

DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS  
POPULATION DIVISION

# **HIV/AIDS: AWARENESS AND BEHAVIOUR**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



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## Executive Summary

Twenty years into the human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) pandemic, social and behavioural research on HIV/AIDS remains limited. Data on sexual behaviour and AIDS-related knowledge and attitudes are sparse and difficult to compare. The present publication, prepared by the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, relies primarily on a unique source of information to document AIDS awareness and AIDS-related behaviours, namely, the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS). The Surveys contain a wealth of data on HIV/AIDS which until now was not disseminated to a wider audience.

This publication, which is being released on the occasion of the first anniversary of the special session of the United Nations General Assembly on HIV/AIDS (25-27 June 2001), highlights findings from a series of national Demographic and Health Surveys that are directly relevant to the AIDS epidemic. It provides a picture of HIV- and AIDS-related awareness and behaviour across countries and population groups, age and gender. Information about risk-related behaviours, their determinants and the context within which they occur has direct relevance to the effective targeting of AIDS prevention efforts.

According to data from 39 African, Asian and Latin American countries:

- The level of awareness of AIDS is generally high. In over half of the countries, at least 90 per cent of the female population have heard of AIDS, and in more than three fourths of the countries, at least 90 per cent of the male population have heard of the disease. However, awareness remains low in a few countries. In Bangladesh and Nepal, less than one in three ever-married women have heard of AIDS;
- In most countries, awareness of AIDS is higher among men than women. This gender gap reaches 34 percentage points in the Niger and 28 percentage points in Chad. Also striking are the gender differences in AIDS awareness in Bangladesh (19 percentage points), Benin (13 percentage points), Eritrea (17 percentage points), Mali (19 percentage points), Mozambique (12 percentage points) and Nigeria (15 percentage points);
- Awareness grows with the incidence of HIV/AIDS. In 12 countries where HIV prevalence exceeds 5 per cent, awareness has reached at least 90 per cent, whereas in 2 countries where prevalence is less than 1 per cent, less than half the female respondents are aware of AIDS;
- Urban residents are much more aware of AIDS than rural populations are. In all but three countries, the level of awareness among women in urban areas reaches 93 per cent. The differential between rural and urban knowledge is enormous in several countries, including Bangladesh, Bolivia, Chad, Eritrea, Guatemala, Indonesia, Nepal and Peru;
- More education is associated with greater awareness and better knowledge. In most countries, nearly all respondents with at least a secondary education have heard about AIDS. In 31 out of 34 countries for which data are available, at least 95 per cent of the most educated female respondents knew about AIDS;

- In some countries, the differentials between the more and less educated respondents are striking. In Indonesia, for example, 88 per cent of the most educated group are aware of AIDS, compared with only 14 per cent of those with no education;
- However, where national awareness is very high, even those with no education have heard of AIDS. In 14 countries with high awareness, 90 per cent or more of those with no education have heard of AIDS. In Brazil, Malawi, Uganda and Zambia, fully 98 per cent of those with no education say they know about AIDS;
- Radio is by far the most often cited source of knowledge about AIDS. About half of the female respondents and more than 7 in 10 male respondents have heard about AIDS on the radio. Also striking is the fact that in many countries, men are far more likely than women to have heard about AIDS on the radio;
- Second only to radio, friends and relatives prove to be one of the most important sources of AIDS information in many countries. At least 50 per cent of female respondents in 10 African countries say they have heard of AIDS from friends or relatives;
- Schools and teachers appear to play little of a role currently in AIDS awareness. In many countries—particularly those with low levels of AIDS awareness—schools and teachers are mentioned by fewer than 10 per cent of respondents;
- Among those who have heard of the disease, a large majority of female respondents know that people who have the disease almost always die of it. In some countries, however, a substantial minority do not hold this belief. In Colombia, Jordan and Mozambique, about a quarter of the respondents think that AIDS is almost never or only sometimes fatal;
- In many of the countries surveyed, a majority of female respondents who know about AIDS are aware that a healthy-looking person can have AIDS and that a period of years may elapse before an infected person shows signs of illness;
- While, globally, at least three fourths of respondents know about mother-to-child transmission, in some countries, many women who know they are HIV-positive still wish to become pregnant;
- In practically all countries surveyed, including those where HIV prevalence is high, at least two thirds of female respondents and 8 of 10 male respondents said that they are either at no risk at all or at small risk of getting AIDS. In none of the countries surveyed, does the level of education make a significant difference in the responses;
- Women have a somewhat higher risk perception than men. Male respondents to the surveys are more likely than women to believe that they are at low risk of getting HIV/AIDS and only a minority of couples share a similar perception of risk;
- In all countries, a large majority of respondents who had heard of AIDS knew at least one way to avoid sexual transmission of the disease. Still, in half the countries surveyed, including some countries where HIV/AIDS prevalence exceeds 5 per cent of the adult population, one quarter to one third of female respondents know of no way to avoid getting AIDS;

- At least 8 in 10 men—and often 9 in 10—know of at least one sexually transmitted infection. Similar levels of knowledge are reported for women in a few countries: Brazil, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. However, in other countries, about half the female respondents do not know that they can get a disease through sexual contact;
- Using a condom and having only one sexual partner are the two safe behaviours most often mentioned by respondents who knew about the sexual transmission of HIV;
- In all countries surveyed, a large majority of men, ranging from 60 to 90 per cent, reported that they had changed their behaviour to avoid AIDS. In contrast, in only half the countries have a majority of female respondents made a behavioural change;
- Among those respondents, whether male or female, who did change their behaviour, the most frequently cited change had entailed confining sexual activity to one partner;
- Only a small percentage of respondents began using condoms to prevent HIV transmission. Fewer than 8 per cent of women in all countries surveyed report that they have changed their behaviour by using condoms. Among married women, the percentages are particularly low. Figures are usually higher for men, ranging between 15 and 25 per cent in most countries.

The Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS<sup>1/</sup> adopted at the special session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS, held in June 2001, acknowledged that prevention of HIV infection must be the mainstay of responses to the epidemic. The results from this study highlight the enormous challenges lying ahead in the prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS campaigns have significantly raised awareness and knowledge of the infection, particularly in urban areas. Key messages on HIV prevention have reached out to individuals at risk, as evidenced by changes in their sexual behaviour. At the same time, the scope for improving policy intervention looks daunting. Prevention measures that are promoted globally are often at odds with what couples perceive as acceptable strategies to protect themselves within their own social and family environment. And, in countries where large families are the norm, the promotion of safer sexual behaviour comes up against the desire for more children. In sum, existing programmes have done little, so far, to adequately inform the vast majority of couples who live in the rural areas of many African and Asian countries.

Clearly, dramatic changes in sexual and reproductive awareness and behaviour in many less developed countries are needed in order to defeat the HIV/AIDS epidemic. As the Secretary-General of the United Nations indicated in his statement on 20 July 2001 to the conference of G-8 heads of State in Genoa, Italy (SG/SM/7895: AIDS/31), the first priority is “to ensure that people everywhere—particularly the young—know what to do to avoid infection”.

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<sup>1/</sup>General Assembly resolution S-26/2, annex.