**AIDS: shattering the silence**

**Facing the Challenge**

An epidemic that is destroying more lives than all the armed conflicts raging today, AIDS is a complex global emergency demanding the most urgent attention of the world community. In sub-Saharan Africa, the disease is the worst social and human catastrophe in history. Of the 2.8 million people who died of AIDS in 1999, 79 per cent were African.

AIDS is draining the resources and stamina of extended families and governments already strained to the limit. It has set back hard-won gains in child survival, health and education in many countries and will do even more damage as millions of people infected with HIV develop AIDS. Poverty and armed conflict worsen the tragedy of HIV/AIDS, and the ‘culture of silence’ surrounding the issue has prevented needed action from taking place.

The AIDS toll on children

On any one day in 1999, millions of children around the world grieved for dead or dying parents and other loved ones affected by HIV/AIDS. At the same time, many of these children, lacking the care and support of their parents, went without nutritious meals, health care and schooling. And a good number of those who did attend school were likely to lose their teachers to AIDS: An estimated 860,000 children in sub-Saharan Africa lost their teachers to the disease in 1999 alone.

The tragedy does not end there. Because of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and other forms of exposure to the virus, large numbers of these same children have begun their own painful slide towards disease and death. To date, nearly 4 million children under the age of 15 have died from AIDS, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa.

By the end of 1999, a cumulative total of 13.2 million children had, before the age of 15, lost their mother or both parents to AIDS. Some children orphaned by AIDS have loving family members, usually grandmothers, to take care of them. But many others end up isolated, in abusive households, in institutions or on the streets.

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**AIDS: A tragedy told in numbers**

- Every minute, six young people below the age of 25 become infected with HIV.
- At the end of 1999, 34.3 million people in the world were living with HIV, 24.5 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa.
- In 1999, AIDS killed 10 times more people in sub-Saharan Africa than did all the conflicts raging in that region.
- Girls’ rates of infection outpace those of boys in many places. In Zambia, more than twice as many girls are infected with HIV as are boys.
- In the Mekong region of South-East Asia, 7.2 million people are living with AIDS. One fifth of them were infected in one year, between 1998 and 1999.

*(See also photo essay, ‘The AIDS preventive: Awareness’, pages 10 to 13.)*
Achieving Results

Each year, we learn more about how best to support families, communities and governments in their struggle against AIDS, through our work with these partners as well as with NGOs, the media and the private sector. UNICEF is a key member of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), a leading global force in the struggle against AIDS. We also cooperate with other UN agencies in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), which has laid the groundwork for a collaborative approach to fighting AIDS in eastern and southern Africa.

UNICEF's goal is to address the underlying causes of the AIDS epidemic, reduce the vulnerability of children, adolescents and women and mitigate the impact of disease and death. In 1999, we expanded our staff in the most-affected countries, and we continued to support communities in protecting the rights of children, young people and women affected by AIDS.

Preventing mother-to-child transmission of HIV

UNICEF plays a leading role in efforts to prevent what is a prime cause of death among children in many countries in eastern and southern Africa – by supporting prevention programmes in more than 20 countries. In 1999, 11 countries – 9 of them in sub-Saharan Africa – took part in a pilot programme, launched with support from UNICEF, that offers voluntary and confidential counselling and testing for women and their partners; administers AZT (an anti-retroviral drug that reduces HIV transmission from mother to child); and provides information about breastfeeding, counselling on infant feeding options and improved prenatal care. The programme improves HIV prevention and reproductive health services for all women, including those not infected with HIV.

Strengthening young people’s health and development

In Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe, UNICEF assists the Straight Talk project, a series of newspapers and radio talk shows coordinated by youths to provide their peers with information on reproductive health. By the end of 1999, Kenya’s Straight Talk newspaper had a monthly circulation of 700,000.

UNICEF also works with partners to set up youth-friendly health services for adolescents and youth. And we help children who could be at risk of sexual exploitation by supporting their right to education, which is the best prevention. To reduce HIV infection among children and adolescents who are exploited, we support programmes that offer information about sexually transmitted infections as well as counselling, legal advice and protection and other services.

Education: The ‘AIDS vaccine’

Education, especially for children and young people, is crucial to prevent HIV/AIDS, and it helps counter the discrimination suffered by those infected. UNICEF helps provide information that addresses the underlying attitudes, values and skills.

