against women at work**, making it a disciplinary offence; and
- extending **workplace medical facilities** to the families of workers.

The ILO

The *ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work* stresses that each part of a comprehensive workplace programme on HIV/AIDS covering prevention, care and the protection of rights— needs to be gender-sensitive and include activities for women and men separately as well as together. The Code provides practical guidance for taking action at the workplace. It is complemented by an education and training manual that includes case studies, learning activities, and examples of non-discriminatory laws and policies (with one module specifically covering gender issues).

Additional information

[ILO/AIDS](#) and [ILO/GENDER](#)

[*An ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work*](#)

[*Implementing the ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work: an education and training manual*](#)

Also see the [Global Coalition on Women and AIDS](#) and the [World AIDS Campaign](#).