

Technical Meeting on Young Women in HIV Hyper-endemic Countries of Southern Africa

Economic Empowerment and HIV Prevention Policy and Programme Action Brief

Julia Kim^{a, b} Paul Pronyk^{a, b} Tony Barnett^c Charlotte Watts^b

^a School of Public Health, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

^b London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

^c London School of Economics AIDS Programme

Global evidence suggests that the relationship between poverty and HIV risk is complex, and that poverty on its own cannot be viewed simplistically as a driver of the HIV epidemic. Rather, its' role appears to be multi-dimensional, and to interact with a range of other factors - such as mobility, social and economic inequalities, and social capital - which converge in a particularly potent way for young women living in southern Africa. To date, there have been few interventions that have explicitly attempted to combine economic empowerment with the goal of HIV prevention, and even fewer which have been rigorously evaluated. However, early lessons are emerging from circumscribed interventions that have attempted to link economic empowerment with HIV prevention. By providing a detailed exploration of how vehicles such as microfinance or livelihoods initiatives might impact on a range of HIV-related outcomes, such research is useful for drawing out broader lessons, and providing a metaphor for what might be possible in promoting women's economic empowerment on a wider scale.

However, there are clearly limitations to what individual intervention programs can achieve, and unless women's economic empowerment is supported by broader country-level policies that bridge a range of intersecting levels, impacts are likely to be limited. Thus, the challenge to policy makers is to begin using the lessons generated from such programmatic experiences to generate effective, cross-sectoral responses to HIV/AIDS that are relevant to their own context. Intervention programs targeting women's economic empowerment need to be supported by country-level policies that carry the potential for far more sustained and systemic changes in women's status and health. The following recommendations highlight important entry points for strengthening HIV prevention efforts by deliberately addressing women's economic vulnerability.

- 1. Policies and programs that promote the economic empowerment of women and girls should be included as core components of national HIV prevention strategies:** Research suggests that addressing women's basic economic needs through programs such as microfinance, youth livelihoods and life skills training, and initiatives to protect women's food security and property and inheritance rights not only targets women's economic vulnerability directly, but can also offer a strategic opportunity for attracting sustained group-based participation in HIV prevention activities among the poor. Experience with combined economic empowerment and HIV interventions suggest that it is feasible to address structural factors such as poverty, gender inequalities and gender-based violence as part of HIV prevention programs, and these goals should be explicitly included within national HIV/AIDS strategies. Adequate resources, technical expertise, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms relating to these goals need to be included to support effective

implementation.

