

WOMEN AND POVERTY

Women play a crucial role in local economies and the health and well-being of their families. Women who are educated are more likely to have fewer and healthier children. In fact, mothers with some education immunize their children 50 percent more often than mothers who are not educated, while HIV/AIDS spreads twice as quickly among uneducated girls than among girls that have even some schooling. Poor maternal health reduces women's capacity to work and limits their ability to generate income and overcome poverty, often in communities where their contribution to household income and childcare is crucial.

Despite the centrality of women to their homes, families, local communities and economies, women and girls suffer disproportionately from the burden of extreme poverty. To provide but a few statistics:

- Women make up 70 percent of the 1 billion people living on less than a dollar a day
- Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours, produce half of the world's food, yet earn only 10 percent of the world's income and own less than 1 percent of the world's property
- More than 850 million people – most of them women and children – suffer from chronic hunger or malnutrition

In order to end poverty, we must attack its root causes, not only its consequences. In practice, this means that we can't just build a school – we must fight for the rights of girls to be educated. It means not only providing HIV and pregnancy prevention information, counseling and testing, but also fighting for every individual's right to be free from abuse or violence. Uncovering and transforming the political, social and economic relationships at the heart of poverty is essential – our work to improve the health and well-being of women and girls is critical to that fight.

WOMEN AND THE HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC

This fight to counter the underlying determinants of poverty is woven into the fight to stop the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The majority of the 33 million individuals infected with HIV/AIDS are women. The status of women is perhaps the most powerful and pernicious driver of this statistic. Women are less able to negotiate safe sexual encounters and many face tough choices, including transactional sex, in the face of extreme poverty. Many girls are coerced into first sex or forced into early marriages with older men. Women living with HIV are often blamed and ostracized, even when they contract HIV from their unfaithful husbands. Sex workers face violence and discrimination on a daily basis. The failure to effectively reduce the vulnerability of women and girls – by protecting their rights and enhancing their status – has undermined the global AIDS response.

PEPFAR

Despite these obstacles, we have an opportunity to ensure that these forms of poverty and social exclusion are eliminated with the reauthorization of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

In 2003, the United States launched PEPFAR - the largest investment ever made by any nation to combat a single disease. To date, approximately \$19 billion has been spent under the PEPFAR initiative in order to combat the pandemic by:

- Contributing significantly to the five-fold increase in the number of people receiving antiretroviral (ARV) therapy
- Providing HIV/AIDS counseling and testing
- Supplying access to medicines essential to slowing the spread of the disease
- Construction of health clinics

In addition to these accomplishments, we want to ensure that these funds are spent effectively – lives are at stake. The current abstinence-until-marriage provision imposes an arbitrary funding restriction and a narrow approach to HIV/AIDS prevention programming – and that undermines our efforts to help at-risk individuals avoid HIV infection. Abstinence and faithfulness are an important part of the solution; however they must be integrated and adapted to local context.

ACT NOW TO SUPPORT STRONG PEPFAR LEGISLATION

The current PEPFAR legislation is set to expire in 2008, and Congress is currently hard at work authorizing a new bill. What PEPFAR does over the next five years will be critical to the future of the AIDS pandemic and to the lives of millions of people – it could be either an essential catalyst for success or a lost opportunity.

A reauthorized PEPFAR bill should:

- Invest in the wide variety of sectors that play a role in stopping the spread of HIV – including food security, microfinance, reproductive health and education;
- Focus on women in developing countries who are particularly vulnerable to HIV – those who are less able to negotiate sexual relations and victims of sexual violence; and
- Allocate sufficient funds to comprehensive prevention efforts, and removes policy and budget restrictions such as the abstinence-until-marriage earmark on these funds.

On February 27, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs passed the *Tom Lantos and Henry J. Hyde United States Global Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria Reauthorization Act* (H.R.5501), which reflects many of these goals. It is a significant improvement over current law for the following reasons:

- It provides \$50 billion over five years for the fight against global AIDS, TB and malaria. Together, these preventable diseases kill millions, many of them women and girls.
- It strengthens U.S. policies that influence how vulnerable people can avoid becoming infected with HIV. It strengthens and expands evidence-based, comprehensive prevention programming and repeals the so-called ‘abstinence-until marriage’ restriction,

giving the President the flexibility to deliver prevention programming that addresses the reality of the lives that poor people face everyday.

- It improves our ability to help hungry people avoid HIV infection (they may be so desperate they trade sex for food) or—if they're already infected—helps them get the food they need to stay well (it's a tragedy for someone taking anti-AIDS drugs to weaken or even die from hunger or malnutrition). By expanding linkages to food security programming this bill will enable the U.S. to do more to help hungry people avoid HIV infection and survive AIDS.

As the full House and Senate consider this important piece of legislation in the coming weeks, we urge Congress to support these important provisions and defeat any efforts that either weaken the bill or reduce funding for the global fight against AIDS.

Together, we can rise to the challenge of the HIV/AIDS pandemic – to halting its spread and ensuring that all men, women, and children are able to live a life of dignity and respect. Let us act now to accomplish this goal.