

WE HAVE LITTLE POWER

Ndilimeke, a domestic worker had this to say about her life: "I am married and have five children. At the age of eleven I had to drop out of school. I am working for a very small salary. Many times my husband refuses to give me money and then the children go hungry. Some nights he even beats me but I cannot leave him. Where will I go and how will I feed my children?"

This woman is poor. She has little access to information about ways to improve her situation. There is no institutional support for her and thousands of others in similar situations. With so little control over her own life, how will she ever protect herself against AIDS?

Due to economic dependence on a male partner, a woman is forced to remain in an oppressive relationship and sex, together with washing, cleaning and cooking, often serves as a means to attain that economic security, how dubious it may be.

Thus, the link between a woman's economic situation, male domination of sexual activity, and HIV infection must be recognised and confronted by the state and NGO's working in this field.

The term "safe sex" must include everything that would really make sex safe: Freedom from sexual assault, the right of a married woman to say no when her partner is sleeping around, the right to appropriate health care, and economic and social power for women to take control over their own lives.



GRAPHICS: Off our backs

Symptoms of AIDS in women

A recurring theme in non-sexist, non-bigotry literature about AIDS lately is the fact that the very definition of AIDS is based upon the symptoms that men get when they are infected with HIV.

Women have different clinical manifestations of HIV-disease, such as recurrent gynecological problems.

For example, the cervix is most susceptible to foreign organisms (such as the AIDS virus) during a woman's most fertile period; that is when she ovulates; that is when conditions allow the sperm to enter. Most HIV prevention literature and programs warn women not to have sex during the menstrual period because a menstruating woman is more likely to infect her partner, but may be less likely to become infected than is an ovulating woman.

Women do manifest the swollen glands, night sweats and diarrhea that often characterise the disease in men.

But HIV positive women more commonly show what is often described as "women's problems", meaning symptoms that show up in the reproductive system.

Irregular menstrual periods, pelvic inflammatory diseases, severe infection in the vagina, chronic and recurring vaginal yeast infections (this is white discharge with severe itching) are all symptoms that might be AIDS related in women.

HIV positive men do get yeast infections, but these occur in the mouth. Hormonal imbalances, pneumonia, rapid weight loss, and increased symptoms of herpes are common in both men and women. Women do not get *Kaposi's Sarcoma* (rare skin tumors), which is common in HIV-positive males.

Let us have safer sex and let us not base sexual decisions on fear, ignorance or misinformation.

