

# Gender, Health and HIV&AIDS



## ***How Do Gender Inequalities Affect Health?***

“Gender” refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women (*World Health Organization*). These roles and behaviors can have a direct effect on the health of the individual, family and community. Gender inequality and disregard for the rights of women and girls inhibits their access to information, education and services, all of which are violations of their human rights and contribute to their increased vulnerability to ill-health and HIV infection.

In Kenya, 8.7% of women aged 15-64 are HIV positive, compared to 5.6% of men. This disparity highlights the increased vulnerability of women and girls in Kenya to HIV infection, and illustrates the intricate relationship between gender, health and HIV&AIDS.

### **Economic disempowerment:**

Men are often the sole decision-makers in the community, marginalizing women’s social and economic participation. Without access to property ownership and a steady and sustained income, women remain economically dependent on men, with limited power to participate in decisions related to the well-being of the individual, family and community. This limits their access to the information and education necessary to promote their well-being and good health. Young girls are particularly vulnerable to ill-health and HIV infection as a result of marginalization and economic disempowerment, which can lead to sexual and gender-based violence and transactional sex.

### **Violence against women:**

Negative attitudes, behaviors and norms about the role of women in the family and community, as well as stereotypes that encourage male dominance and aggression, contribute to instances of sexual and gender-based violence against women. This dramatically increases women’s vulnerability to ill-health and HIV infection. Not only does sexual violence increase the risk of HIV transmission, but the fear of violence can prevent women from being tested, counseled or treated for HIV&AIDS. Furthermore, weak links between the health system and the legal system prevent survivors of sexual and gender-based violence from reporting their cases to the proper authorities.

### **Negative cultural practices:**

Many cultural practices, deeply embedded within the social fabric of various communities, perpetuate a cycle of disempowerment and poor health for women. Practices such as polygamy, wife inheritance, early and forced marriage, and female and male circumcision subordinate women within individual relationships, familial relationships and participation within the wider community. This limits women’s access to the information, education and services which promote their health and well-being.

### **Inadequate health system:**

The effect of gender inequality at the individual, family and community level on women’s health is further compounded by limited access to health services in Kenya. The lack of adequate infrastructure, health workers and supplies—as well as economic, geographic and social barriers—often prevent women from freely accessing both preventive and curative health services. Furthermore, the availability of women-initiated HIV prevention methods, such as the female condom, is extremely limited in Kenya, leaving HIV prevention largely in the hands of men and eliminating women’s control over their own health.

## ***A System Insensitive to Women’s Needs***

In Kenya, gender inequalities are further enhanced by a legal system that is insensitive to women’s needs and fails to address the specific vulnerabilities of women and girls. Women face many barriers in accessing the legal system, including high court filing fees and inadequate information (*“Women’s Human Rights and the Right to Development in Kenya,” Enricha Dulo*). This affects their ability to seek redress for violations of their rights, perpetuating women’s disempowerment and contributing to the cycle of gender inequality and poor health.

# Strategies to improve gender equality and promote good health

## ***What is the Role of Men and Boys?***

Gender roles also affect men and boys, as stereotypes of male dominance often encourage risky and aggressive behavior that directly affects the health of both men and women. Health promotion and HIV&AIDS prevention strategies that lead to the empowerment of women and girls need to be complemented by increased understanding of male vulnerability and responsibility for changing the status quo.

*(UNAIDS Inter-Agency Fact Sheet on Gender and HIV&AIDS)*



## ***Critical Links with Human Rights***

Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of women and girls is critical to reducing their vulnerability to ill-health and HIV infection. Promoting the empowerment and participation of women also promotes their good health, and that of the entire family and community. Human rights programs have an important role to play, and should be at the fore front in facilitating communities to comprehend the effects of negative perceptions and attitudes of women and girls. Civil society must advocate for women's empowerment, creating awareness among communities and providing a forum for women to demand their rights. With vigorous mobilization, communities can end the harmful attitudes, behaviours and practices that threaten the rights and lives of women and girls.

## ***Strategies for Integrating Gender Egalitarian Attitudes, the Rights of Women and Girls & Health Promotion***



***“There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women.”***

*- Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General*

- Facilitate open exchange and dialogues among the community;
- Include community leaders in forums addressing gender issues;
- Heighten awareness within the community of negative attitudes and practices that increase girls' and women's vulnerability to HIV;
- Integrate the promotion of gender egalitarian attitudes, behaviors and norms into HIV&AIDS prevention strategies;
- Avail women-initiated methods of HIV prevention, such as the female condom, and other reproductive health supplies;
- Promote of sexual and reproductive health and rights;
- Create access to information, education and property ownership for women;
- Include both men and women in strategies aimed at eliminating gender inequality and promoting health;
- Discourage harmful traditional practices; and
- Combat the sexual and economic exploitation of women and girls; and
- Combat stigma and discrimination related to gender, poverty and HIV&AIDS.

*Produced by Health Rights Advocacy Forum (HERAF)  
Muthangari Road, off Gitanga Road, Valley Arcade*

*P.O. Box 100667-00101 JAMIA • Nairobi, Kenya • tel: 020 386 1482/3 • info@heraf.or.ke • www.heraf.or.ke*