14 October 2005

Gender and HIV/AIDS

This issue of Gender Dialogue focuses on Gender and HIV/AIDS. It highlights the main findings of a gender assessment of policies and programmes in selected Caribbean countries carried out by the ECLAC subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean in collaboration with UNIFEM. It also coincides with the launch of the Regional Coalition on Women and AIDS in November 2005.

Gender review and assessment of HIV/AIDS programming of selected national AIDS programmes in the Caribbean

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean in collaboration with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Caribbean Office, has been reviewing gender issues in HIV/AIDS policies and programmes being developed or implemented in the Caribbean subregion. The main objective of this review is to assist in developing a programme for combating the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) in the Caribbean within the context of their mandate to provide technical assistance to governments and to engage in advocacy, capacity building and the dissemination of good practices, techniques and tools that can be used in the development process.

HIV/AIDS is clearly a development challenge as it incorporates health social and economic dimensions which, if not addressed, could lead to an exacerbation of an already serious problem. In this regard, the lack of recognition of the gender dimensions of HIV/AIDS is providing gaps that allow for the spread of the disease at exponential rates. Official HIV/AIDS policies and programmes are very important in the development of strategies and plans to stop the spread of the disease.

An understanding of the gender dimensions of the factors contributing to the spread of HIV is an important aspect of prevention and advocacy strategies that seek to halt the spread of the disease. It is no accident that this disease, which started with higher proportions of men than women in most countries, is now growing at a faster rate among women. Women's vulnerability, social and cultural beliefs and attitudes and behaviours that are

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gender-based are some of the factors that greatly influence the spread of HIV in the Caribbean, as with the rest of the world. Research has shown that risk and vulnerability to HIV are influenced by gender and the inequalities that are associated with being female or male. A gender assessment of policies and programmes is about utilizing and applying the tools of gender analysis in order to understand how such policies and programmes to prevent the contraction and spread of HIV are differentially affecting men and women and boys and girls. Gender analysis is useful in diagnosing opportunities or constraints to the successful implementation of policies and programmes as well as in identifying effective strategies and interventions for achieving important objectives. It must be used at every stage of policy and programme formulation, including design, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

It is in this context that the ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean, in collaboration with UNIFEM, conducted a Gender Review and Assessment of HIV/AIDS Programming of three countries in the Caribbean: Guyana, the Bahamas and Trinidad and Tobago. The review is intended to assist in the preparation and implementation of HIV/AIDS programming in the Caribbean and to point to the gender issues that need to be addressed and integrated into proposed activities and strategic approaches developed and/or supported by ECLAC, UNIFEM and other agencies within the United Nations system. Primary research, including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, as well as secondary research in the form of review and analysis of documents were used in the conduct of this study which was carried out in 2004.

“We can only make headway with HIV if we fully address the social ills facing the society”
Jimmy Bhojedat, former Executive Director, Lifeline Counselling.
Georgetown, Guyana.

“How some of the trends observed in the Bahamas are relationships between older men and younger girls and multiple partnering… It is critical to engender HIV/AIDS policies and programmes”
Sandra Dean-Patterson, Ministry of Social Services and Community Development, the Bahamas.
Nassau, The Bahamas

“There is a need to change people’s behaviour… changing sexual behaviour is one of the most difficult things to do… There is a need for a gender perspective in HIV/AIDS”
Patricia St Bernard, Executive Director, Rape Crisis Society of Trinidad and Tobago
Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago
At the end of 2003, the Caribbean subregion had the second highest adult HIV prevalence rate in the world (between 1.9 per cent and 3.1 per cent), second only to Sub-Saharan Africa (between 7.5 per cent and 8.5 per cent). The primary mode of transmission is sexual (76 per cent). Sexual transmission of HIV is however no longer predominantly via male homosexuals, but through a combination of homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual activities, with heterosexual transmission accounting for 65 per cent of HIV transmission in the Caribbean by the end of 2002. The social stigma associated with homosexuality also means that there will continue to be underreporting of AIDS cases among this group (CAREC, 2004).

According to CAREC, a cumulative total of 24,567 AIDS cases had been reported between 1982 and 2002 by 20 of its 21 member countries. Given the levels of underreporting that have taken place, projections are that it is more likely that between 30,000 and 35,000 cases of AIDS have occurred in these countries. It has been further estimated that for the year 2002, the annual incidence of AIDS cases could be estimated at 52.43 per 100,000 persons, compared to 13.6 per 100,000 in 1991. This means that between 1991 and 2002, the AIDS incidence in CAREC member countries has increased almost fourfold.

One indicator of this spread is the rate at which HIV infection is rising among females and youth in the region. Data show that AIDS is now the leading cause of death among males and females aged 15 to 45 years in the Caribbean, and that the epidemic is also one that essentially impacts on youth now. The 15-24 age group, and specifically female 15-24 year olds, are most vulnerable. This is evidenced by data which show that although there is a higher rate of AIDS cases among males (a ratio of 2:1), the incidence of AIDS among females in the 15-24 year old age group is three to six times higher than that of males in the same age group.

