

# HIV/AIDS and Education: Smashing Taboos to Save Lives

**Families composed of only grandparents and grandchildren; households run by adolescents; dying parents nursed by their children. As well as devastating entire economies, HIV/AIDS is transforming the structure of both families and education systems in Africa, where a staggering 11,000 people contract the virus daily. It is also wiping out social and economic gains that Africa has worked towards for decades.**

Asia also presents the potential for a full-blown crisis – if not on the same scale – unless urgent action is taken. Eastern Europe has seen an alarming rise in AIDS related to drug abuse. No region can afford to ignore the threat the HIV/AIDS virus represents and its implication for education systems.

The AIDS problem has become so critical that the United Nations Security Council addressed it in January 2000 – the first time in its history that it has ever treated a pandemic as a global security crisis.

In certain African communities 30 per cent of the teachers have died. In Zambia 1,300 died in 1998 alone. A study carried out in Côte d'Ivoire revealed that 140 teachers died of AIDS and 519 were HIV positive in the 1996/97 school year. Estimating that the schooling of almost 38,000 primary school pupils would suffer, the study said that if the rate of infection stayed the same, at least 71,000 children would have poor-quality schooling in the year 2000.

Apart from the devastating psychological effect of illness and death among teachers and pupils, the long-term structural effects of AIDS on education systems are dire. "As AIDS continues to take its toll, there will be schools with no head teachers and inspectors," a recent UNICEF study points out. "This has a negative impact on the education system's ability to plan, manage and implement policies and programmes."

Half of all the new cases of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, occur in young people between 15 and 24 years of age. "We learn to be responsible about sex only by being taught," says 16-year-old Bradley Mauff of Western Samoa. "A child who knows nothing of the consequences of unprotected sex is most at risk." Bradley and 500 other young people speak out on sexual and reproductive health in a recent booklet from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). All of them demand accurate information on sex, HIV/AIDS, family planning, marriage and child care. They bring home the lesson that quality education should not only meet learning needs, it should advance human rights, including reproductive rights.

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*Boy pupils at the Idooome primary school in Uganda, where some 2.6 million pupils in 8,000 primary schools spend 12 per cent of class time on health-related subjects. HIV prevalence has now dropped among young people.*



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"The time is now to put the HIV/AIDS crisis at the centre of our national education agendas," insists educationist M. J. Kelly of the University of Zambia in a recent analysis of HIV/AIDS in education. "School in an AIDS-infected world cannot be the same as school in an AIDS-free world."

"Though AIDS may be wiping out large numbers, in certain societies people are still reluctant to address sexuality," explains Sonia Bahri of UNESCO. "Cultural attitudes often discourage open discussion on prevention, so countries are slow to teach it in schools." Traditions, beliefs and value systems thus need to be taken into account in the design of HIV/AIDS preventive programmes, as much as the medical aspects. "In too many instances, parents are uncomfortable discussing these issues, peers are uninformed and schools are hesitant to encourage dialogue. Yet rates of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy and are highest at young ages," says Dr Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of UNFPA. "Young people are denied the information and services that they need in order to make responsible decisions about sex and reproduction."

Some countries are actively overcoming the taboo. Senegal has worked hard to prevent a major HIV epidemic and has maintained one of the lowest rates of infection in sub-Saharan Africa.

Reproductive health and sexuality are now part of school curricula. When HIV prevalence in Uganda reached nearly 10 per cent of adults, the government instituted urgent national measures to raise awareness, support behavioural change and address the needs of people living with HIV/AIDS. HIV prevalence has now dropped substantially among young people.

In other parts of the world preventive projects are mushrooming. Since 1993, Sri Lanka has included "population and family life education" in the school curriculum. Cambodia has translated preventive educational material into Khmer and intensively trained teachers on a national level. In Thailand, the Daughters of Education project provides funding for girls who would otherwise be sold into the sex trade so that they remain in school.

In Latin America, Brazil has embarked on an ambitious US\$50 million national prevention programme targeting young people both in and out of school, especially those difficult to reach, from prostitutes to prisoners. Honduras, Mexico and the Dominican Republic are all running teacher training workshops within the UNAIDS framework.

Ministers of Education and Health in the Arab States will attend workshops all through the year 2000 to plan preventive strategies adapted to the region, where HIV/AIDS, although a major concern, has not reached crisis proportions.

Thanks to effective information campaigns, industrialized countries show a high level of awareness of the risks attached to HIV/AIDS. However, immigrant populations and ethnic minorities, who contract the virus at higher rates, are still vulnerable. Preventive education continues with some success. In western Europe, 60 per cent of young people now use condoms the first time they have sex – a six-fold increase since the early 1990s. This is a good illustration of how responsibly young people behave when they are properly informed. Any hope of bringing the pandemic under control resides with them.

AIDS is theoretically a treatable disease now, thanks to multiple-drug therapy. But at US\$20,000 a head per year, only the world's richest countries can afford this treatment, despite solidarity campaigns such as the UNAIDS/French Government initiative to give developing countries access to the latest treatment. Until such actions become generalized, in the words of Raphael N'Diaye of the ENDA Tiers Monde organization, "the only effective vaccine against AIDS is education." ■

**"The first battle to be won in the war against AIDS is the battle to smash the wall of silence and stigma surrounding it".**

**Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations.**

