Reference E.
Gender and HIV: some issues to consider

Resources for developing National Strategic Frameworks
Gender & HIV

Suzanne O’Neill,
with acknowledgement to Robyn Drysdale
and Linda Petersen (SPC Human Development Program Manager)
Feminisation of HIV & STI in the Pacific

• In 2009: 47% of new HIV infections in the Pacific are among women & girls
  • increase from 25% in 1990

• Main mode of transmission of HIV
  • unprotected heterosexual activity - 91%
  • Mother to child – 5%

• WHO-SPC 2006 surveillance found 1:5 women are infected with chlamydia
  • Infections increase risk x5-fold IF exposed to HIV
  • PNG IMR study found 94% of women had 2 or more STIs at the same time

• Women aged 15-49 Kiribati (68%) & Solomon’s (64%) reported experiencing Gender based violence

• UNICEF study in Vanuatu, Kiribati and Solomon’s reported that over half of sexually active girls and women reported experience of forced sex
Women’s vulnerability

Increased vulnerability — health factors:

• Women are more vulnerable because of physiological differences

• Chronic curable STIs, chronic ill health and immune suppression

• Lack of access to health services and sexual health information
Women’s vulnerability

Increased vulnerability – social and cultural factors:

• Poverty, marginalisation, economic dependence
• Inability to negotiate safe sex
• Blame, guilt, stigma, discrimination
• Sexual coercion & sexual violence
• Less participation in decision making, particularly about sex
• Low functional literacy rates, less access to education
• Lack of perception of personal risk
The role of violence

- Gender based violence, including emotional, physical and sexual violence, are serious issues across the Pacific
- These are associated with increased sexually transmitted infections and risk of HIV infection
- Male-to-female sexual transmission of HIV happens more easily than female-to-male transmission, more so if sex is forced or rough (especially for female youth & menopausal women)
- Sexual abuse & sexual exploitation also reported in many countries
PACNEWS—26 Feb 2007

‘Sailors blamed for child sex trade in Kiribati’

– Korean sailors' sexual exploitation of Kiribati young girls on their vessels berthed at Betio port or at bars near the port had been a serious and longstanding problem

– In general, Korean sailors refuse to use condoms

Kiribati National Youth Commission report 2007
Survival sex

**Economic insecurity** – can result in women engaging in ‘transactional sex’ (sex in exchange for money, goods and services)

- Labelled trade
- Ages range from 14 yrs (some secondary school students)
- Peer groups and also individual activities
- Presence of middle workers (‘pimps’)
- Earnings = fish, gifts etc to set amounts of cash
- Violence & abuse - is quite common
- Entertainment - built around the trade eg. bars
Men’s vulnerability to HIV

Men’s behaviour is constrained by traditional beliefs and expectations, cultural and social norms, and economic and political factors

- Social and cultural attitudes to sex and vulnerability
- Number of sex partners, polygamy, traditional practices
- Range of sexualities & lack of forums to talk about this
- Low rates condom acceptance / usage
- Links between alcohol and socialising
- Male occupations
- Violence
- Poverty
- Cultures in transition
Myths

Prevalent in the Pacific & strongly influence attitudes, behaviours AND access to services

• “Marriage will protect you”
• “Promoting condoms promotes sex”
A LESSON FROM PUNE, INDIA

Of a sample of 400 women attending STI clinics in the city, 93% were married and 91% had never had sex with anyone but their husband.

All of the women were infected with an STI and 13.6% tested positive for HIV.

Myth: “Marriage will protect you”
And in the Pacific?

- While married women can be at risk of HIV infection through their own sexual practices; they are mainly vulnerable and at risk from the sexual relationships of their husbands, and from violence that occurs outside of & within marriages, including rape and forced sex.

- In PNG, marriage has been significantly identified as a risk factor for women for HIV infection (Hammar, in press; Lakshman, 2004; NHASP, 2005; UNFPA, 2005b).
Barriers to prevention for women

• Stigma of HIV
• Women often unaware of partner’s infection status or level of risk
• Women may be unable to negotiate safer sex practices
  – Sexual coercion
  – Domestic violence
  – Economic vulnerability
Prevention messages

• Reliance on the ABC hierarchy in the Pacific: **Abstain; Be faithful; condom use**

• **A** in the context of the Pacific where many women have little or no control over their sexual activity?

• **B** see the previous myth!

• **C** stigma associated with condoms; relies on the women being able to negotiate condom use
Maximising prevention possibilities for women

Promoting options – instead of ‘which is better’? A, B, C, D…..

More is better!
Women at community level

- STIs – prevented & treated
- Mother to child transmission of HIV prevented
- Break down the myths eg. *Marriage will protect you*
- Increase availability, accessibility & acceptability of services and products
- **PLUS** addressing the underlying factors of risk and vulnerability – with both women & men

Methods, programs and policies that have the greatest potential for promoting and supporting women’s sexual & reproductive health rights