- In Namibia, UNICEF worked with young people to develop a school curriculum, entitled ‘My Future Is My Choice’, which teaches youth vital life skills, such as how to negotiate in relationships and make informed decisions. More than 40,000 young people in Namibia have used the 11-session curriculum – 17,000 in 1999 alone.
- In Zimbabwe, adolescents participate in role-playing and other activities that help them learn about HIV/AIDS and life skills. The weekly lessons are provided through the UNICEF-supported national AIDS Action Programme for Schools.
- In Myanmar, UNICEF and the Myanmar Red Cross support a life skills project, which by the end of 1999 had trained more than 17,000 youths aged 15 to 24 and had helped convey prevention messages to an additional 80,000 young people.

Helping children and families obtain care and services

Children orphaned by AIDS are best supported in a caring family and community environment. In Malawi, UNICEF provides training and other support to Village Orphan Committees made up of children, adults and village leaders. The project has helped more than 240,000 orphaned children through services such as community gardens and day-care centres.

Support for staff affected by AIDS

Many UNICEF staff members have died from AIDS or have been otherwise affected by the disease. In Zambia, the Caring for Us project was developed to help staff cope with grief, tension and other problems caused by the epidemic. The project is being adopted by other UNICEF offices and UN organizations.
AIDS takes a ruthless toll on the young. Nearly 4 million children under 15 years old have died of the disease since the epidemic began, and approximately 1.3 million children 15 and under are living with HIV. Millions more have been orphaned when their mothers or both parents died of AIDS.

In addition to grief and loss, children affected by AIDS face untold hardships when their extended families are strained to extremes in trying to care for them. Many children are left to fend for themselves and for their siblings. Resources and support are vital if these and other children are to be protected. And to prevent yet another generation from suffering, governments and communities must rally to the cause of AIDS awareness and prevention.
Breaking the Silence

A ‘culture of silence’ in which fear and discrimination thrive surrounds AIDS in many societies. Programmes are needed that foster openness about the disease, awareness about its causes and respect for those affected by it.

Young people under 25 are those most likely to become infected with HIV, so they deserve and need AIDS education and information at school as well as training in life skills that will help them make sound, informed decisions about their health and well-being. Young people often learn best from their peers and need ample opportunities to interact with each other about key issues – at school, at youth-friendly health clinics and in community settings. The most successful initiatives invite young people to take part in programme planning and management.
A boy leads an HIV/AIDS information session in Egypt.

Monks receive HIV/AIDS materials for distribution in Cambodia.
Young people need our focused attention. But if the epidemic has taught us one lesson, it is that AIDS is everyone's problem. The fight against the disease must involve all members of society – women and girls alongside men and boys – and must galvanize the conscience and resources of the entire global community.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes children's right to be informed about their health and development. Yet this right remains unrealized for the millions of children who need it most, largely because commitment and adequate resources are lacking. In the case of AIDS, denying young people access to information and services is a tragedy in the making.

UNICEF supports myriad efforts to increase HIV/AIDS awareness for young people in many countries, including through school programmes, youth-run newspapers and radio programmes, peer counselling projects, media campaigns and popular theatre. Encouraging results show that these efforts, many of them still fledgling or small-scale, are helping develop positive attitudes and behaviours regarding AIDS. This is especially true when the programmes are backed up with AIDS-awareness activities for families and communities.

Adolescents perform a play about AIDS written by young people in Tanzania.

Adolescents attend an HIV/AIDS community leadership workshop in Brazil.

Two girls from Brazil.
Facing the Challenge

Children and women are especially vulnerable in times of armed conflict and upheaval, and they are increasingly targeted by warring groups aiming to spread terror among civilian populations. During conflict, children commonly lose their homes, their schools, their parents or their hope for the future. The resulting trauma can have a deep and lasting effect. Making matters worse is the fact that several conflicts, especially those in Africa, have slipped from public attention, leaving devastated societies with little hope of assistance from donors.

In conflicts, the rights of the most vulnerable children and women are grossly violated:

- More than 2 million children died or were killed in the last 10 years as a direct result of armed conflict.
- In the last year alone, an estimated 31 million refugees and displaced persons – mostly women and children – were caught up in conflict situations.
- An estimated 300,000 children are serving in armed forces, often forcibly, as soldiers and servants, and many are forced into sexual slavery.
- Each year, about 6,000 children are killed or maimed by landmines planted where children live, play and go to school.

