

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ACT 77/087/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 289
24 November 2004

Embargo Date: 24 November 2004 00:01 GMT

Violence against women fuels spread of HIV/Aids

Significantly more young women than men are now being infected by HIV/Aids as violence against women and girls fuels the spread of the virus. HIV/Aids is a human rights catastrophe which increasingly affects women, said Amnesty International in the report *Women, HIV/Aids and human rights* published ahead of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

"The increasing spread of HIV/Aids among women and sexual violence are interlinked. If governments are serious in their fight against the disease they also have to deal with another worldwide "pandemic": violence against women," said Amnesty International.

Violence is a key factor in women's risk of contracting the virus. Studies suggest that the first sexual experience of a girl will often be forced and we know that one in five women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime. Traditional practices such as genital mutilation, early marriage, and the practice of newly bereaved widows being "inherited" by other male relatives also increases women's exposure to the virus.

Mass rape and sexual violence in conflicts drives the HIV pandemic, in countries as disparate as the DRC and Colombia. In the DRC tens of thousands of women were raped during the conflict and the health system has completely collapsed with only eight percent of donated blood being tested before use in transfusions. The situation in the war torn region of Darfur in Sudan is likely to go the same way given the similarities of rape and sexual violence again used as a weapon of war. The majority of women in Darfur have also undergone female genital mutilation, a factor increasingly likely to put them at risk of infection.

Stigma is still a serious problem - for both survivors of rape and people living with HIV/Aids. Women often refrain from seeking medical treatment following rape because of the risk that they will be identified as rape victims within their community and ostracized. In Colombia Amnesty International has received testimonies about people from stigmatised groups, including those thought to have HIV/Aids, who have "disappeared", been persecuted or killed.

"In many parts of the world stigma blocks the way for women to access appropriate medical health care and leads to the exclusion of women from families or communities," said Amnesty International.

Where women are denied property and inheritance rights, employment and access to finance, they are forced into dependence on men which places them in a very weak position to assert their rights and protect themselves from violence. Many women and girls also lack awareness of measures required for

self-protection from HIV/Aids. In Ethiopia, for example, some 80% of married young women have had no education and are unable to read. Ensuring access to education including awareness raising about sex, health and HIV/Aids is fundamental to protecting the right of girls and women.

"Discrimination and unequal power relations make it more difficult for women and girls to control their lives and their own sexuality, including negotiating safer sex. Women must be empowered to act effectively in their own best interests," said Amnesty International.

To fight the spread of HIV/Aids governments must take effective measures to:

- Increase awareness of HIV/AIDS and ensure access to anti-retroviral drugs and appropriate medical care
- Stop violence against women
- Ensure education for women and girls, including information about health and sexuality
- Increase economic empowerment of women
- Undertake more effective public information campaigns to fight the stigma about HIV/Aids.

"If a government can't ensure access to adequate health care the international community has a responsibility to contribute material support, Amnesty International added.

Background

The number of people living with HIV/AIDS in 2003 was estimated by UNAIDS to be 35.7 million adults (of whom 17 million were women) and 2.1 million children. An increasing proportion of those infected with HIV/Aids are women. Globally, young women are 1.6 times more likely to be living with HIV/AIDS than young men according to UNAIDS. In Sub-Saharan Africa 57% of adults living with the virus are women, and two thirds of young HIV-positive people are women and girls.

Women are increasingly campaigning effectively for their rights. Grassroots activism by women, including in particular women living with HIV/AIDS, has accelerated in recent years.

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