

The AIDS epidemic today “is not simply a health issue”, but also a critical human security issue. HIV/AIDS has “destabilized all levels and sectors of society”, studies having shown that with an infection rate reaching 20% of the population, a nation can expect a decline of 1% of its GDP each year. In too many regions “HIV/AIDS is killing people at such a massive rate that it even questions human survival”, security of women being particularly at risk. Indeed “for a woman living in Uganda and heading a household, the risks of being infected by HIV/AIDS are high. Unless she already has adequate assets like land or income, her efforts to feed her family may put her in a vulnerable situation where she is more likely to be coerced into sex in exchange for money and resources.” Overall AIDS “affects the very web in which certain societies are woven by breaking up the family and introducing a combined impact of stigma and economic burden”, while it also acts as a magnifying lens on problems societies may already be experiencing. HIV/AIDS thus often induces a negative synergy through the entire social fabric. AIDS “causes poverty even where it did not exist before”, and hits the already poor with greater intensity. The spread of AIDS is facilitated by violence and conflict, which negatively impacts gender/AIDS relations in many ways

1. Sexual violence: rape used as a weapon of war becomes another vehicle for the epidemic to spread.
2. Breakdown in social structures and legal protections: “sexual relationships become transitory, involving a greater number of partners” leading to abuse of women and young girls and a vicious circle of impunity for those perpetrating these abuses.
3. Limited health infrastructures: access to condoms is limited, and treatment against mother-to-child transmission is unavailable, with women always having less access to health facilities, while confronted to more public discrimination.
4. Heightened deprivation and reduced economic opportunities: “women and children find themselves forced to exchange sex for food, resources, shelter, protection and money.”
5. Breakdown of education: “lack of education and training increases the dependency of women and children to get involved in risk behaviour”.
6. Presence of military and peacekeeping forces: these population groups tend to have a higher HIV infection rate than the overall population, and lack knowledge on transmission and preventive measures, while they are in positions of power that they exploit on occasion to abuse refugees, women and children.

This paper therefore makes the following policy recommendations

1. Empowering women, for they are the most afflicted, notably through legal protection and national laws that are gender sensitive, an example being Rwanda’s inheritance law which now allows women to inherit land.
2. Training soldiers and promoting a code of conduct that stresses the need to respect women and young girls.
3. Strengthening international commitment, in the wake of Security Council Resolution 1308 which recognizes AIDS as a security issue, to “reach deep into the roots of the HIV/AIDS epidemic”