Achieving Results

With a strong presence in 161 countries, areas and territories, UNICEF has structures and capacities in place to respond to the needs of children affected by conflict. In addition, the UNICEF Supply Division – one of the largest of any international organization – is able to provide a range of items children need when emergencies strike.

UNICEF also works to help affected populations rapidly regain their ability to manage their lives, for example by restoring school systems and education and by supporting families and children in dealing with trauma from exposure to violence and other atrocities.

- In 1999, UNICEF helped train teachers and establish temporary schools for nearly 30,000 children in Burundi’s camps for displaced people. To boost education in the rest of the country, UNICEF helped provide 80,000 students with notebooks and pens and promoted teacher training and peace education in 1,500 schools.
- In Kosovo, where schools were decimated during the war, a UNICEF-led alliance of relief organizations, international donors and local communities provided alternative spaces for classrooms and repaired and equipped damaged schools. As a result, 97 per cent of primary schoolchildren whose schooling had been disrupted were back in class by the end of 1999.

One of UNICEF’s most pressing goals is to make certain that children and their families receive humanitarian assistance, needed services and vital supplies during conflict. In some cases, we negotiate agreements with all sides to a conflict under the auspices of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), to ensure that children and women can be immunized and receive other essential services. At the same time, these interventions help build respect for humanitarian principles.

In conflict situations, including those in Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, East Timor, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Sudan,
UNICEF, together with the World Health Organization (WHO), negotiated and organized ‘days of tranquillity’ to immunize children. In Afghanistan, an agreement secured access by health workers to northern provinces for the first time in a year, allowing almost 4 million children to be vaccinated against polio.

Adolescents need special support during crises, as they are particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse, including rape and exploitation as child soldiers.

In Liberia, where as many as 6,000 to 10,000 children served as soldiers during the civil war (1989-1997), UNICEF supported the demobilization of more than 4,000 child soldiers and continues to build the skills and capabilities of these and other war-affected young people – including girls abducted and raped during the war – so that they can lead productive lives. Activities include extensive counselling for those suffering psychosocial trauma and an innovative education programme that condenses six primary grades into three to help provide basic education to older children who missed school. From the inception of the programme in 1994 to the end of 1999, 6,000 such children were being reached. A related education project helps adolescents and youths learn marketable skills and imparts information about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.

In six refugee camps for displaced Kosovars in Albania, UNICEF helped youths aged 15 to 24 set up Youth Councils that planned and managed camp services, including schooling, cleaning crews, landmine awareness and inter-camp football and volleyball tournaments for young people. An important aim was to promote leadership skills that would help youth make an active contribution to Yugoslavia’s post-war recovery and to the strengthening of democratic processes.

UNICEF’s Peace and Security Agenda

This year, UNICEF launched a Peace and Security Agenda to help guide international efforts on behalf of children and women in armed conflict. The set of goals, presented to the United Nations Security Council in February 1999, builds on our ongoing Anti-war Agenda. This new Agenda includes measures such as ending the use of child soldiers; enforcing the Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel mines; protecting children from the effects of sanctions; reducing the availability of small arms and light weapons; and improving safety for humanitarian workers.

Tragically, staff safety issues took on greater urgency for us this year as UNICEF staff members were taken hostage, assaulted and robbed, or were victims of other violent acts. Luis Zuñiga, UNICEF Representative in Burundi, and Dr. Ayoub Sheikh Yerow, a UNICEF health officer in Somalia, were murdered while performing their humanitarian work, victims of the conflicts raging in those two countries.
Facing the Challenge

Discrimination invades society like a disease. Its symptoms include poor communities without clean water and sanitation facilities, health and other basic services; classrooms without girls and children with disabilities; legal systems that turn a blind eye to violence against women and children; and societies that shun people with HIV/AIDS.

Girls and women are often the most affected by discrimination, and their rights are further violated when they are denied access to schooling and health care. In the most extreme cases, they are victimized by unconscionable acts of violence.

