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Seminar on HIV and girls and young women, November 1999, London

Report compiled by the Working Group on Children and HIV; UK NGO AIDS Consortium

• Introduction

The working group on children of the UK NGO AIDS Consortium held an international seminar recently in London on the vulnerability of female children to HIV/AIDS. The UK NGO AIDS Consortium is a group of UK based organisations who work together to understand and develop effective approaches to the problem of the HIV epidemic in the South. It enables each agency to share its experiences and help all the members improve their responses to the epidemic. The Consortium represents 50-55 UK-based development organisations working with HIV/AIDS issues in all parts of the world.

This seminar was organised in response to growing concern around the world about the impact of HIV/AIDS on young people and, in particular, the differential effect it appears to be having on girls and young women. According to estimates by UNAIDS, 60% of new infections occur among young people. However, data disaggregated by sex also shows that girls have consistently higher rates of infection than boys do. This is due to the greater social and biological vulnerability of girls to HIV/AIDS. While both boys and girls are vulnerable to sexual coercion, girls appear to be more often victimised by sexual abuse and exploitation because of their gender.

The seminar was therefore designed to address issues related to the vulnerability of girls to HIV/AIDS and was concerned in particular with sexual abuse, exploitation and violence. It brought together practitioners and advocates from around the world who shared their experiences and came up with recommendations to improve service delivery and advocacy. Speakers and participants came from a wide range of organisations and

countries, representing Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and the USA. A number of cross-cutting themes emerged from the seminar which underline many of the concerns raised by practitioners from around the world. These emphasise how the experiences of girls from around the world are universal.

Some of the major themes

- Deepening poverty, structural and social inequalities are some of the major causes of girls' vulnerability to HIV. For example, girls living in poverty and with limited opportunities for education and income may resort to selling sex in order to survive.
- Unequal power relationships based on gender and age provide the context in which abuse takes place.
- Apart from economic needs, girls fall into relationships with men to meet their need for protection, affection and love.
- The social isolation of girls also serves to increase their vulnerability to sexual victimisation and HIV.
- A silence surrounds the issue of sexual abuse, which makes it difficult to identify and address.
- Some cultural traditions and attitudes often provide a sanction for abuse and represent some of the greatest challenges to NGOs.
- A major barrier to the advancement of women and girls is the support that still exists for traditional gender roles. Without a critical mass of women involved in the decision-making process, changes are likely to occur slowly.
- A lack of political will exists to enforce laws and principles adhered to in international conventions. NGOs have an important role to play in advocating for the implementation of conventions such as the

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

- **Recommendations for service delivery and advocacy**

Some key principles

Programmes need to address the social and political environment in which girls live, but also the psychological causes and effects of abuse and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

As explained by Randini Wanduragala of World Vision, an integrated approach seems to work best. An example of this approach is demonstrated by Plan International India, which organised a programme in collaboration with an NGO in India and Nepal to return Nepali girls to their homes who were sold into prostitution in India. After girls were rescued from the brothels, they were taken to centres where they received counselling and medical care. Counselling was given to girls as well as their families at every stage of the process. Activities were also organised to provide basic literacy skills and training in various trades so that girls might find alternative sources of income. Once back in their communities, girls continued to be supervised but were also provided with credit assistance to start small income-generating projects.

In addition to re-integration, the programme also included a focus on prevention. ABC Nepal, the NGO counterpart in Nepal, organised activities in communities to raise awareness of the problem of trafficking and HIV/AIDS. One important outcome was the formation of 'pressure groups', made up of individuals from different sections of the community, who have implemented their own activities with financial assistance from the project. Some of the activities of pressure groups include street drama, rallies, public forums, and lobbying of local government to encourage the arrest of traffickers.

Change is possible if we start with women and girls as the catalysts for change.

Thoko Ngwenya of The Musasa Project in Zimbabwe explained that their 'interventions with women centre on the individual woman

so that she can focus on her needs and become aware of her abilities, decrease victim behaviour and develop an awareness of the socio-political context of the violence she has suffered'. Each woman is treated as the best expert in dealing with her situation and decides what she wants to do with her life. The goal is to encourage her to build her self-confidence and eventually regain control over her life and circumstances. The centre provides counselling but also training on HIV/AIDS, communication and assertiveness, and gender. After six months in the programme, noticeable changes were found among women who were assisted.

Programmes need to provide an environment that raises the possibilities for girls and enables them to change their lives positively.

As Judith Musick of the Ounce of Prevention Fund explained, 'those working with disadvantaged girls cannot break the hold of their difficult or toxic life circumstances without serious, sustained efforts to expand girls' horizons and increase their knowledge and skills'. Girls need to be exposed to other possibilities and given the chance to exceed their own expectations. This could consist of social activities (i.e. drama, arts and crafts, sports or social activism) and/or non-formal or professional education. Judith Musick also pointed out that in working with girls who have been sexually abused or exploited it is important to remember that, as children, they will have needs and interests that are similar to other children their age. Programmes should not just focus on their sexuality, but encourage other activities that girls may be interested in, such as sports or drama.

- **Other recommendations for NGOs**

General

- Involve children as decision-makers in programmes and provide opportunities for them to become their own advocates.
- Follow a participatory approach to planning, implementation and evaluation.
- Approach the issues from a rights-based perspective, e.g. defending the right of children to be protected from violence and

abuse as fundamental human rights principles.

- Use mentors or alumni in programmes as teachers. Girls need positive role models who can show them other possible futures.
- Carry out research to inform planning, especially the collection of disaggregated data.
- Document and share experiences with other NGOs. In particular, examples of good practice or successful programmes should be disseminated.
- Ensure sufficient quality of care in service provision.

International

- Make governments accountable to the UN conventions they have ratified to accelerate their implementation.
- Integrate programmes into the wider development framework to address the larger causes such as poverty and structural inequalities. For example, lobbying government or donors to increase the allocation of resources to HIV/AIDS programmes and education.

National

- Strengthen partnerships with the private sector, trade unions and the media. Journalists and media institutions can be valuable allies in making issues known to policy-makers and the wider public. Trade unions and private corporations may also provide important material and moral support for causes.

Regional

- Challenge cultural attitudes to create an environment that does not tolerate violence, abuse and exploitation. Organisations need to work continuously with the public to shift attitudes, and while this may take time, change is possible, as examples in changing attitudes to Female Genital Mutilation have shown (where negative aspects have been discouraged while positive aspects, such as puberty rites, are maintained).

Local

- Mobilise all sections of the community to raise awareness of the issues. A greater focus is needed on men's and boys' involvement and awareness in particular.

Recommendations for strengthening advocacy include:

- research to find out what is being done, to link up with organisations and to know what resources/information are available;
- developing 'strategic' alliances with other organisations and agencies (i.e. government, social service agencies and law enforcement may be particularly useful to make sure that issues are dealt with and services reach girls that are appropriate and gender-sensitive);
- strengthening partnerships with other NGOs and networks;
- investigating points of entry which can be approached to have an influence on policy in government or international institutions.

To contribute to raising awareness at the local and international level, organisations should look for and use every opportunity available to raise the issues onto the agenda. This means informing individuals within our own organisations as well as outside. With this objective in mind, the Consortium is hoping to maintain contact with agencies who were involved in the seminar and others concerned with the impact of HIV on children and girls to keep these issues high on the agenda and to make they are raised at relevant international fora and debates (i.e. the upcoming international conference on HIV/AIDS in Durban and Beijing +5, which is the follow-up to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995).

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A fuller report of the seminar is available (February 2000). For more information, please contact the Consortium at: ukaidcon@gn.apc.org

