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Fact Sheet

World AIDS Campaign 2001

“I care ...do you?” is the slogan of the World AIDS Campaign 2001. In line with the ‘Men Make a Difference’ theme of 2000, the Campaign spotlights the many ways in which men contribute to the AIDS epidemic and the powerful roles they can also play in tackling it. As the slogan implies, this year’s campaign challenges men everywhere to make a difference in the struggle against AIDS.

- All over the world, women find themselves at special risk of HIV infection because they lack the power to determine where, when and how sex takes place. But the same expectations, cultural beliefs and social customs of men that so disempower women also heighten men’s own vulnerability. HIV infections and AIDS deaths among men outnumber those of women on every continent except sub-Saharan Africa. The younger the men are, the more they are at risk: men under 25 years of age make up about a quarter of the 36.1 million people currently living with HIV/AIDS.
- Curbing the AIDS epidemic demands that harmful notions of masculinity be reshaped, along with the many common attitudes that shape how boys are socialized to become men and how men regard risk. The customary association of manhood with physical strength, emotional indifference, virility and daring can translate into behaviour that threatens the health and well-being of men and their sex partners. At the same time, men can play a powerful role in tackling AIDS.
- Research shows that people generally maintain behavioural patterns that they learn at an early age. It is therefore easier to achieve the goal of 100% condom use if young men adopt that behaviour as soon as they become sexually active. Given the appropriate information and life skills, boys and young men can be empowered to make responsible and healthy choices that include abstinence and delayed sexual activity, as well as safer sex.
- The World AIDS Campaign’s emphasis on men also reflects the fact that men are less likely to seek health care than women. In all but a handful of countries, men have a lower life expectancy at birth and experience higher death rates during adulthood than women. Yet, boys are often brought up to think of themselves as impervious to illness or risk. Real men, they are led to believe, don’t get sick. The Campaign sets out to ensure that the health needs of men (including those living with HIV and AIDS) get the attention they deserve—not least from men themselves.

Drawing men into the struggle against AIDS

- Men have to become more involved in the fight against AIDS. Over 70% of HIV infections worldwide occur through sex between men and women, and 10% through sex between men. Approximately 5% of infections occur among people who inject drugs—four-fifths of them men. All over the world, men tend to have more sex partners (as well as extramarital partners) than women, thereby increasing their own and their primary partners' risk of contracting HIV. The secrecy, stigma and shame associated with HIV further compound matters, since they discourage men and women from discovering or even acknowledging their HIV-positive status.

Dangerous behaviour

- Some circumstances place men at especially high risk of contracting HIV. Men who migrate for work and are separated from their families may pay for sex and use substances, such as alcohol, to cope with the stress and solitude. That combination increases their risk of infection. So does the culture of risk-taking that tends to characterize predominantly male environments like the military. In all-male institutions such as prisons, men who otherwise prefer women as sex partners may have unsafe sex with other men. In a world of AIDS, this can be deadly.
- Male violence is an important factor in the spread of HIV through the displacement of communities by wars and civil conflict, as well as through coerced sex. Each year, millions of men commit sexual violence against women, girls and other males—often in their own family or household. According to a UNICEF report, worldwide at least one in three women will, in their lifetime, be beaten, sexually assaulted or otherwise abused.

Challenges ahead

- Part of the answer lies in men emerging from behind their veils of silence and fortitude. Men—especially those who lead countries, religious organizations, communities and businesses—need to speak out as friends, parents, partners and citizens. They need to lead by example.
- By focusing on men, the World AIDS Campaign challenges leaders and role models—from politicians to sports stars and entertainers—to affirm and demonstrate their commitment to fight AIDS. It offers them a platform to do so and provides avenues for supporting prevention and care programmes around the world.
- But a balance must be struck between recognizing how men's behaviour contributes to the epidemic and building on their potential to make a difference. As politicians, entertainers, pioneers, frontline workers, fathers, sons, brothers, partners and friends, men have much to give. Their capacity for nurturing and caring within the community needs to be encouraged. Similarly, they need to be prompted to take a much stronger hand in caring for their partners and families—a responsibility that is magnified by an AIDS epidemic that has robbed more than 13 million children of their mother or both parents.
- None of this suggests an end to prevention programmes for women and girls. Rather, the Campaign complements those endeavours by recognizing that until men everywhere dare to care, the struggle against HIV/AIDS will only be half-won.