Infection rates among females have also been increasing and in some cases accelerating at a rate faster than within the male population. Recent estimates also showed that HIV prevalence among pregnant women has reached or exceeded 2 per cent in eight countries, namely, the Bahamas, Belize, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, Haiti, Saint Lucia, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. As a consequence of this high heterosexual transmission of HIV, Mother-to-Child Transmission (MTCT) now accounts for 6 per cent of reported AIDS cases. In fact, CAREC estimates that during 2002, close to 600 infants were infected with HIV via mother-to-child transmission.

In many countries of the Caribbean, HIV infection has been spreading from specific subpopulations to become a generalized epidemic. Identification of the at-risk groups is one exercise in gender analysis that is important in arriving at gender sensitive strategies to stop the spread of HIV. Over the years, the guidelines for surveillance have been modified in order to fill the gaps in previous guidelines which became evident as the disease rapidly evolved. The inclusion of Behavioural Surveillance Surveys (BSS) to improve the monitoring of behaviour that puts individuals at risk of contracting HIV and, more recently, third generation guidelines that recognize the importance of using other sources of information to better understand the impact of the epidemic; as well as participatory approaches with community involvement - including the involvement of Persons Living With HIV-AIDS (PWLHA), provide greater opportunity for the inclusion of relevant social factors such as gender in order to better understand how the disease is contracted and spread. This opportunity will however be missed if the decision makers and policy formulators are not gender sensitive and are not equipped to undertake gender analysis.

1 CAREC (2004, 2).

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Some of the factors which were found to contribute to the spread of HIV and which reflect the dynamics of gender at work are: poverty and lack of employment; gender socialization practices; inconsistent or non-use of condoms; multiple partnering; inter-generational relationships, specifically relationships between young/teenaged girls and older men; gender-based violence both in and out of the home, including child abuse, coercion and rape of young girls, and rape of women generally; migrant workers; drug and alcohol abuse; co-infection as it relates to sexually transmitted infections and tuberculosis; stigma and discrimination; and lack of knowledge of infection status. These factors are both structural and behavioural and are mutually reinforcing.

The study also reveals varying levels of gender sensitivity in the policies and programmes of the countries under study, and some of the gaps that intensify the vulnerability of males and females to HIV because of gender are highlighted. In this regard, two main findings are highlighted:

(i) For the most part, decision makers and persons responsible for the formulation of HIV/AIDS policies and programmes do not demonstrate adequate awareness of the impact of gender on the issues of HIV/AIDS, and were therefore unable to implement strategies and programmes that addressed these issues as they affected males and females; and

(ii) In cases where gender issues were identified, as for example, in situational analyses as these related to HIV/AIDS, this awareness was not transferred in the development of strategies and programmes to deal with the problem. One of the reasons for this is that a framework for gender analysis was never adopted or established as an essential part of the development of HIV/AIDS policies and programmes.

**Conclusion**

Gender mainstreaming should be a strategic priority of national policies and programmes to deal with HIV/AIDS. It is a critical component in any attempt to deal with HIV/AIDS because of the sexual risk factors that have been highlighted. In this context, gender awareness among programme and policy formulators assumes critical importance.

Without a gender framework that recognizes the specific vulnerabilities of males and females in the context of HIV/AIDS and the gender inequalities that obtain in the relationships between men and women, measures to combat HIV/AIDS will be less than effective.

The assessment of the three countries under review reveals the need for more focused and targeted HIV/AIDS interventions and strategies based on an awareness of gender issues and a capacity to conduct gender analysis. While training for policy formulators is absolutely necessary for the success of HIV/AIDS policies and programmes, so is the need for training and sensitization of health care workers, as it relates to stigma and discrimination. Information, education and communication are also necessary to target specific groups among the general population. Messages must, however, be based on research and analysis that understands the gender dimensions of the situations that they seek to address.

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All research therefore needs to address, the importance of gender socialization, gender identity and roles and gender relations in order to understand the factors at work in determining the behaviour of at-risk groups and their responses to HIV-AIDS. This understanding will enable the links between these gender factors and others, such as poverty, drug use and violence, to be better understood, and for more targeted interventions and strategies to be implemented with greater success.

The need for financial and other material resources, as well as expert psychological counselling are also needed to support interventions and create opportunities and an enabling environment for vulnerable groups, including marginalized youth and poor women. Educational and employment opportunities, free from stigma and discriminatory practices are essential in this regard.

**Recommendations**

The study recommended the following:

(a) The provision of technical support to national and regional HIV/AIDS committees to assist in the formulation of HIV/AIDS policies and programmes from a gender perspective;

(b) The development of training manuals that can be used to build gender awareness and capacity in gender analysis at all levels.

(c) The development of protocols for gender-sensitive interventions regarding issues of HIV/AIDS.

(d) The development of effective, gender-sensitive communication strategies and packages to relay messages and information regarding HIV/AIDS to the intended audiences, paying particular attention to young people.

(e) The development of gender-responsive budgets for HIV/AIDS strategies and programmes.

