



ICW VISION PAPER 3

HIV Positive Women, Poverty and Gender Inequality



HIV Positive Women, Poverty and Gender Inequality

- New infections among women are increasing at a faster rate than new infections among men.
- In sub-Saharan Africa HIV positive women outnumber HIV positive men. *(UNAIDS 2003)*
- Many women, especially in rural sub-Saharan Africa, define poverty as their prime concern above all others, including the risk or reality of HIV. *(Wallace 2004)*

Gender inequalities in personal relationships, in the community, within the workforce, and in political circles affect women all over the world. Inequalities increase women's vulnerability to poverty and vice-versa: both impact harshly on our ability to enjoy full human rights. Gender inequality and poverty not only increase the risk of HIV but also leave women more vulnerable than men to its impact. Short-term survival needs force women to develop a range of coping strategies with varying implications for our long-term health and well being. With increasing HIV related ill health and stigma we may be unable to make choices to improve both the health and happiness of ourselves and our families. Moreover, even when women (HIV positive and HIV negative) know the risks, we may not be in a position to practise safer sex.

In my opinion, the problems of positive women are much like those affecting women in general. The main one is that more women on the planet lack power. (ICW European contact from Spain quoted in O'Sullivan 2000)

Sex refers to the biological characteristics that categorise someone as either female or male; whereas **gender** refers to the socially created ideas and practices of what it is to be female or male. (Baden and Reeves 2000)

Livelihoods

Clearly the need for financial support or a livelihood is important for all women. However, an HIV positive diagnosis compounds the problems women face in finding and keeping work. HIV positive women who sell goods may find that people avoid their stall or shop, women farmers may lose access to land, and employers have been known to fire people after an HIV positive diagnosis, sometimes after compulsory testing.

At the same time that I got AIDS, I had my job and they wanted to drive me out. I knew but I did not accept it because I did not want to quit my job. They forced me to have blood taken. Eventually, they drove me to live in this house for AIDS people. (Participant of Thailand Voices and Choices 2003).

I felt like I was falling into a huge abyss because I knew what was going to happen at work. And so it was – they sacked me as soon as they found out and most of my so called friends turned their back on me. [...] My dream, what I was – a nurse known by all, with prestige, loved by everyone – had gone. I fell into a depression and forgot everyone in the world. (Participant from Mexico in Voces Positivas, ICW 2004)



Many women, including HIV positive women, also work in the informal sector. The informal sector may provide flexible opportunities to earn a living. However, when informal sector workers or family members are ill they do not get paid for the work they miss. Moreover, stigma and gender inequality combine to make it difficult to obtain resources and customers for small businesses.

I tried to do a local business but it ended because of stigma. I started selling food, but because people knew my status they did not buy them. [...] because they were things to be eaten people thought they would catch HIV. (Participant of Kampala conference, 2003¹)

Personal relationships

Gender inequality and discrimination against women living with HIV hits personal relationships too. When HIV positive women face abuse from partners and other relatives we are often even less able than other women to assert ourselves. For many of us there may be no possibility of practising safe sex – even if we are aware of the risks. This is especially true for young women who lack the protection of elders and the power and confidence to negotiate safer sex.

Our culture makes it difficult to rescue women. They do what the husband or partner says. They are not autonomous. If he says no, then it is no. (Mexican participant, Voces Positivas)

Our unequal status within families and society means that we are often blamed for 'bringing HIV into the family'. Poverty and inequality means that we are unable to avoid the bad treatment that comes with this blame.

Losing two babies also made my partner worried. Up to this time he had been denying that he might be infected. He started to question how he could be HIV positive and began to blame me for bringing HIV to his life. It did not stop there. He went to his family and told them about my HIV status but neglected to tell them that he was HIV positive too. He warned them that if anything happened to him I would be responsible. (Personal testimony, South African positive young woman, 2003)

Many women fear violence, the loss of access to assets, children and homes. This is particularly the case if we are HIV positive and after the death of our husbands.