2. **Increase financial support to community organizations that promote economic empowerment of women, and ensure that these organizations are represented on National AIDS Councils, Country Coordinating Mechanisms (CCMs), and in other relevant national and local decision-making and consultative bodies:** Currently, most national and local bodies focusing on HIV/AIDS tend to reflect the participation of stakeholders and advisors representing primarily clinical and public health expertise. Given the need to encourage greater cross-sectoral collaboration, these should be expanded to include a more diverse range of expertise, including groups working on poverty alleviation, food security, gender-based violence, and women's rights.
3. **Support the development of cross-sectoral partnership models and encourage programmatic innovation to develop combined economic empowerment and HIV prevention interventions:** While there have been increasing calls for a "cross-sectoral response" to the HIV pandemic, there are few concrete examples of programs that work – particularly in high-prevalence African settings. Emerging evidence suggests that adding a Gender and HIV training component to economic interventions such as microfinance can expand their health and social impacts. However, without specific funding to support the development of combined economic and health interventions, it is likely that further innovation will remain limited. Technical and financial support to develop cross-sectoral intervention programs, and the sharing of expertise required to initiate and sustain these, should be encouraged.
4. **Support scale up of promising cross-sectoral intervention models:** Where promising interventions combining economic empowerment and HIV prevention have been developed, they should be supported to scale-up where appropriate. Further research would help to identify how such programs might be replicated or adapted in different contexts. Many programs currently include an HIV training component, and best practice guidelines should be developed in relation to the content, delivery, and intensity of such training. Technical support may be required for including newer elements such as content relating to gender norms, gender-based violence or community mobilization activities. Such support should also consider what kind of capacity-building might be required for program implementers themselves, and what kind of institutional structures need to be developed in order to support and manage expanded activities and mandates. Where there are pockets of innovation, lessons should be shared regionally, through the development of learning centers and exchange programs.
5. **Explore a broad range of economic empowerment strategies for women and adolescent girls as a platform for reducing vulnerability to HIV infection:** To date, most experience with combining interventions aimed at women's economic empowerment and HIV prevention has arisen within the microfinance sector. There is a need to further explore other economic empowerment strategies which carry important opportunities for cross-sectoral interventions. Programs such as vocational training, literacy programs, or other livelihoods strategies may present relative advantages or disadvantages for different target groups and settings. Initiatives aimed at improving women's food security and safeguarding their property and inheritance rights have yet to develop strategic linkages with HIV training or service organizations. Lessons and partnership models from the microfinance sector should be further elaborated and expanded to include these other areas.
6. **Evaluate interventions using realistic and relevant indicators, methods, and timeframes:** There is a need for further research in order to guide programme and policy development for linking economic empowerment strategies and HIV/AIDS interventions in a range of settings. Few economic empowerment strategies – with or without an additional HIV-related component – have been well evaluated and it is rarely feasible to implement a randomized controlled trial. However, experience suggests that strong and informative evaluations are possible. To date, economic programs have tended to focus on measuring conventional financial indicators, such as poverty targets, or financial sustainability measures. Broader impacts on dimensions such as women's empowerment, gender-based violence, sexual behaviour, and other HIV-related outcomes should be more

systematically evaluated, and consideration given to the longer timeframes that may be required in order to observe change. In some areas, there is a need to address information gaps, for example, by developing sex-disaggregated national- and local-level indicators that can measure progress toward women's equality in land and property inheritance rights. More research on such outcomes within different intervention models is needed, as well as operational research that evaluates the most effective institutional strategies for creating partnerships between economic empowerment and HIV prevention programs.

7. **Ensure that broader country-level policies support and sustain the impact of individual programs.** There are clearly limitations to what individual intervention programs can achieve. Often, the impact of scaling-up or replicating locally successful models is constrained by a lack of realistic engagement with broader policies and structures that can curtail or expand their scope. Therefore, in order to be effective, intervention programs need to be supported by country-level policies that carry the potential for far more sustained and systemic changes in women's status and health. Therefore, in addition to supporting programs that strengthen combined approaches to economic empowerment and HIV prevention, countries should ensure that domestic legislation is consistent with international human rights norms, and that it is effective in protecting women's rights within marriage, securing their right to own and inherit property, ensuring equality in the workplace, and strengthening laws against domestic violence and sexual violence.
8. **Ensure that economic development plans (whether involving the development of productive sectors or the provision of social safety nets) pass an "AIDS impact assessment":** Given the range of factors known to interact with poverty and increase vulnerability to HIV infection, economic development plans should be viewed with an "HIV lens" in order to determine whether they may inadvertently increase population risk of infection, and if so, whether deliberate measures can be taken to reduce this risk. Just as governments currently require private and public sector development projects to include an "environmental impact assessment", such projects should also be required to pass an "AIDS impact assessment". Relevant criteria might include: whether hiring practices critically examine the demographic profile of the work force and strive to reduce dependency on migrant labour; industry standards that seek to provide alternatives to congregate, single-sex dwellings at work sites; transportation alternatives to long distance truck routes; inclusion of workplace AIDS policies and policies promoting gender equity; and programs that provide educational or economic alternatives to sex work for women living in communities surrounding high-risk areas. As with environmental impact assessments, good practices can be encouraged through preferential consideration for contracts, as well as tax and other financial incentives where programs can demonstrate that such HIV-related considerations have been taken into account. Such structural-level interventions have the potential to make important contributions to addressing the broader contextual factors which may be beyond the reach of individual economic empowerment programs.