

Gender Focus Group Meeting (GDFG) Tuesday, 5 December 2000

The Gender Focus Group Discussion

Over 50 women and men have met, starting with the Civil Society Organization (CSO) Meeting on Saturday, 2nd December in Conference Room Two. The meetings are held each morning at 8 :00 a.m. at the Press Bar and each evening, immediately at the close of the Break Out Sessions in Caucus Room 8.

Several wide ranging issues were identified which were deemed of high priority with respect to leadership challenges from the perspective of gender.

Access to Drugs

Top among these was the issue of drugs. Who decides what the drugs are to be made available and how are they to be distributed to the population. Leaders need to revisit the issue of drugs, not just for People Living With AIDS (PLWA). Its associations and actions greatly affects women.

In most African countries the studies and trials of drugs such as AZT are pilot programs and are often used for demonstrating the effectiveness of these drugs. But, after the pilot program is completed, the drugs are not available to women most needing them, especially those that are HIV positive.

It is necessary to have women decision makers, mothers, and women who are involved in the work of HIV prevention to ensure that the in the pilot programs the subjects understand the consent to the research, trials, and programs that they will participate in. Policies are needed to protect both the mother and child, and also resources for dealing with the issue of mother-to-child-transmission (MTCT).

Women should have the right to the female condom. Studies show that there is a lack of this product. Men as well as women prefer the female condom. Governments should include female condoms among procurement of these devices for HIV prevention. Governments should not accept arguments that the female condom is not affordable. Therefore , women should be involved in decision-making of procurement of the products. Thus far, developed countries have decided that only the male condom will be made available.

Ethical Dilemmas

Several ethical dilemmas have been identified which must be addressed by the leadership:

- Sexuality a taboo area, needs to be addressed for youths between the ages of 6-13 with respect to socializing boys and girls. Socialization has to prepare the youth for life in a world of AIDS. It is unethical for parents to be silent about HIV/AIDS and consider it a social taboo. There has to be sex education including HIV/AIDS issues and provision of services that are child- and adolescent-friendly. This education must be offered right now.
- Breast feeding and placebos

- Discrimination of men and women

Information dissemination

The Gender Focus Group(GDFG) pointed out that the lack of information has negative impacts on women, as opposed to men, especially in rural areas.

Most often condoms are not available to men in the rural areas and information does not highlight the vulnerability of men.

Rural communities need to be targeted and women be mobilized for leadership in the community. The leadership in this case would facilitate the process of transmitting information to the rural communities.

Bio-medical Research

Who are the participants in the trials of the bio-medical research and under what conditions does it take place ? What are the benefits of this research to Africans, it is not often clear and there is often no guarantee that the research will lead to care and support for the subjects. The subjects are often not informed of the side effects of the research and therefore are likely to be exposed to harm.

In light of this, leaders have the responsibility to ensure that bio-medical research is conducted by nationals of the country and the information from this research remains in local hands and available to the public.

More female-based studies are needed on how HIV affects women differently than men and also how the AIDS drugs affect women differently.

Voluntary Counselling and Testing

It has been established that when people are aware of their HIV status, then they often begin to change their behaviour. The GDFG believes that rapid results and other testing methods be explored. A care and support system in place.

Some members of the group proposed that Heads of States and high ranking leaders should also be tested barring issues of confidentiality.

The GDFG raised the legal considerations concerning the notion of unsafe sex. It was stressed that it should be regarded as an offense in law where marital rape and defilement are inflicted on women and young girls. Therefore, leadership should take the initiative to put in place laws that protect women or men from unsafe sex of that nature.

Action

GDFG urges delegates to examine all strategies proposed for scaling activities in the respective countries in order to derive a gender sensitive approaches. All states should be asked what are the costs of ignoring gender in addressing HIV/AIDS.

The group therefore declared the position that no organization, no sector, no government and no international body should have a mission statement excluding HIV/AIDS. It must be insisted upon as a component and an obligation ; in other words, it must penetrate, multisectorally.

Priority Gender Issues

Gender Focus Group(GDFG)

The Gender Focus Group (GDFG) met on Sunday 2 December 2000 at 10:00 – 2:00 P.M. to chart its program for the deliberations of the week. The gender issue will be taken up in every session of the conference. The group will meet at each evening, immediately at the close of the afternoon Breakout Sessions to review the previous sessions and agree on strategies of the next day and beyond.

At its first brainstorming, the GDFG outlined the priorities it wants the Breakout Sessions to examine. They put at the top of the list, the issue of:

Women's rights, particularly the inequality of rights between men and women. The imbalance in education of both women and girls was noted. The GDFG focussed on leadership and posed the question: what kind of leadership is needed to overcome the problems that women face. The GDFG also addressed/listed the issues of the credibility of leaders and the needed transparency. They noted that the impact of corruption on dealing with HIV/AIDS should be considered. The GDFG pointed out the leadership dimensions to getting access to appropriate female controlled technology, i.e. the female condom and microbicide.

Furthermore, it was stressed that gender specific issues of PWLA needed to be prioritized as a gender based concern. The issue of governments allocating more budget funds to the military and the perpetuation of conflict situations in the regions must be challenged by gender interventions.

The group stated that men are at a disadvantage when decisions are made that are not gender-based. Women's organizations which do not integrate HIV/AIDS into their programs as part of their top issues to attain female rights; strategies to change this trend was called for.

The final but crucial issue to be prioritized was the one that gives lip service to gender and AIDS.