

Proposed Satellite Session for AIDS 2006, Toronto

Missing the Women Exploring Key Challenges in Global Policy Responses to HIV/AIDS

Organizing Partners:

Commonwealth Secretariat, HSRC, Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, Dalhousie University, UNAIDS, OSISA

Rationale:

Experiences in research, programming and policy in HIV/AIDS indicate that globally, we are “missing the women”. For example, at the AIDS 2002 conference in Barcelona, a mere 9.6% of research presentations focused on women or the gender dimensions of the pandemic. In 2004, no appreciable improvement was noted at the World AIDS Conference in Bangkok with only 8.3% of total presentations addressing gender issues, despite the increased awareness of the growing impact of HIV/AIDS on women and girls.

There is recognition that, increasingly, HIV/AIDS has a woman's face. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS for a variety of reasons:

- Physiological difference
- Lower socio-economic status
- Systemic gender discrimination
- Cultural taboos
- Ethnic, racial and familial discrimination
- Lack of political will and government action to address gender-based discrimination

It is imperative therefore that we explore why we continue to ‘miss the women’ in research, policy and programmes and seek ways to ensure that women's voices do not go unheard.

Objectives:

1. To consider what evidence has been produced that addresses women and girls in the HIV/AIDS pandemic and which women's voices are privileged in this evidence.
2. To explore what has been done with available evidence on women, gender and HIV/AIDS, and which research questions and research participants have been ignored or overlooked.
3. To understand the micro and macro dynamics that prevent researchers, programmers and policy makers from paying attention to the voices of diverse groups of women and girls
4. To examine the barriers to translating evidence about the realities of women's lives and experiences into effective and appropriate policies and programmes.
5. To develop recommendations about how best to undertake policy and programme development and implementation to meet the needs of women and girls infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

Session description:

The session will commence with a presentation by Olive Shisana, President and CEO of the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa. Her paper will focus on the reasons for 'missing the women' in the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In highlighting issues such as stigma and discrimination, marginalized groups, violations of human rights and policy gaps and failures, Dr. Shisana will identify areas where the absence of a gender focus renders research, policy and practice unable to adequately meet women's practical needs and strategic interests.

Cheryl Potgieter, Director of Gender and Development Unit in the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa, will follow up with an analysis of research on women and HIV/AIDS in recent years. She will examine: what we know about women and HIV/AIDS; what we don't know and why; which women's voices are privileged – and which are absent – in research.

Four discussants will elaborate on main threads highlighted in the presentations by Olive Shisana and Cheryl Potgieter. Sisonke Msimang, Programme Manager for HIV/AIDS at Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa, will address why policy does not reflect the evidence about women and HIV/AIDS. Meena Seshu, Director of SANGRAM in India, will focus on the needs and experiences of marginalized women and the challenges they face in regard to research and policy responses. Joanne Csete, Executive Director of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, will speak to the erosion of women's rights in recent years and the need to work within a rights-based framework to create gender responsive policy. Alice Welbourn, Chair, UK Board, International Community of Women living with HIV/AIDS, will speak to the issues facing HIV+ women and girls who live with the daily realities of stigma, discrimination and a lack of enabling policies.

Target Audiences:

The session will appeal to participants (100-150) from a wide variety of disciplines, sectors and regions. The presentations and discussion will be of interest to: researchers, programme managers/implementers, advocates and civil society organizations, government and corporate representatives, policy and decision makers, policy analysts and donors.

Outcomes:

Presentations will set the stage for discussions on recommendations about how best to undertake policy and programme development and implementation to meet the needs of women and girls infected and affected by HIV/AIDS around the world.

Session organizers will finalize a statement of recommendations arising from the session and will disseminate the statement to interested participants as well as through existing networks.