Statistics tell a cruel story:

- Girls make up nearly 60 per cent of the more than 110 million school-aged children not in school.
- Nearly 600,000 women – 1 per minute – die every year in childbirth or from pregnancy-related causes, largely because they do not have the power to negotiate when and how often they bear children or because they are denied their right to quality and timely health care, adequate nutrition, information and counselling.
- An estimated 60-100 million girls and women are ‘missing’ from the world – victims of foeticide, infanticide, malnutrition, neglect and other rights violations – according to demographers. This is attributed primarily to practices that favour male over female children.

Achieving Results

Antidotes to the ‘disease’ – awareness, education and commitment – are already at work in thousands of communities around the world as UNICEF joins with governments, NGOs and civil society to raise awareness about discrimination’s effects and to change the cultural norms that value and reinforce men’s power and privilege over women.

Highlighting gender concerns in every aspect of its programmes, UNICEF works with several partners towards better legal protection of women and stricter enforcement of existing laws. We support programmes in schools, youth clubs, police academies and other organizations...
that encourage boys and men to embrace tolerance and equality.

Girls' education
Along with improving health care and literacy programmes for women, education for girls is the single greatest initiator of human development. It equips girls with the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to make the most of their abilities, to lead healthier lives and to protect themselves from discrimination and violence.

UNICEF supports programmes that help girls gain access to schools and complete their education. Measures include setting up schools close to communities so that girls do not have far to travel; protecting girls' privacy through provision of separate latrines for girls and boys; developing textbooks and curricula free of gender bias; and training teachers and administrators to be more sensitive to girls' needs.

All of these goals drive the Global Girls' Education Programme, initiated in 1994 and implemented by UNICEF and its partners in more than 60 countries.

In Zimbabwe, in 1999, a government programme sensitized regional education directors, 4,600 primary school heads and 280 facilitators to the special needs of girls in school.

Equality in early childhood care
UNICEF supports programmes, such as the Roving Caregivers home-visit programme in Jamaica, that intervene during a child's first years to help children and their parents promote equality among girls and boys and change the attitudes, values and behaviour that devalue and marginalize girls.

Adolescent girls
The adolescent years are a time of great promise, but they are also a time of particular vulnerability, especially for girls. To help promote solutions to problems such as AIDS and gender-based discrimination, adolescents from 16 countries have been brought together by the Inter-country Project on Adolescent Girls' Rights to Participation and Development, which is backed by R. E. ('Ted') Turner's United Nations Foundation and implemented by UNICEF. In Jordan, in 1999, the Foundation helped support a Youth Forum and Future Search Conference led by youth. Young people who led the conference identified marriage and pregnancy at an early age as key problems for girls and young women. They began an advocacy campaign to raise the legal age of matrimony.

Safe motherhood
UNICEF supports a variety of measures to reduce high rates of maternal mortality, ranging from educating communities on safe motherhood and the rights of women to strengthening prenatal care and improving nutrition.

In Bolivia, free health care for pregnant women and their children, established in 1997, increased prenatal visits to health facilities by 80 per cent, deliveries at health facilities by 48 per cent and treatment of emergency cases by 90 per cent, in its first year.

In Indonesia, in 1999, UNICEF supported efforts to improve emergency obstetrical services in district hospitals and helped train 40,000 village-based midwives in providing safe home deliveries.

Ending violence against girls and women
Like maternal mortality, violence against girls and women is rooted in the low status accorded them in their societies and the unequal power relations between women and men. UNICEF works to assist victims and to help change underlying values, attitudes and behaviour (see panel at right).

Majeda was 17 years old and seven months pregnant when a neighbour, angry over a family land dispute, threw a glass of sulphuric acid in her face.

Acid attacks against women – especially young women – have risen steadily in Bangladesh, with as many as 200 reported in any one year. These attacks occur during disputes over marriage dowry or property, or when male suitors feel the sting of rejection. The survivors of these attacks often endure lifelong disfigurement.

Fortunately, Majeda and others like her have found help through the Acid Survivors Foundation, established in May 1999 with support from UNICEF and the Canadian International Development Agency. The foundation works with the Government of Bangladesh, NGOs and the international community to raise awareness about the horrific practice. It provides survivors with access to medical care, counselling, legal help, education and employment.

Majeda, blinded by the attack, has been helped to obtain medical care. Now 18, she has undergone extensive facial reconstruction and eye surgery, which restored 20 per cent of her vision. In January 1999, six months after giving birth to her son, Majeda was able to look at him for the first time.