

ActionAid International is committed to addressing the causes and consequences of violence against women and HIV&AIDS. We call for concerted and protracted action from all actors in societies across the world, to deal with the cultural, legal, political, social and economic issues at stake.



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■ Trafficking of women and girls makes women vulnerable to HIV&Aids

Human trafficking has been recognised as the third most profitable illegal global trade after drugs and arms. Although men and boys are also trafficked, a large majority of those trafficked are women and girls. Most of them are sold into prostitution.

Women and girls face violence before, during and after they have been trafficked. Increasingly research shows that a significant cause of trafficking is domestic violence. Either women become vulnerable to traffickers because they want to escape abusive situations or their being sold to traffickers is the end product of continuing violence at home.

Trafficking in women and girls

- Four million women and girls are trafficked annually. (United Nations)

Although a majority of women are trafficked into prostitution and subjected to systematic violence, it is important to recognise that women trafficked for domestic work are also abused and harassed. Their illegal status in foreign countries gives traffickers and employers near-total control over their labour and bodies. Moreover, the violence inherent to, and insecurity of their work inhibits them from demanding safe sex from their clients and makes them vulnerable to HIV&AIDS.

Violence and HIV&AIDS in prostitution

A five country study of people in prostitution (South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, USA, and Zambia) states:

- 62% reported having been raped in prostitution
- 73% reported having experienced physical assault in prostitution.
- 92% stated that they wanted to escape prostitution immediately. (Farley, et al, 1998)

■ Violence against women during conflict makes women vulnerable to HIV&AIDS

Violence against women during conflict has reached epidemic proportions. Mass rape of women and girls is used systematically and strategically by warring groups. Rape and torture of women and girls is being used as an 'effective' weapon of war and cannot be seen as an unfortunate by-product of it.

Rape as a weapon of war

- In the Democratic Republic of Congo, 5 000 cases of rape, corresponding to an average of 40 a day, were recorded in the Uvira area by women associations since October 2002 (UN 2003).
- In Rwanda between 250 000 and 500 000 women, or about 20% of women, were raped during the 1994 genocide (International Red Cross report, 2002).
- In Sierra Leone 94 % of displaced households surveyed had experienced sexual assaults, including rape, torture and sexual slavery (Physicians for Human Rights, 2002).
- In Iraq at least 400 women, and girls as young as eight were reported to have been raped in Baghdad during or after the war, since April 2003 (Human Rights Watch Survey, 2003).
- Every 14 days a Colombian woman is a victim of forced "disappearance" according to a 2001 report by the Women and Armed Conflict Work Table (UNIFEM 2001).
- In Bosnia and Herzegovina 20 000 to 50 000 women were raped during five months of conflict in 1992. (IWTC, 2002).
- In some villages in Kosovo, 30% to 50% of women of child-bearing age were raped by Serbian forces (Amnesty International, 1999)

As a result of conflict and consequent displacement, women are physically and economically forced to become prostitutes and/or have transactional sex, in order to secure the basic necessities for their families. War impacts further on women; with women and children accounting for the majority of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Conflict affects women disproportionately making them vulnerable to HIV&AIDS. Interlinked and mutually reinforcing factors of mass rapes, sexual assault, breakdown of law and order, flight from home, loss of livelihood and family, and the absence of health care and prophylaxis, make women frighteningly vulnerable to HIV infection. Repeated sexual assaults and gang-rapes accentuate the risk of transmission. In Rwanda, during the 1994 genocide, hundreds of thousands of women were raped, many by men who were HIV-positive (Amnesty International). The eastern border of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is thought to be on the verge of a major HIV epidemic. Some 60% of the militia who roam the countryside raping, torturing and mutilating thousands of women and girls are believed to be HIV-positive, and virtually none of the women have access to services and care (HRW).

■ Inadequate law and enforcement makes women vulnerable to HIV&Aids

Of the many forms of violence that plague women and girls increasing their vulnerability to HIV&AIDS, some are tactically allowed, accepted and condoned as traditional, hence 'normal' practice.

Violence against women and legal structures

- Around 20% to 70% of abused women never told another person about the abuse until being interviewed for the study by WHO (WHO, 2002).
- In South Africa, the conviction rate for rape remains low at an average of 7%. Only a third of the estimated number of rapes was reported in 2003 (Police Annual Report for the year ending March 2003).
- In Egypt, 47% of physically abused women never told anyone (WHO 2002).
- In Chile, only 3% of all raped women report to the police (WHO 2002).
- In Bangladesh, 68% of women never told anyone about being beaten (WHO 2002).
- In 2003 at least 54 countries had discriminatory laws against women (report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women).
- In her 1994-2003 review, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women highlighted problems of law enforcement in almost all of the reviewed states.
- 79 countries have no (or unknown) legislation against domestic violence (UNIFEM, 2003).
- Marital rape is recognised specifically as a crime in only 51 countries (UNIFEM, 2003).
- Only 16 nations have legislation specifically referring to sexual assault, while as few as three have legislation that specifically addresses violence against women as a category of criminal activity in itself (Bangladesh, Sweden and USA) (UNIFEM 2003).
- So called "honour" defences (partial or complete) that justify violence against women are found in the penal codes of Peru, Bangladesh, Argentina, Ecuador, Egypt, Guatemala, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Venezuela (UN 2002).

Child marriage, female genital mutilation, wife-inheritance, rape as community-imposed retribution; the list goes on. Despite preventative legislation these practices carry on unreported and/or unpunished. The result; impunity of aggressors, continued violence and increased vulnerability to HIV&AIDS for women.

Violence against women, in general, goes unreported because survivors fear retribution, loss of children, economic and emotional sustenance, and little access to redress. In addition, some states have no laws at all, while others have flawed laws, which may punish some forms of violence but exempt others. Even with appropriate legislations in place, many states fail to implement the laws fully.

A fighting chance

This year, the international theme for the 15th annual 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence is "For the Health of Women. For the Health of the World."

The theme couldn't be more appropriate as evidence explicitly linking the HIV&AIDS pandemic and gender violence mounts; and it becomes clear that analysing this evidence is key to giving women a fighting chance to combat the aggression they confront everyday.

However, before analysing how gender violence is both a cause and a consequence of the pandemic, it is important to understand exactly what gender violence is and to lay bare the facts of women's physiological vulnerability to the disease.



FIGHT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
FIGHT HIV&AIDS

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