


**UNITED NATIONS
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ON HIV/AIDS**

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Fact Sheet

HIV/AIDS and the world of work

Most of the 36.1 million people infected with HIV are in the prime of their working lives. The effects are momentous—not just on workers and their families, but on enterprises and entire national and regional economies. AIDS has become a crucial workplace issue and a massive development challenge.

Employment and labour market implications

- It is estimated that at least 23 million workers aged 15-49—the most productive segment of the labour force—carry the HIV virus. It is devastating the lives of individuals, their families and communities. In the most affected countries, the epidemic is undermining decades of development gains. It is a real threat to social and economic progress.
- HIV/AIDS hits the world of work in numerous ways. In badly affected countries, it cuts the supply of labour and slashes income for many workers. Increased absenteeism raises labour costs for employers. As illness forces workers to leave their jobs, valuable skills and experience are lost. Often, a mismatch between human resources and labour requirements is the outcome.
- Along with lower productivity and profitability, tax contributions also decline, while the need for public services increases. National economies, especially in badly affected regions like sub-Saharan Africa, are being weakened further in a period when they are struggling to become more competitive in order to weather the challenges of globalization.

HIV/AIDS and basic worker rights

- AIDS threatens fundamental principles and rights at work and undermines efforts to provide women and men with decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. Many affected by HIV/AIDS have no social protection or medical help. The poor suffer disproportionately.
- Discrimination against HIV-positive persons (or even people suspected of carrying the virus) worsens existing inequalities in society. Screening people for HIV infection, in order to bar them from work, deny them promotion or exclude them from social protection and benefits, counts as AIDS-related discrimination. So do breaches of confidentiality or the refusal to establish alternative workplace arrangements for workers with HIV/AIDS.
- As the epidemic strikes families and households, more children are forced out of school and into child labour, often into exploitative and extremely hazardous forms of work. Young female orphans are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Women, work and AIDS

- Gender inequality—linked to patterns of social, economic and cultural inequality—makes women more vulnerable to infection. As the epidemic spreads, women are faced with the double burden of having to work and cope with the additional responsibilities of providing care and support to family and community members who fall ill.
- Most women are still confronted with limited access to secure livelihoods and socioeconomic opportunities. As a result, their dependence on male partners—and their subsequent vulnerability to circumstances that may carry risks of HIV infection—increases.
- Research suggests that men working in occupations that involve spending long periods away from their families are more likely to engage in unsafe sex. This also increases the risks that their partners might become infected with HIV.

It covers the protection of workers' rights (including employment protection, gender equality, entitlement to benefits and non-discrimination on the basis of HIV status). And it deals with the challenges of care and support (including confidential voluntary counselling and testing, as well as treatment in settings where local health systems are inadequate).

The ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work

- In June 2001, the International Labour Organization adopted a Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work. The fundamental aim of the Code is to help safeguard conditions of decent work and protect the rights and dignity of workers and all people living with HIV/AIDS.
- The Code is intended to help prevent the spread of the epidemic, mitigate its impact on workers and their families, and provide social protection that can help them cope with the disease. The Code provides practical guidance to governments, employers and workers' organizations (as well as other stakeholders) for developing national and workplace HIV/AIDS policies and programmes.
- The Code addresses several important issues, including preventing infection through information, education and gender-awareness programmes, and by promoting behaviour change.