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The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality

Written statement submitted by

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The Role of Men and Boys in achieving Gender Equality

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Engaging men and boys as partners in the fight against HIV/AIDS

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is far from over with more than 40 million people worldwide now living with HIV/AIDS. In 2003, there were 5 million new infections, more than 3 million people died of AIDS and more than 14 million children have been orphaned, a number projected to increase to 25 million by 2010 – the highest numbers ever.

For the first time in 2002, more women than men became infected. Globally, close to 50% of people living with HIV/AIDS are women, and in some areas of sub-Saharan Africa with older epidemics, the proportion of women infected is even higher than 50%.

The gender dimensions of the epidemic must be understood and addressed. Women bear an increasing burden of both HIV infection and care in their role as traditional caregivers. Many women learn about their HIV status when they are pregnant, yet their male partners remain untested. A 2003 review of progress made on meeting the goals in the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS, adopted at the General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS in 2001, showed that one third of countries lack policies that ensure women's equal access to prevention and care services.

Until recently, discussions on gender aspects of HIV/AIDS have mainly focused on the vulnerability of women and treating men as a problem. Similarly, reproductive health interventions have focused almost exclusively on women, neglecting the role of men. In reality, there is a great need for more focus on the social services offered to men and fathers, including the areas of education, sexual and reproductive health.

The response to AIDS must be about women *and* men alike. All too often, silence between men and women about sexual matters results in failure to use prevention.

The spread of HIV-infection is in many cases directly related to women's disempowerment, and prevailing stereotypes about appropriate behaviour for women and men.

While biological factors contribute to the behavioural differences between men and women, in every society, men's conduct is determined at least in part by expectations as to how men should act -- expectations often shared by women as much as men. Ideas about "manhood" evolve over time. They differ from culture to culture and within cultures. Education, age, upbringing and income all influence the role that men are expected to play.

For instance, studies from around the world show that men on average have more sex partners than women. This means that a man with HIV is likely to pass the virus on to a greater number of people than a woman, especially since for biological reasons HIV is twice as easily transmitted sexually from a man to a woman, than from a woman to a man.

Fearing violence from their partners and ostracism from the community, women remain silent when they learn about their HIV infection, thereby depriving themselves of care and support and the capacity to reduce the risk of transmitting the virus to their children. When their husbands die, they are often left alone caring for the children. Being conceived as having brought shame to their husbands' family, they are in many cases being refused property and inheritance rights, and expected to fend for their family without any support.

Research suggests that when fathers and other male family members offer a positive role, boys develop a more flexible vision of manhood and are more respectful in their relationships with women. But all members of the family have an important role in raising boys. Mothers often reinforce traditional ideas about manhood by showing that they do not expect sons to do household chores or express their emotions. Relatives, teachers and other adults may worry more about the sexual behaviour of girls, leaving boys to explore their sexuality on their own.

Over 70% of HIV infections world wide are estimated to occur through sex between men and women. A further 10% can be traced to sexual transmission between men. In addition, over 5% of infections are estimated to result from the sharing of needles and syringes by people who inject drugs, 80% of whom are men. The use of recreational drugs, like alcohol, is associated with increased risk taking, including unsafe sexual activity. And world wide, men are more likely than women to use such substances.

Additional challenges for HIV prevention arise from traditional expectations that men should take risks, have frequent sexual intercourse (often with more than one partner) and exercise authority over women. These expectations may encourage men to force sex on unwilling partners, to reject condom use and to view risk behaviour as manly.

Men need to be challenged to be more responsible and honest with regard to relationships and sexuality, and help empower women to take more control of their own sexuality.

Men's sexual and intimate relationships with women vary tremendously within and between countries. Some men and women live their lives in respectful and mutually faithful relationships. Other men have a regular female partner and also engage in occasional sex with other women -- or men. In some parts of the world, formal or informal polygamy-- in which a man has more than one wife or regular female partner -- is common.

Globally, men are more likely than women to have extramarital sex partners, which increases their own and their partners' risk of contracting HIV. Most men do not talk openly about their outside encounters to their wife or partner, and may react with anger or even violence if questioned about them or asked to use condoms. Risk is also increased by the stigma and shame that surround AIDS. Both factors stifle discussion within couples about preventing transmission of HIV.

Due to the stigma and discrimination associated with sexual relations between men, many bisexual and homosexual men choose to hide this aspect of their life from society by getting married or having girlfriends. This does not mean that they stop engaging in sex with other men. This segment of the population is very hard to reach with information and prevention activities, and the culture of denial puts both themselves and their female partners at risk of infection.

Millions of men are sexually violent towards women and girls. Sexual violence, or the threat of it, is common in situations of war and conflict, trafficking in women, and regular sex work - but it also happens inside households, and marital rape is seldom recognized as a crime in national legislation. Even where support services exist for victims of domestic and sexual violence, there are seldom services available for the male perpetrator to help stop the violent behaviour. It is important to protect and support victims of violence, but equally important to remove the source of the violence, so the act will not be repeated.

Even when violence is not a factor, research from all over the world shows that men are more able than women to influence how sex takes place. Women are often not in a position to choose to abstain from sex or insist on condom use. Even women who seek sex on their own terms may still find themselves disempowered when it comes to prevention. All this must change if women and men are to achieve greater equality in their sexual relationships, and if both are to be able to contribute to HIV prevention and care.

Women and girls are disadvantaged by society in a number of ways that men are not. HIV and AIDS make these inequities worse and life threatening. Women face particular challenges in the area of access to property rights, through limited access to education, limited access to care and treatment, and when violence against women are tolerated.

Persuading men to change attitudes and behaviours will have a major impact on the rate the infection is spreading and in improving the lives of their families and partners. Emphasizing the important role of fatherhood is one avenue for encouraging men to reflect about the consequences of their sexual behaviour, and their responsibility in keeping their partners and children free of infection. They need to bear in mind that their children will be orphaned if they and the mother die of AIDS. How might men as fathers be motivated to keep themselves safe and uninfected for their children's sake? Or, if they already suspect or know they have HIV, motivated to protect their wife and children from the virus?

A differentiated approach to HIV/AIDS prevention has gradually emerged, emphasising the role of men and boys as part of the solution. This was illustrated by the World AIDS Campaign in 2000-2001 "Men make a difference", emphasizing men as a positive force, and the role men play is increasingly influencing HIV/AIDS prevention strategies.

It is important to see men as part of the solution, and encourage their potential for being positive role models. Given the urgency of curbing HIV rates, activities with a focus on men and boys need to be scaled up dramatically. Men need also to be encouraged and helped to play a much greater part in caring for orphans and sick family members. Even though the outcomes may take years to materialize, it is important to challenge harmful concepts of masculinity, including the way adult men look on risk and sexuality and how boys are socialized to become men.

Engaging men and boys as partners in the effort against AIDS is critical in order to change the course of the epidemic. While men's behaviour currently contributes substantially to the spread and impact of HIV, as well as putting themselves on the frontline of risk - such behaviour can change.