I know women in Papua New Guinea who husbands have died and whose in-laws have broken into their homes. I know women who have lost custody of their children, who have lost the pots and pans they use to cook food for their children. (ICW member from Asia Pacific, ICW 2001)

In some societies we find that even though we may be legally entitled to own property in our own name, in practice we can only gain rights to land and other assets through men (usually husbands or fathers).

We suffer, especially us widows. When our husband passes away, you can be tortured by the husband's relatives. They can throw you out, they can remove everything from you. (Participant of Kampala Conference, 2003)

¹ 11th International Conference of HIV Positive People, Kampala, Uganda, October 2003.



Even if we know our rights, we rarely have access to independent legal support. Those women who do get support, for instance from a women's law group or community leader, can often face increased anger and ostracism from relatives. A village head in Birchenough Bridge, Zimbabwe, stopped the in-laws of an HIV positive widow with six children from driving her out. He said they had no right to do so when there were so many children. However, this left the in-laws bitter and angry and so the woman felt that there was no one to help her when she was sick (ICW 2002).

After the loss of a breadwinner, HIV positive women in certain social situations are faced with having to find an income, or secure financial and social security through another relationship. Young women especially face strong pressure to marry older men to secure financial and social security, leaving them with little power to negotiate healthy sexual relationships. Such pressure to seek new livelihoods or maintain existing ones is intensified by their own ill health and the ill health and care of other relatives, including children.

My father was the first one to die [...], my mother gave birth to a healthy baby, but she also got sick. [...] As I was the eldest daughter, I was the one who took over all the duties of looking after the family including my mother and the baby. The baby was like mine and when my mother died I became the breadwinner. As my father had left no pension I had to find ways to look after the family. I had three brothers and one sister. [...] When my young sister was three years, she also became sick and died. There was no other way to find money. I started to have sex with anyone who could give me money. It was not easy for me but I had to do it because I had to find food for my brothers. All the relatives did not want to help us. (Participant of Zimbabwe Voices and Choices, ICW 2002)

Coping strategies

Sex work may be the only possible economic option available to many women.



Yes we can stop sex for money, but what are we going to do to have our needs fulfilled, such as clothes? The problem is lack of employment. (Young woman Malawi, Welbourn 2002)

There are some women whose family knows what kind of work they do but people who come from the country generally don't tell. But when they work for a long time and keep giving money to the family – to build a house, buy the land, pay off debts, when their siblings don't have to go to school in torn clothing any more – then they'll tell the family about their work. They'll tell them bit by bit, so it doesn't come as a huge shock. And they might say, please try to be economical at home because now you know the kind of work we have to do to get this money. (Thai interviewee, ICW 2001)

Women who are involved in sex work generally face greater discrimination.



If we can not afford to feed ourselves how can we afford to travel to the places where decisions are made about our lives.

Women who are involved in sex work generally face greater discrimination than other women because of social ideals about what makes a 'good' woman. Such discrimination can come from women and men, both HIV positive and negative.

Women, young and older, HIV positive and HIV negative, may have to use sex to ensure the smooth running of other livelihood strategies, such as having to offer sex to officials in exchange for being allowed to trade goods. Unfortunately, in some societies, women who act independently and move around more than their peers are labelled as immoral by our communities, making our efforts to earn a secure living even harder.

Border jumping is very risky because if the police get hold of you, you probably have to offer sex. These days when you tell someone that you are a vendor who sells from one country to another it's almost the same as saying you sleep with people. (Participant of Zimbabwe Voices and Choices review workshop)

Investing in the future?

Poverty and gender inequality also limit our access to health care and nutritious food which is not only needed to maintain good general health but also affects the possibility of taking up anti-retrovirals (ARVs).

I wanted to tell young people that this disease is very expensive. For sure the way it is expensive is that I have many diseases; tuberculosis, sexually transmitted infections, coming on and off.

(Participant of Kampala conference)

Now we have ARVs in Kenya, but if people don't have anything to eat, it's letting them down and causes more problems.

(ICW interview, Kenya, June 2004)

Impacts of poverty on children include having to withdraw them from school to help in the home or with income generating activities or because there is not enough money to pay school costs. This is likely to affect girls more than boys as often less value is placed on their education.

