



A UNAIDS Initiative

**The Global Coalition  
on Women and AIDS**

**Media backgrounder**

## **AIDS AND GIRLS' EDUCATION**

Girls are less likely than boys to attend school for many of the following reasons:

- Parents are more likely to spend limited funds on educating a boy
- Many families do not understand the benefits of educating girls, whose role is often seen as being prepared for marriage, family and domestic responsibilities
- Girls in many communities are already disadvantaged in terms of social status, lack of free time due to high burden of domestic tasks, access to resources, and even lack of food
- The burden of care for ill parents and younger siblings often falls on girls, which jeopardizes their ability to attend school; this is most pronounced in AIDS-affected societies

An estimated 104 million primary school-aged children were not enrolled in school at the turn of the millennium with girls making up 57 percent of the total. Girls are also more likely than boys to fail to complete secondary education because of early marriage, pregnancy and care duties at home.

In high prevalence countries, girls' enrolment in school has decreased in the past decade. Girls are the first to be pulled out of school to care for sick relatives or to look after younger siblings. HIV/AIDS is threatening recent positive gains in basic education and disproportionately affecting girls' primary school enrolments.

Girls and young women are often expected to know little about sex and sexuality, but this lack of knowledge puts them at risk of HIV infection. Surveys have shown that fewer girls than boys aged 15-19 have basic knowledge about how to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS and many misconceptions exist and remain uncorrected in communities with limited access to accurate information. Often, these myths can be damaging to girls and women, for example, "having sex with a virgin can cure HIV".

Going to school is protective. Education is one of the key defences against the spread of HIV and the impact of AIDS and the evidence for this is growing. While ensuring girls are in school is important to reducing overall vulnerability, it is insufficient without specific measures to provide information, skills and links with school-community services.

Girls who stay longer in school and receive education on life skills and sexuality benefit from delayed sexual debut, increased HIV prevention knowledge and condom use rates among those already sexually active, and improved understanding of HIV testing. There are three key lines of action in the education response to HIV/AIDS and its effects on girls and these can be supported by strategic activity:

### **1. Get girls into school and ensure a safe and effective environment which can keep them at school and learning.**

- Abolish school fees. Evidence shows that even in the face of extreme poverty, removing school fees reduces costs of schooling to parents and communities, making education attainable for large numbers of children who could not previously afford school. This is especially the case in ensuring access to secondary schooling for girls.

- Use incentives such as bursaries and food. Targeting vulnerable households or communities with benefits of money or food have been successful ways to increase attendance amongst girls. School subsidies provide multiple benefits and are easier to monitor than other sorts of direct subsidies. Many countries have successfully used school subsidies to increase access to education for girls.
- Improving girls' access to school is central, but schools must be safe and provide an effective learning environment, which in turn will encourage staying at school, and make the experience worthwhile for girls as well as boys.
- Schools must work to reduce discrimination girls and young women face at school, by enforcing appropriate policies and practices.

## **2. Provide life skills-based education with a focus on gender issues and preventing HIV, as part of the overall quality education that all children and young people deserve.**

- Schools provide an ideal opportunity to ensure girls' and boys' access to good quality skills-based HIV/AIDS education, not only through traditional teacher-based methods, but also through school-community connections with civil society organizations.
- Well-implemented school-based HIV/AIDS prevention programmes have been shown to reduce key HIV/AIDS risks, particularly when they go beyond the provision of information. They also help young people develop knowledge, attitudes and life skills needed to protect themselves against HIV and AIDS.
- In addition to the direct benefits to individual knowledge, and behaviours, quality life skills-based programmes can also help:
  - Foster equal partnerships and participation between boys and girls, young men and women;
  - Make sure that HIV/AIDS-related messages do not reinforce gender stereotypes or other biases related to HIV status, race, religion, and tackle entrenched cultural practices such as early marriage.
  - Promote equity among boys and girls, young men and young women in care-giving for relatives with HIV/AIDS.
  - Strengthen home-school-community partnerships to better coordinate education with other complementary strategies such as supportive policies and legal frameworks, access to condoms and to prevention and treatment services for sexually transmitted diseases.

## **3. Protect girls from violence, exploitation, and discrimination in and around schools**

The experience of girls in schools is not always good; schools can be scary environments, especially for young women, due to the prevalence of gender-based violence. Gender-based violence occurs when someone is abused because he or she is female or male. Harassment is one form of this. Schools have a special role in combating gender-based violence, both in helping learners to understand the attitudes and structures that promote it and how their behaviour contributes; and in helping the healing process.

Schools need to establish security measures and codes of behaviour which go beyond the immediate school environment to reduce harassment and violence, gender discrimination and girls' exploitation. Such measures need to consider travel to and from school, as well as natural school-community connections and traditional ways of ensuring the safety of girls and boys in and around schools.

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