

Social aspects of HIV/AIDS: Gender

Why is gender an HIV/AIDS issue? Gender refers to the social constructions that define the roles of women and men are expected to fulfill in a culture. Gender norms define the way girls and guys are 'suppose' to behave. For example, in some cultures women may be expected to be homemakers and men are expected to be tough and non-emotional. While gender roles and norms change from culture to culture, in most parts of the world, men tend to have greater social, political and cultural power and privilege. Gender roles have an impact on HIV vulnerability for a number of reasons for both young women and young men. Young women are specifically more vulnerable to HIV due to gender imbalances.

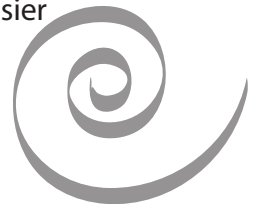
Young Women's vulnerability and risk

Young women represent the fastest growing group of HIV infections worldwide. This is because both social and biological factors make young women vulnerable.

1. Biological vulnerability

Young women are physically more vulnerable to HIV infection than young men because:

- Girl's vaginas are more likely to tear through intercourse facilitating HIV infection
- STIs are harder to recognize in women than men, and having an STI makes it easier to contracting HIV
- There is more surface area on the female genital tract than on men's
- There is a higher concentration of HIV in semen than in vaginal secretions
- There is more semen exchanged during sex than vaginal fluid



2. Social and Cultural Factors

The main cause of young women's vulnerability to HIV comes from unequal gender relations and social norms.

While young men are often encouraged to have multiple sexual partners, young women are often expected to be 'innocent' when it comes to sex. This makes it harder for women to talk about safe sexual practices with their partners, who might classify them as 'sluts' for bringing up the conversation. Because in society men often have more power in social relations, young women are also vulnerable to being coerced into having sex before they are ready.

Young women are especially vulnerable to rape, which can facilitate HIV transmission. Young women are often raped through the use of violence and force, which makes it more likely that there will be tearing of the genitals and possible HIV infection.

Men are also more often the ones making decisions about when and where sex takes place and if a condom is used. This can make it difficult for a girl to negotiate condom use with her partner. Young women are also more likely to have older male sexual partners who are more likely to have already been exposed to the HI virus. Age differences also makes girls less powerful in the relationship and have more difficulty insisting on condom use.