The only problem as a single woman is that I do not have a [waged] job, I rent a house, at least I have my business because this disease needs medicine, proper food as well as school fees for my three year old son.

(Participant of Kampala conference)

Yet poverty makes claiming our rights to equality, safe and secure livelihoods and good health almost impossible. If we cannot even afford to feed ourselves how can we afford to travel to the places where decisions are made about our lives?



ICW Call for Action

ICW recognises that gender inequality and poverty both need to be tackled for HIV positive women and their families to thrive. We call for the following:

Support for women's groups:

- Support women's organisations already campaigning for better access to land, property ownership and inheritance rights.
- Support self-help and support groups – as they often help women discover livelihood opportunities as well as providing space to explore and challenge gender inequality.

Economic rights:

- Conduct research into the effectiveness of income generating activities and what specific factors support their success.
- Support strategies designed to increase women's financial independence, such as micro-credit schemes; financial support for carers unable to work and to keep children in education.
- Support the resource, training and capacity-building needs of income generating groups, for instance, management training and how to access resources to invest in equipment and transport.

Workplace policies:

- Involve HIV positive people in workplace policy development and implementation. Policies that promote the retention and employment of HIV positive staff, including women, and ensure that benefits to staff include a range of appropriate care and support, which is not just drug specific.
- Develop a proactive awareness throughout the whole management and staff body, from top to bottom, of the way in which HIV and gender affects all our lives.

Law Reform:

- Review ownership and inheritance laws and promote advocacy work with both women and men at the community level to take note of the impact these laws have on HIV positive women, men and their families.

Work with men:

- Challenge violent and abusive behaviour, to encourage them to recognise that their roles are also governed by gender stereotypes and that gender inequities harm them too.
- Create environments that enable men to support their partners. This includes media campaigns, one-on-one counselling, male peer support groups, and community-wide life-skills programmes.

Examples of work on gender equality and poverty

Developing a shared understanding of inequality

Creacion Positiva is an organisation based in Barcelona, Spain, that works on HIV/AIDS from a gender perspective. By considering the different ways that women and men are affected by gender in all areas of life Creacion Positiva is able to address the complexity of behaviours, ideas, emotions and feelings related to HIV infection. This organisation offers a space for reflection, support and activism.

For more information contact: tel: +34 93431 4548, email: creacionpositiva@eresmas.net.

The Indian Railroad is the world's third largest employer, with over 1.5 million staff.

Vision Paper 3 >>>



Challenging negative stereotypes

The Gender AIDS Forum (GAF) and ICW hosted a National Summit - Confronting marginalisation in the context of HIV/AIDS in Durban, South Africa, 7-8 August 2003. The aim of the summit was to bring together women and men from marginalised groups such as sex workers, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered women and men, refugees, prisoners, and women and men living with HIV to discuss the realities of their lives. Participants created a national advocacy agenda for action on gender and HIV/AIDS in South Africa (Ewing 2003 - report available on ICW website).

Raising awareness among community members

The Stepping Stones training programme on gendered, and inter-generational, communication and relationship skills for all community members, has enabled both older and younger male and female participants, in Africa, Asia and beyond, to work together to reduce household quarrels, increase male involvement in sharing of household tasks and expenditure, write wills to increase the chances of widows' inheritance, reduce and outlaw gender violence, increase respect and support for HIV positive neighbours, reduce numbers of sexual partners and increase condom use within and outside marriage. (www.stepsstonesfeedback.org)

Income generating activities

Yolanda Zaldivar, an ICW member, describes an income generating project in Honduras: *The project proposal was approved. I only asked for 2000 Lempira and for that amount for 11 women. First we approached cooperatives. Unfortunately, none of them accepted us because we were HIV positive but then one said, yes, come over. We all went and explained who we were, and the manager accepted us and explained how to be a part of the cooperative. The women put*

1000 Lempira in the co-op and took away 1000. Each then one decided what she was going to do with her share. One decided to sell vegetables, the other decided to set up a mini pulperia. When they needed more money we negotiated with the donors and received 3000 lempira more. Once there were 20 children in our group who were not studying because of lack of resources. This year, all are in schools.

