Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1785 (2007)[1]

The spread of HIV/AIDS epidemic to women and girls in Europe

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly is concerned that, more than twenty-five years after it first broke out, the HIV/Aids epidemic is continuing to spread, including in Europe. The apparent inability of European governments to stop the spread of the disease is particularly worrying, although they do appear to know how the virus is transmitted and what type of behaviour is associated with transmission.

2. While there is a substantial heterogeneity in the epidemic within and among European nations (the use of injectable drugs is the main mode of transmission in eastern Europe, while sexual transmission is the main mode in the rest of Europe), there is a common trend in Europe as well as globally: more and more newly diagnosed HIV infections are in women, particularly young women.

3. This should come as no surprise, as the epidemic started spreading from "high-risk" groups (homosexuals, injectable-drug users and prostitutes) to the general population a long time ago. However, the discovery of tritherapy, a treatment able to considerably slow down the development of the virus, seems to have led many people, young adults in particular, to let down their guard. This attitude can account for much of the increase in infections in young women.

4. However, this is not the only explanation. Physiologically, women are more prone to the virus than men. Coupled with social and economic dependence, sexist attitudes and domestic violence, a deadly cocktail can develop: for women who are, in one way or another, dependent on the men with whom they have sexual relations, refusing sexual relations or insisting on the use of condoms may not be an option.

5. The empowerment of girls and women in Europe is thus a key factor in the fight against HIV/Aids. Girls and women must both be properly informed of the risks associated with certain behaviour and be put into a position where they have the power to act on this information. Men also have a role to play in the fight against the spread of the epidemic: they must dispense with certain harmful, typically male forms of behaviour and work with women to break the cycle of gender inequality and gender-based violence.

6. At the same time, it is important to tackle discrimination against HIV-positive women and girls. HIV testing, in particular pre-natal testing, must be confidential. It requires informed consent and should be backed up with counselling and information on treatment options (including treatment to prevent mother-to-child transmission). Access to such services should not depend on gender.

7. The Assembly recalls Resolution 1536 (2007) and Recommendation 1784 (2007) on HIV/Aids in Europe, and recommends that the Committee of Ministers ensure that a gender perspective is taken in all work on HIV/Aids within the Council of Europe and its member states.

8. The Assembly recommends that the Council of Europe run a European awareness-raising campaign to combat Aids in the near future, similar to the one being run this year to combat domestic violence.

1. *Assembly debate* on 25 January 2007 (8th Sitting) (see Doc. 11108, report of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, rapporteur: Mrs Fautrier). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 25 January 2007 (8th Sitting).

9. The Assembly furthermore recommends that the Council of Europe and its member states focus their efforts on the following measures to halt the spread of HIV/Aids to women and girls in Europe:

9.1. promote and develop school programmes, including sex education, which take into account the specificities of both sexes;

9.2. support the introduction of prevention programmes and awareness-raising campaigns on HIV/Aids, in particular by ensuring the dissemination of adequate and well-targeted information to young adults via the media and other available information outlets;

9.3. implement gender-sensitive and human-rights-based testing and treatment policies, including free access to full medical care, which ensure that persons who are HIV-positive are recognised by social insurance schemes;

9.4. fight discrimination against HIV-positive people, in particular women, and put into place reinsertion programmes for HIV-positive victims of this type of discrimination;

9.5. work at national and international level to establish the legal and institutional frameworks which ensure the respect for and the protection and exercise of the fundamental rights of women and girls, including in Europe.

10. Furthermore, the Assembly recognises that programmes and policies such as those set out in paragraph 9 above are likely to be more successful if they involve, at both national and international level, relevant civil society organisations and people living with HIV/Aids.