



EDUCATION

The power of learning

Education is vital to ensuring a better quality of life for all children and a better world for all people. If girls are left behind, these goals can never be achieved.

In country after country, educating girls yields spectacular social benefits for the current generation and those to come. An educated girl tends to marry later and have fewer children. The children she does have will be more likely to survive; they will be better nourished and better educated. She will be more productive at home and better paid in the workplace. She will be better able to assume a more active role in social, economic and political decision-making throughout her life. And, crucially, she will be better equipped to protect herself against HIV and AIDS.

Young women's vulnerability to HIV and AIDS is not just physiological: more fundamentally, it is a result of gender inequalities that result in women's disempowerment. The same gender imbalances that make women vulnerable to HIV also deprive them of an education.

Reversing such economic and cultural discrimination against women will require structural changes that can take decades, but getting girls into school offers a clear start along this road.

Educating against AIDS

Education is especially empowering for girls and young women. This makes it one of the most potent and essential tools in the fight against HIV and AIDS, a disease which thrives on the social and economic vulnerability of young women. The importance of education in the fight against AIDS is reinforced by recent analyses by UNICEF of nationally representative surveys in 53 countries¹. These clearly indicate that young women and men with higher levels of education know more about HIV/AIDS, have a better understanding of how to avoid infection, and are better placed to change behaviour that puts them at risk of contracting the disease.

In Ethiopia, for example, more than 80% of educated young women aged 15 to 24 knew that a healthy-looking person could be HIV-positive, compared with less than 25% of women with no education. In Peru, more than 70% of educated young women knew where to be tested for HIV, compared with 5% of uneducated women. In Mali, 60% of educated women reported discussing HIV/AIDS with their partner, compared with less than 20% of uneducated women.

There is strong evidence that delaying sexual debut is crucial in reducing HIV/AIDS infection. In recent analysis of eight sub-Saharan countries, women with eight or more years of schooling were up to 87% less likely to have sex before the age of 18 than women with no schooling. Furthermore, surveys in 22 countries showed a link between higher education levels and more condom use during high-risk sex. Other studies in Haiti, Malawi, Uganda and Zambia linked higher education to fewer sexual partners.

Current challenges

Ironically, as awareness rises of the important role education has to play in combating the spread of AIDS, the pandemic is depriving more and more children – girls and boys – of the opportunity to go to school.

¹ Girls, HIV/AIDS and Education, UNICEF, 2005.

Some children are too sick to go to classes. Others are too poor. Many have to stay at home to look after ailing family members or go to work to bring extra income into the household. One of the most common by-products of AIDS is poverty – with the result that families are often forced to forfeit children's education.

Over 100 developing countries still impose charges for primary education. These charges put school out of reach of many poor families. When education becomes hard to afford, girls and orphans are usually the first to be withdrawn. Absence from school denies them an opportunity to learn about HIV/AIDS and how to avoid infection. It may also make them more susceptible to abuse and exploitation, increasing their risk of contracting the disease.

Teachers, too, are being affected by AIDS, with teacher numbers falling because of AIDS in several parts of Africa. At the same time, although most schools are welcoming to children, some fail to provide the necessary protection for children to flourish and can, in fact, expose young people (especially girls) to violence. Gender stereotypes may prevail and in some instances can foster a context in which sexual harassment, intimidation or assault take place – discouraging girls from staying in school and putting them at direct and immediate risk of HIV infection. In one study carried out in Ecuador, 22% of adolescent girls reported being sexually abused at school.

All this means that fewer girls are getting the quality education they need. This in turn fuels existing power imbalances between women and men, reinforcing a status quo in which girls and women are poorer and less well informed, thereby reducing the choices they can make in negotiating relationships with men, determining if and when to have sex, and even whether that sex is safe.

What needs to be done?

Education empowers women and girls by providing them with knowledge and skills to make informed decisions and adopt behaviours that reduce their risk of HIV infection. To change the course of the pandemic, it will be crucial to extend good-quality education to girls and boys equally. Efforts that have been successful in ensuring girls' education rights must therefore be brought to scale.

The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS is therefore advocating for:

- All girls to complete at least a primary education, and to continue their education through to secondary school
- Removal of all financial barriers to primary education and the immediate abolition of school fees
- The provision of HIV/AIDS education in the core curriculum in all schools. This must accurately address issues around sexual and reproductive health in order to help young people develop the life skills required to reduce their vulnerability to HIV infection
- Schools to become places where girls want to learn: schools must be safe, free from sexual violence of any sort, and offer a quality education.

February 2005