Now we have developed a second project to train women as machinists to make more school uniforms for orphaned children. In the factories they ask you for an HIV test and if it is positive you don't get the job. So, in our group we said, 'Let's show them that if they trust us PWAs, we can do good work.' We wrote to UNICEF, who approved the project and are now paying for the premises. It is amazing. In our factory there will be only positive women. We are going to show the world that we can succeed. The people of Puerto Cortes are impressed, and they are supporting us. (ICW 2004)

Work place policies

As a result of an initiative by UNIFEM and the Vijaywada division of the Indian Railways, Gender and HIV/AIDS education has been introduced into the curriculum of all the Indian Railway schools. Building upon the existing curriculum on sex education and HIV/AIDS prevention, the introduction of a section on gender and sexuality aims to encourage young people to question existing gender stereotypes, enable young women to negotiate safer sex and promote male sexual responsibility. The Indian Railroad is the world's third largest employer, with over 1.5 million staff and an extensive infrastructure including schools, hospitals and training colleges. (Source: www.unifem.org.au)



References

Ewing, 2003, *Confronting Marginalisation in the Context of HIV/AIDS*, report of the National Summit, Durban, South Africa 7-8 August 2003, GAF/ICW

ICW, 2004, *ICW News Issue 25*, London: International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW)

ICW, 2002, *Positive Women: Voices and Choices*, London: International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW)

ICW, 2001, *ICW News Issue 19*, London: International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW)

Reeves, H., Baden, S. 2000, *Gender and Development Concepts and Definitions*, BRIDGE, Institute of Development Studies (IDS)

O'Sullivan, Sue, 2000, 'Uniting Across Boundaries: HIV positive women in global perspective', *Agenda* No.44

UNAIDS, 2003, *AIDS Epidemic Update 2003*, Geneva: UNAIDS

Wallace, Tina, 2004, *Inform, Inspire, Encourage: A guide to producing effective HIV/AIDS materials*, London: ActionAid International

Welbourn, Alice, 2002, 'Gender, sex and HIV: how to address issues that no one wants to hear about', in Cornwall, Andrea and Welbourn, Alice, 2002, *Realising Rights: Transforming Approaches to Sexual and Reproductive Well-being*, London: Zed Press

ICW research programmes and workshops mentioned in this Vision Paper

Voices & Choices Zimbabwe, 2002, and Voices and Choices Thailand, 2003

A project led by positive women to explore the impact of HIV on their sexual behaviour, well being and reproductive rights, and to promote improvements in policy and practise.

Voces Positivas – process of empowerment and training for HIV positive women from Central America and the Caribbean, 2003.

ICW Vision Papers (2004) have been written for HIV positive members and our supporters to use when advocating and organising around ICW's visions, aims, and objectives. In them you will learn what ICW's positions are and be able to represent ICW well at any meetings or in any groups you attend, or if you are asked in any circumstances to explain what ICW stands for. They are meant as an aid to your own work and can be used creatively. ICW welcomes your feedback and evaluation of its vision papers. Please tell us how you have been able to use them. We'd love to hear from you.

This Vision Paper on gender inequality and poverty one of five ICW Vision Papers. This series outlines ICW's position on: access to care and treatment; participation and policy making, gender equity and poverty; human rights; and HIV positive young women. They are available in English, Spanish and French.

ICW is very grateful to The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) for funding this series and Aids Fonds Netherlands for funding reprints - project number 2005067.



We would also like to thank Novib, Positive Action and Comic Relief for core funding.

The International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW), a registered UK charity, is the only international network run for and by HIV positive women. ICW was founded in response to the desperate lack of support, information and services available to women living with HIV worldwide and the need for these women to have influence and input on policy development.

All HIV positive women can join ICW for free. Just contact us – details below.

International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW)

Unit 6, Building 1
Canonbury Yard
190a New North Road
London N1 7BJ
UNITED KINGDOM

Tel +44 20 7704 0606
Fax +44 20 7704 8070
Email info@icw.org
URL www.icw.org



ICW is the convening agency for the treatment and care arm of the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS.

ICW is registered in the UK as a company limited by guarantee with charitable status. Company No 2987247 Registered charity No 1045331