



## Back to School: Educating Girls to Fight HIV

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A quality education is essential for children, but for girls at risk of HIV/AIDS, it is a necessary and lifesaving measure. Girls and young women across the world remain one of the most vulnerable populations for HIV/AIDS. There are 1.1 billion girls in the world and every four minutes, three girls become infected with HIV. Girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa are 14 times more likely to be infected by HIV than their male counterparts.

Young women and girls' vulnerability to HIV infections is the result of a combination of societal inequalities, including the lack of safe workplaces, of access to health care services, of sufficient political representation, as well as of adequate education.

The push to empower girls to stay in school is much more cross-sectoral than it may seem. It is critical in the effort to make accelerated progress against HIV. A formal education gives girls valuable and relevant information that allows them to make informed decisions that reduce their risk of becoming infected with HIV. In addition, staying in school helps prepare girls with essential life skills and access to health care services. In an analysis of adolescents across 47 countries, it was found that those "least equipped to deal with HIV" were both boys and girls with the lowest levels of educational attainment.

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Education also improves a girl's chance of entering the workforce and reaching financial independence. Women account for about half of the world's population but only about 40 percent of the global workforce. By becoming even more educated and qualified, girls will have the ability to become self-sufficient and empowered. Through informed decisions about their relationships, women and girls will be less susceptible to the unequal power dynamics currently at play in many communities. They will also be able to contribute to the workforce, particularly in fields where they are needed. There is a shortage of teachers and female health care workers in many regions, which has further hindered women and girls' access to both education and health care.

Communities with high rates of HIV/AIDS and other diseases need working education systems that reach boys and girls equally. These communities need to educate and equip girls with knowledge and skills that allow them to achieve financial independence and escape power imbalances that increase their risk of HIV infection. While there are many societal factors that can increase a girl's risk of HIV infection and mortality, these factors are largely preventable by providing girls with life skills-based education and protecting them from violence.

Although there is some awareness and action in the movement to educate girls all over the world, there is still more work to do. A number of international organizations have developed effective gender-based interventions. For example, the Global Fund's HER initiative builds upon the leadership of the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief DREAMS partnership by working to reduce HIV rates among adolescent girls and young women by 58 percent in 13 target African countries over the next five years. If we want women to have a seat at the table, we need to help girls get a desk in the classroom. During this back to school season, it is crucial to support programs focused on helping girls around the world stay in school.