(f) Giving consideration to the vulnerability to HIV created by poor economic circumstances and limited opportunities for obtaining employment and to the creation of employment opportunities as well as the provision of affordable child-care support systems, particularly for female single parent poor households;

(g) Promotion of programmes aimed at empowering youth – e.g. improving educational and employment opportunities. This must include providing non-traditional employment opportunities for young women, which usually are higher paying.

(h) In-depth research on the factors responsible for the spread of HIV in the countries of the subregion, with a specific focus on the way in which gender relations are reproduced among young persons and the extent to which this impacts on the spread of HIV. This should be with a view to developing cross-cutting policies which will address the need to change gender relations among young people.
Launch of the Regional Coalition on Women and AIDS

A Regional Coalition on Women and AIDS, a collaboration between UNAIDS and CRN+ and supported by the Commonwealth Secretariat, UNIFEM and PANCAP, will be launched at the Kapok Hotel, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 1-2 November 2005.

The Coalition is intended to function as an advocacy group with the broad objective of advocating for the prioritization of the impact of HIV/AIDS on women and girls. The strategy of the partnership would be to generate momentum and strengthen political will to address the intersection between gender, sexuality and HIV/AIDS.

The background documentation for the launch of the Regional Coalition notes that although gender is inextricably linked to all of the factors related to HIV/AIDS, there remains a disconnection between gender and these factors in HIV/AIDS programmes.

The Coalition will focus on areas where women’s needs are not met thereby rendering them particularly vulnerable to HIV. Such areas include sexual and reproductive information and services, preventing transmission to and by women, environments free of violence and empowering women through the teaching of life-skills and sex education.

The specific objectives of the Coalition are outlined as follows:

- Preserving the next generation;
- Prevention efforts targeting young women and girls specifically;
- Revisions of National HIV/AIDS Strategic Plans to focus more on gender issues;
- Developing partnerships with other regional coalitions such as the Caribbean Coalition of National AIDS Programme Coordinators (CCNAPC) and the Caribbean Regional Network of Persons Living with HIV (CRN+);
- Functioning as a mechanism to permit groups that deal with women’s issues to network specifically on the issue of HIV/AIDS and women;
- Creating more cohesion between regional and national women’s organizations;
- Placing on the regional agenda the gender implications of a rights-based approach in the context of HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, care and support;
- Dissemination of best practices on women’s health.

Several Caribbean countries will be represented at the launch. For more information, please contact:

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The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS (GCWA) is a worldwide alliance of civil society groups, networks of women with HIV and AIDS, governments and UN organizations.


UNAIDS/WHO 2004
Bibliography on Gender, Sexuality and the Implications for HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean

In March 2004, the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, held a Symposium on Gender, Sexuality and the Implications for Substance Use and HIV/AIDS. The symposium addressed a wide range of issues including the following:

- Gender expectations and sexual empowerment within sexual relationships
- Gender roles and youth sexualities
- Violence power and control
- Sexual attitudes, beliefs and taboos
- Sexuality, education and sensitization
- Sexual-economic exchange
- Sexual economics and the youth
- Transgressive sexualities

A bibliography, titled as above, was also compiled and is now available for sale at the Centre for Gender and Development Studies. For further information, please contact Michelle Seeraj at mseeraj@cgds.uwi.tt

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Working Group on Gender and HIV/AIDS

One of the outcomes of an Inter-Agency Meeting on “Gender and HIV/AIDS Programming in the Caribbean” convened by the UNIFEM on 29-30 July, 2004 at the United Nations House, Barbados, was the establishment of an Ad Hoc Working Group on Gender and HIV/AIDS with a mandate to support and shape a strategy for gender training at multiple levels. The Working group is being coordinated by UNIFEM and includes representatives of the United Nations System (UNIFEM, UNDP, UN-AIDS, ECLAC), the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, the University of the West Indies, St Augustine, the Caribbean Coalition of National AIDS Programme Coordinators (CCNAPC), and the Caribbean Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (CRN+). The first meeting of the group, convened by UNIFEM in conjunction with Centre for Gender and Development Studies, UWI, St Augustine, was held at the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute for Social and Economic Studies, UWI, St Augustine Trinidad and Tobago on 16-17 February 2005. The main objectives of the meeting were (i) the synthesis of a development plan for a training manual to be used in building capacity and awareness of gender and (ii) to prepare multi-level regional support for gender mainstreaming.
The Statistics and Social Development Unit of the ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean has as its focus the conduct of research and analysis on the areas of women and development; population and development, (migration and teenage fertility), poverty, and other social development issues such as the conditions of vulnerable groups in the society, social reform and social policy formulation. In this regard, the ECLAC/CDCC Secretariat is responsible for assisting member States with the implementation of programmes of action coming out of international conferences such as the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD); the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing Conference).

GENDER DIALOGUE was created in response to calls from participants at the Third Caribbean Ministerial Meeting on Women, held in Trinidad and Tobago in October 1999, for a more systematic sharing of information and dialogue around policies and programmes for women. In addition to this call we, too, at the ECLAC/CDCC Secretariat, have felt the need for a medium through which we could routinely share our work.

The newsletter is available both in print form and at the ECLAC website. We are exploring as well, the creation of a chat room to expand the possibilities for dynamic dialogue.

Contact Us
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