



DIALOGUE

HIV/AIDS IN AFRICA: THE PRICE BEING PAID BY YOUNG WOMEN

Progress is being made on HIV/AIDS, but not for young women. In South Africa there are almost twice as many HIV-affected females as males. The gender gap is even wider in younger population groups, where HIV incidence is four times higher among young women than their male counterparts. It is an unacceptable situation whose causes include poverty, the status of women and, most of all, the violence to which they are subjected.

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The most recent World HIV/AIDS Day, held on 1 December 2019, provided an opportunity to learn about the latest international and national epidemiological data for the infectious syndrome. Overall, there has been gradual improvement (see the UNAIDS Report 2019;¹) both in terms of new HIV infections – which peaked at over 3 million towards the end of the 1990s and then began to fall, with 1.7 million new cases in 2018 – and in terms of AIDS-related mortality, which peaked at 1.5 million deaths in 2005, then dropped by about half, to 770,000 deaths, in 2018. Global HIV/AIDS prevalence, i.e. the number of people living with the infection, is on the rise: there are nearly 38 million such individuals, including both new cases of infection and “older” ones where HIV-infected patients survive and in most cases continue to live in good health conditions thanks to antiretroviral therapy.

Italian HIV data provided by Epicentro² show that in 2018, 2,847 new HIV-infection diagnoses were reported, equivalent to 4.7 new cases per 100,000 residents, and thus a decrease from the 2017 figure. Among the Italian regions with more than 1.5 million inhabitants, the highest such incidences were recorded in Lazio, Tuscany and Liguria. 85.6% of those who learned they were HIV-positive in 2018 were male. The median age was 39 for males and 38 for females, with the highest HIV incidences being found in individuals aged 25-29 years and 30-39 years. Most new HIV diagnoses were attributable to unprotected sexual intercourse, which accounted for 80.2% of all the reports. Moreover, more than half of the individuals with newly-diagnosed HIV were diagnosed at an advanced stage of illness. Advanced-stage HIV diagnoses are common in Europe (see ECDC data;³), particularly among women in their forties. In 2018, 60% of women diagnosed with HIV were aged from 30 to 49, and 92% of them had been infected through heterosexual transmission.

Globally, sub-Saharan Africa remains the world's hardest-hit region in terms of HIV infection (see the **table** on the inside cover of the magazine). Progress is gradually being made, but the epidemic continues to rage, in part because while antiretroviral medicines suppress the virus, they cannot cure it, and an effective HIV vaccine is not on the immediate horizon. The only truly effective response, therefore, is prevention.

The world's hardest-hit country in terms of HIV/AIDS is South Africa. Out of a total 56 million inhabitants, 7.7 million live with the infection. The situation has undoubtedly improved over time: in 2018, there were 240,000 new infections (compared to 390,000 in 2010) and 71,000 deaths (half the 2010 figure). The number of patients being treated with antiretroviral therapy rose from 900,000 in 2010 to over 5 million in 2018. Among the over-14 population, there are almost twice as many HIV-affected young women (4.7 million) as men (2.8 million). The gender gap is wider in the youngest population groups, where HIV incidence is four times higher among young women than their male counterparts. It is an unacceptable situation whose causes include poverty, the status of girls and women and, most of all, the violence to which they are subjected, including being forced to have unprotected sex. The UNAIDS report tells us that in South Africa, 30% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 report having been subjected to physical or sexual violence from their partner over the last year. Similar percentages were recorded in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania and Uganda, while the numbers were just slightly lower (20-25%) in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Malawi, Namibia, Rwanda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

NOTES

¹ UNAIDS Data 2019.

² <https://www.epicentro.iss.it/aids/epidemiologia-italia>

³ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/news-events/world-aids-day-2019-taking-closer-look-hiv-women-europe>