

# The Gender Reality of HIV/AIDS<sup>1</sup>

*Unprotected heterosexual sex is the single most important factor in the transmission of HIV worldwide. New infections among women and adolescent girls are rising rapidly and they now make up half of those infected and 60 percent in sub-Saharan Africa. Women are biologically more susceptible to HIV infection. Gender disparities dramatically increase the risks of HIV infection and other adverse outcomes of unprotected sexual intercourse. Global prevention strategies must be based on these gender realities, rather than perpetuating erroneous assumptions about sexual behavior and HIV/AIDS.*

## **Marriage does not protect women and girls from infection**

Evidence shows that marriage is not a protective factor against HIV infection for women and girls. Trends in current data on new infections suggest that the incidence of HIV is rising among married women and girls worldwide. This challenges the logic of prevention strategies that are based on messages of abstinence-until-marriage and monogamy for women and girls.

- Studies from Kenya and Zambia suggest higher rates of infection among young married women (age 15 to 19) than among their sexually active, unmarried (female) peers.<sup>2</sup>
- In South Africa, infection rates among pregnant women ages 25 to 34 are rising. Infection rates have risen to over 35% among pregnant women 25-29. Over 50% of women are married within this age group. The infection rate is about 30%, among pregnant women 30-34. Over 70% of women are married within this age group.<sup>3</sup>
- In Cambodia, a country with the highest HIV prevalence rates in Southeast Asia, prevalence rates among sex workers are dropping, while those among married women are increasing rapidly.<sup>4</sup>
- In India, infection rates among women accounted for 25% of all cases in 2004 and have been rising among married women. Findings from a couple of recent small sample studies suggest that within married women, 80% of infections were among women who were married and monogamous.<sup>5</sup>
- A national survey in Tanzania revealed that 62 percent of married women perceived their greatest risk of HIV infection to be the infidelity of their partners.<sup>6</sup>

## **The majority of adolescents are sexually active**

A large share of adolescents in high prevalence countries are currently sexually active and at immediate and high risk of infection. Sexually active adolescents include both unmarried and married portions of the population. Although average age-at-marriage is rising, significant portions of adolescent girls still marry early thereby becoming sexually active adolescents. About half of all women are married by age 18 in Africa, and almost two-thirds in Asia.<sup>7</sup> In Ethiopia and parts of West Africa, marriage of girls at ages 7 and 8 is commonplace even though the average age at marriage may be higher. For example, and in Kebbi State in northern Nigeria, the average age of marriage for girls is just over 11 years old, while the national average is 17 years.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Center for Health and Gender Equity, adapted version 2006

<sup>2</sup> L. Altman. "H.I.V. Risk Greater for Young African Bride," *The New York Times*, February 29, 2004. UNICEF and UNAIDS conducted studies.

<sup>3</sup> AIDS Epidemic Update, (Geneva: UNAIDS/WHO, December 2003).

<sup>4</sup> UNAIDS. *Cambodia: Epidemiological fact sheets on HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections*. 2002. Demographic and Health Survey 1998

<sup>5</sup> National AIDS Control Organization [India] (NACO) *Surveillance for AIDS Cases in India as Reported to NACO as on 29th February 2004*. 2004. <http://www.naco.nic.in/indianscene/overv.htm>. Rodrigues, et al. "Risk Factors for HIV Infection in People Attending Clinics for Sexually Transmitted Diseases in India." *BMJ* 311, no.7000 (1995); Newman, et al. "Marriage, Monogamy and HIV: a Profile of HIV-Infected Women in South India." *Int J STD AIDS* 11, no.4 (2000); Solomon, et al.

<sup>6</sup> Tanzania Reproductive and Child Health Survey. 1999.

<sup>7</sup> K. Cravero, "Global Context of Women and Girls with Regard to AIDS." Presentation made at the launch of the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS. London, UK. February 2, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> *Child Protection - Early Marriage*, (New York: UNICEF). Accessed online on March 11, 2004 at [http://www.unicef.org/protection/index\\_earlymarriage.html](http://www.unicef.org/protection/index_earlymarriage.html).

<b>Table: Sexual Debut, Marriage and Child-Bearing among Women in Selected African Countries</b>			
<b>Country</b>	<b>Median age of women (25-49) at first sex</b>	<b>Median age of women (25-49) at first marriage</b>	<b>Teens married or unmarried who have begun child-bearing (%)</b>
<b>Uganda (DHS 2000-01)</b>	16.6	17.8	31.4
<b>Kenya (DHS 1998)</b>	16.5	19.2	20.9
<b>Zambia (DHS 2000-01)</b>	16.8	17.8	31.6
<b>Tanzania (DHS 1999)</b>	16.6	18.1	24.5
<b>South Africa (DHS 1998)</b>	18.4	24.2	16
<b>Rwanda (DHS 2000)</b>	20.1	20.7	6.8
<b>Mozambique (DHS 1997)</b>	15.9	17.1	40

Raising the age-at-marriage, which has numerous public health and social benefits, has been a focus of development efforts for some time. However, demographic data on the age at marriage and age of sexual debut suggests that as age-at-marriage rises, the age of sexual debut does not. This is because age of sexual debut does not keep pace with increase in age at marriage. Thus there is a significant portion of sexually active single adolescents as well as sexually active married adolescents.

**Women and girls do not control the timing and frequency of sexual intercourse**

Threat of sexual violence and coercion in primary partner relationships —particularly marriage—has exposed millions of women and girls to the risk of HIV infections due to inability to negotiate safe sex. Violence is regarded as a leading risk factors for HIV infection among women and girls. Poverty and marginalization of women and their families force women and girls into transactional sex, i.e. sex for money, food, household goods, school fees, or other necessities often with men who are often much older.<sup>9</sup>

- Studies show that approximately 49 percent of women in Ethiopia, 40 percent in India, and 52 percent in Nicaragua have experienced violence and coercion at the hands of their husbands. One-quarter to one-half of women who experienced violence by intimate partners were also forced into sex. Many more women do not refuse sex with their husbands for fear of physical abuse.<sup>10</sup>
- Data from the Demographic and Health Surveys indicate that 13 percent of unmarried girls ages 15 to 19 had recently exchanged sex for money or gifts in Zimbabwe, 21 percent in Kenya, 26 percent in Mali, 31 percent in Uganda, and 38 percent in Zambia.
- Young women and girls are at greater risk of rape and sexual coercion from men who perceive them as less likely to be infected and who believe the myth that sex with a virgin can cure a man of infection.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> N. Murray, et al. *The Factors Influencing Transactional Sex Among Young Men and Women in Twelve Sub-Saharan African Countries*. (Washington, DC: USAID Policy Project, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Heise, L., Ellsberg, M. and Gottemoeller, M. "Ending Violence Against Women." *Population Reports*, Series L, No. 11. (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health, Population Information Program in collaboration with CHANGE, December 1999.)

<sup>11</sup>Gender and HIV: *The facts about women and HIV/AIDS*, (Geneva: UNAIDS, January 2001).