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“The Fourth Wave: An Assault on Women” Gender, Culture and HIV/AIDS in the 21st Century

How and why is the response to the HIV epidemic failing women?

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<http://www.unesco.org/aids>

Background:

- Epidemiological research demonstrated the growing and disproportionate impacts of HIV and AIDS on young women and girls worldwide, yet strategies addressing this feminization are hugely inadequate.
- Women bear the brunt of global economic transformations, contributing to their vulnerability to HIV; even in settings where HIV epidemics have been spread through non-sexual means women are disproportionately affected.
- Gender based violence, perpetrated by both social structures or individuals is driving the epidemic and increasing women's vulnerability.

Description:

- An exhaustive literature review of the social science of HIV and AIDS was performed in 2005. Young and established researchers examining the changing social-epidemiology of HIV were invited to submit discussion papers primarily based on recent or ongoing research. These papers formed the basis of a workshop held in October 2007. Papers were revised based on workshop discussions and editorial board comments.

Lessons Learned:

- The response to the epidemic often only superficially addresses gender. This is partially due to a prevailing bio-medical approach to the pandemics and a poor understanding of the varied gendered socio-cultural impacts of HIV by various actors within the widely heterogeneous “HIV industry” (including international organizations, pharmaceutical corporations, governments, donors, transnational activist movements and NGOs).
- Gender analysis is often limited to describing differences between men and women, rather than taking into account broader economic forces, social norms, and power dynamics that structure HIV risk as a function of relations between men and women. Programs that aim to include women appear to be “gender sensitive” but in fact do little to address these broader gender dynamics.
- Current emphasis on demonstrating quantifiable results discourages undertaking longer-term work to address structural forces that continue to exacerbate gender inequalities and therefore the differential impacts of HIV and AIDS across sex, age, class and geographies;
- Men who do not conform to gender norms are often victims of SGBVE in parts of the world not limited to conflict zones or societies in transition.
- Gender has insufficiently been taken into account in the way we measure and respond to the epidemic. This may be due to understandable haste in attempting to respond to the urgent life and death challenges posed by a global public health emergency as well as reluctance to call into question how broader social forces increase women's vulnerability.

Recommendations:

- Better understanding of how assumptions about gender roles plays out both in the culture of the response and in sites of intervention, can improve how we address the growing feminization of the epidemic.
- Sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation (SGBV/E), aimed largely at women but also affecting men, is a significant factor driving epidemics that needs to be further studied and squarely addressed.

Next Steps:

- The Reader will be published by UNESCO and launched on 1 December 2008.
- A book blog with invited experts will be mounted by the SSRC to promote the findings of the Reader
- Findings of the Reader will be distilled into training curricula, policy guidance documents and program design and implementation tools to be used by UNESCO and its partners (eg. NGO, governments, IGOs & UNCT)

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