

GENDER AND HIV/AIDS IN THE WORLD OF WORK

HIV/AIDS affects women, men, girls and boys differently in terms of vulnerability, discrimination and impact in the world of work. The epidemic changes the age and sex distribution of the labour force as it hits the population aged 15-49 hardest and increases the number of widows, orphans and elderly facing economic uncertainty and devastation.

The *ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work* includes the principle of gender equality, stressing that successful prevention and impact mitigation will depend on “more equal gender relations and the empowerment of women”. It provides practical guidance to policy-makers, employers’ and workers’ organizations and other social partners for formulating and implementing appropriate workplace policies and programmes for prevention and care. To guide implementation of the Code of Practice, an education and training manual has been produced¹. It contains core information on AIDS and the workplace, case studies, learning activities, and examples of laws and policies.

Inequality and risk

Gender affects the world of work because people take their cultural and sexual identity to work, and the workplace mirrors and sometimes exacerbates the gender inequalities and discrimination in society at large.

Women

Women are more likely to become infected and are more often adversely affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic than men for a range of socio-cultural and economic reasons; biological differences also play a part. The greater the gender discrimination in societies and the lower the position of women, the more they are negatively affected by HIV. Women have more limited access to income-generating possibilities and are more exposed to the economic impact of HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, women are more likely to be in the urban informal sector, in subsistence farming, or in the lower paid jobs in the formal sector, which provide little social and economic security, in terms of income, savings, insurance or social security.

As a result of family responsibilities based on a gender division of labour, the burden of caring for sick family members and neighbours falls more often on women and girls than men, increasing their workload and diminishing time for income-generation and schooling.

Women are also exposed to the risk of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace. It can be very difficult to say “no” to the boss, the landlord or the employer of a domestic worker, to the official who can deny a licence, to the truck driver who can refuse to transport your goods, to the policeman who can keep moving you on in the street.

¹ ILO/AIDS, *Implementing the ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work: an education and training manual* (ILO, 2002)

Research in Kenya's export-oriented sectors² - coffee, tea, and light manufacturing industries - found that women experienced violence and harassment as a normal part of their working lives:

- over 90% of the women interviewed had experienced or observed sexual abuse within their workplace;
- 95% of all women who had suffered workplace sexual abuse were afraid to report the problem, for fear of losing their jobs;
- 70% of the men interviewed viewed sexual harassment of women workers as normal and natural behaviour.

Men

Just as women are often expected to remain within the home, men are often expected to be the chief provider of income through work. This can be a source of pride, but also of stress.

Certain types of work place workers at higher risk of infection than others, although the main immediate cause is behaviour, not occupation. Most of the following categories apply to men more than to women:

- work involving mobility, in particular the obligation to travel regularly and spend long periods away from spouses and partners (e.g. transport, mining, the armed forces).
- work in geographically isolated environments with limited social interaction (and limited health facilities);
- single-sex working and living arrangements;
- work that is dominated by men, where women are in a small minority;
- emergency services: work involving occupational risks (needle-stick injury, infected blood exposure, where Universal Precautions are not followed and/or training and/or equipment is inadequate).

The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) carried out a study of truck drivers in East Africa. Separated from their families for a long time, waiting for days at border crossing points, and taking routes well supplied with bars, they frequently visit sex workers. The ITF study concluded that: "*without observance of the rights of truckers, starting with a redress of their working and living conditions, no meaningful response to the control of HIV transmission ...is possible.*"

Many male workers experience such poor working and living conditions that in their behaviour patterns outside work they tend to resort to risk-taking and exploitative activities.

² International Labour Rights Fund: *Violence against women in the workplace in Kenya* (Washington, 2002)

Trade unions in the Wazirpur area of New Delhi report that there are workers who carry out heavy and dangerous work for 12 hours a day. They are young male migrants from other parts of the country, who send money back to their families. They feel at risk of serious injury or death. In this situation, they have developed a 'macho' sense of themselves: "Being a man means facing hardships, taking care of family and chasing women". They are frequent users of commercial sex workers and generally have unprotected sex.³

Groups at particular risk

Unemployed workers, congregating in urban centres in the hope of obtaining any kind of small income, are exposed to pressures that place them at risk of HIV.

Displaced persons and refugee camp inhabitants may turn to sex or be forced into it, especially the many single mothers in such situations.

Informal sector workers (mostly women) are especially exposed to the consequences of HIV/AIDS: they lack health facilities and social protection arrangements at work, their activities depend heavily on their own labour and rarely lead to financial security; they can easily lose their precarious livelihoods when they are sick or forced to withdraw from work to care for family members.

Girls and boys orphaned by AIDS are often denied educational opportunities and may be drawn into the worst forms of child labour, with young girls being especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Taking action

The actors of the world of work (labour ministries, workers' and employers' organizations) have an important leadership role in challenging attitudes and structures that disadvantage women, and providing a greater range of economic alternatives. This requires the support of government through laws and policies, action programmes, public messages, statutory benefits, taxation, child care provision, and equal opportunity initiatives. Financially independent women are under less pressure to continue in unequal relationships with men who refuse to practise safe sex, or to sell themselves to survive.

Specific steps to tackle gender inequality in the context of HIV/AIDS:

1. **review employment policies and structures**
2. **oppose discrimination** at work
3. provide **workplace education** for men and women, together and separately, which includes life skills and topics such as sexuality,

³ ILO/AIDS, *Implementing the ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work: an education and training manual*, Module 5, p.5 (ILO, 2002)

psychosocial health, violence at work, reproductive health, men's and women's social and economic roles, family responsibilities, working time

4. **avoid work patterns** that separate workers from their families for prolonged periods or, if difficult to change, then improve conditions: provide facilities for rest and recreation, or family accommodation
5. ensure that **business practices** do not encourage or condone risk-taking behaviour, for example the provision of sexual services for clients on expense accounts
6. enforce **zero tolerance for violence and harassment against women at work**: trade unions should stress this as an organizational issue, employers should address violence or harassment as a disciplinary offence
7. encourage **workplace medical facilities** to diagnose and treat STIs, which increase the risk of transmission of HIV.

Sector-specific measures

Some industries have taken very practical measures. The World Tourism Organization, for example, has promoted a multi-stakeholder initiative against child prostitution in the tourism industry.

Based on a model agreement developed by the International Union of Foodworkers (IUF), the Philippines National Union of Workers in the Hotel, Restaurant and Allied Industries (NUWHRAIN) has included a clause about prostitution tourism in its collective agreements with hotels, including:

- *Hotels, restaurants, bars, etc. shall inform customers that they fight against prostitution tourism,*
- *Employees have the right and make it their duty to:*
 - *report any customer request having to do with child prostitution. Unions inform management about those matters and examine ways to discourage this type of request,*
 - *refuse to respond to any request having to do with child prostitution. Management supports employees in any dispute with customers.*

Conclusion

To fight HIV and AIDS, we must address gender inequality in the world of work at large, and promote gender equality at the national, sector and enterprise level.

Reference materials

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- Working paper n°3: Le Recueil de directives pratiques du BIT sur le VIH/SIDA: un instrument au service de la promotion des droits fondamentaux, Marie-Claude Chartier, ILO/AIDS, 2002 (French, English)
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Relevant ILO international labour standards

- Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) and Equal Remuneration Recommendation, 1951 (No. 90)
- Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111)
- Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156)
- Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No.183)