

January 31, 2008, Vol. 14, Issue 1

## **STOPPING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE KEY TO PREVENTING HIV**

Last week, experts from some of the world's leading women's health and violence prevention organizations told more than 100 congressional leaders and advocates that highly effective programs, from Kenya to Hong Kong, Fiji to Papua New Guinea, and Nicaragua to South Africa, are helping to stop gender-based violence and HIV infection. With Congress poised to reauthorize the *President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR)* and consider the *International Violence Against Women Act (I-VAWA)*, experts from the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPF), International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), and PATH urged a greater focus on preventing the violence that can promote the spread of HIV and AIDS.

"Where there is HIV and AIDS, there is violence against women and girls. The two are inextricably linked," said FVPF Public Policy Director Kiersten Stewart. "Violence is a global crisis that creates profound public health challenges and contributes significantly to the pandemic of HIV infection. We need Congress to recognize the connection between these issues and act this year. There's no time to waste."

According to the World Health Organization, one in three of the world's women will experience violence in her lifetime, including being raped, beaten, sold into marriage or domestic servitude, or subjected to harmful practices such as female genital mutilation. One potential consequence of this violence is HIV infection, with women now the fastest growing group in the epidemic, largely as a result of sexual violence and an inability to negotiate safer sex practices.

"There is a compelling need for lawmakers to address the root causes of gender-based violence, and adopt integrated, multi-sectoral approaches," said PATH's Senior Advisor for Gender, Violence and Human Rights, Mary Ellsberg, PhD. "Interventions do not need to be costly to be effective. In fact, actions as simple as providing 30 minutes of counseling to pregnant abused women or asking faith-based communities to help stop the stigma and discrimination against women living with HIV and AIDS can make a huge difference."

Ellsberg urged Congress to improve services for women in the health sector, strengthen women's organizations around the world, and promote access to justice for survivors of gender-based violence.

"Changing community norms, attitudes and responses to gender-based violence is critical to reducing women's vulnerability to HIV infection," added Nata Duvvury, PhD, Director of Gender, Violence and Rights for the ICRW. "We know from field experience that it is possible to change social norms through community-based projects. Women worldwide urgently need Congress to move quickly to strengthen *PEPFAR* to better address violence by expanding such programs, and pass the *I-VAWA*."

Duvvury and Ellsberg described effective programs that are addressing gender-based violence and HIV infection. Among them:

- Stepping Stones, originally developed for use in Uganda, is now used in more than 40 countries and has been translated into at least 13 languages. It involves a series of workshops that address questions of gender, sexual health, HIV and AIDS, gender violence,

communication and relationship skills through role play, drama and other participatory learning approaches.

- IMAGE (Intervention with Microfinance for AIDS & Gender Equity) combines a poverty-focused microfinance initiative targeting the poorest women in communities with a participatory curriculum of gender and HIV education. A rigorous evaluation provided strong evidence that a combined microfinance and training intervention has the potential to generate social and economic benefits for women, reducing their vulnerability and leading to reductions in levels of interpersonal violence.
- VCT Liverpool in Kenya, which is transforming the way rape victims are treated and giving them access to care and treatment after exposure to HIV.
- The Pan American Health Organization, which for more than a decade has run a multi-pronged program in seven Latin American countries to strengthen the health sector's response by promoting screening of women for violence and HIV, and referrals for victims to community-based networks that coordinate with local women's groups.
- Soul City in South Africa, an innovative multi-media health promotion and social change project reaching more than 16 million South Africans. It uses drama and entertainment to impart information on social norms, attitudes and practices, aimed at empowering audiences to make healthy choices.

The Capitol Hill briefing featured Pamela Sibanda Mumbi, Director of the International Justice Mission in Zambia who discussed the urgent need to dispel myths about HIV transmission. Some men believe having sex with a virgin or young girl will cure them.

Mumbi talked about problems with the legal system, poor prosecution of perpetrators, and lack of training for police and medical staff. "We need properly trained medical officers on every compound," she said.

The event was held in conjunction with the Congressional Human Rights Caucus and the Global Health Caucus. Hans Hogrefe, Executive Director of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, moderated.

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## **OUTREACH**

*Advocates need facts in anticipation of the House introduction of the International Violence Against Women Act (I-VAWA) and congressional action to reauthorize the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The following facts illustrate the link between violence against women and girls and the HIV infection.*

- Violence against women is associated with an increased risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections, a risk factor of HIV.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Koenig, Michael et al. December 2004. "Coerced first intercourse and reproductive health among adolescent women in Rakai, Uganda," *International Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 30, No. 4, page 157. Available at <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/3015604.pdf>.

- Violent sexual assault can cause trauma to the vaginal wall that allows easier access to HIV.<sup>2</sup>
- Fear of violence prevents women from negotiating safe sex.<sup>3</sup>
- A study in South Africa found that women who have been forced to have sex are almost six times more likely to use condoms *inconsistently* than those who have not been coerced.<sup>4</sup>
- Children who are sexually abused are more likely to engage in behaviors known to be risky for HIV as adults.<sup>5</sup> They are also more likely to experience sexual or domestic violence.<sup>6</sup>
- Abused women are at greater risk of acquiring HIV,<sup>7</sup> and women living with HIV have more lifetime experience of violence than HIV-negative women.<sup>8</sup>
- A World Health Organization study found that fear of violence was a barrier to HIV disclosure for an average of 25 percent of participating women. In some countries the proportion was as high as 86 percent.<sup>9</sup>
- Fear of violence prevents women from seeking voluntary counseling and testing for HIV, returning for their test results, or getting treatment if they are HIV positive or services to prevent mother-to-child HIV transmission.<sup>10</sup>

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A project of the Family Violence Prevention Fund. Produced by PR Solutions, Inc., Washington, DC;  
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<sup>2</sup> Jansen, H., et al. 2002. *Forced Sex and Physical Violence in Brazil, Peru, and Thailand: WHO Multi-Country Results*. XIV International AIDS Conference, Barcelona, Spain.

<sup>3</sup> American Foundation for AIDS Research. 2005. Women, Sexual Violence and HIV. Available at <http://www.amfar.org/cgi-bin/iowa/programs/publicp/record.html?record=31>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization. 2002. World Report on Violence and Health. Available at [http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/world\\_report/en/](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Heise, L., Ellsberg, M. and Gottemoeller, M. 1999. "Ending Violence Against Women," *Population Reports*, Series L, No.11.

<sup>8</sup> The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS. *Stop Violence Against Women, Fight AIDS*. Available at <http://womenandaids.unaids.org/themes/docs/UNAIDS%20VAW%20Brief.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> World Health Organization. 2006. *Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women*. Available at [http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who\\_multicountry\\_study/en/](http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who_multicountry_study/en/).

<sup>10</sup> Ogden, J. and Nyblade, L. 2005. *Common at its Core: HIV-Related Stigma Across contexts*. Available at [http://www.icrw.org/docs/2005\\_report\\_stigma\\_synthesis.pdf](http://www.icrw.org/docs/2005_report_stigma_synthesis.pdf).