



PHOTOS BY SARAH ELIZAPETROW

Young girls who belong to the Fuyang AIDS Orphan Salvation Association, a community based organization that supports children affected by HIV/AIDS in Eastern China's Anhui Province.

Young Girls in China

A New and Hidden AIDS Generation?

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The latest national HIV estimates in China suggest that the HIV epidemic has begun to spread from certain high-risk groups to the general population. The proportion of female to total HIV cases has increased rapidly in the recent years, from 15.3 percent in 1998 to 39 percent in 2004. The combination of several factors – the high level of HIV among injecting drug users (IDUs) and commercial sex workers (CSWs), growing rates among females, as well as the global estimates that 62 percent of 15-to-24-year-olds living with HIV/AIDS are female – have obvious implications for the young female population. However, because there is no age-disaggregated data in China, the rates of young females are unknown and girls remain unseen.

Hidden in Existing Data

Despite the lack of data, it is not difficult to extrapolate what we know. Among the estimated new HIV cases in 2005, 48.6 percent were associated with injecting drug use. Due to China's growing consumerism and increased freedom of movement, commercial sex, though illegal, is becoming more and more common in both urban and rural areas. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that the number of sex workers in China is around 3 million. The majority of them are poor young women. Condom use among sex workers in China is low due to a combination of poor awareness and a lack of negotiating power for safe sex. The illegal and underground nature of their work creates significant obstacles to effective intervention programs.

Estimates of IDUs in China range from 1 million (registered officially) to 3 million. Drug users in China are largely young and poorly educated. They are often engaged in high risk behaviors including both needle sharing and unprotected sex. Young male drug users tend to seek girls as their sexual partners, and multiple partners are very common among this population. For young female addicts, commercial sex can be a lucrative means to support their habits. Like CSWs, IDUs are deeply hidden due to the illegal nature of drug use in China. Intolerant policies and practices adopted by the Chinese government toward drug abusers and sex workers have created barriers to public health authorities and NGOs seeking to generate group-specific data and to provide health services.

Traditional Values and Changing Ways: A Deadly Combination

A number of common biological and socio-economic factors in many countries make girls and young women especially vulnerable to HIV infection. It is similar in China, keeping in mind the particular Chinese context of high drug use and commercial sex described above, combined with the rapidly changing economic and social mores of the country.

The preference for sons is deeply rooted in Chinese traditions as it is in much of Asia, and is indirectly a factor in HIV vulnerability for girls. Sons are often regarded as a reliable form of social security, especially in poor rural areas where resources are scarce. Although this is changing in urban areas, it remains strong in rural communities where families often prioritize boys' education and girls remain in their households to provide care for the elderly and the sick. According to UNICEF, an estimated two-thirds of China's un-enrolled school-aged children are girls. Moreover, girls who are enrolled, as in many other countries, are the first to drop out when economic pressures affect their families. Lack of schooling builds up girls' vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, leaving them without proper employment skills and unaware of their rights to protection of their health and security. China's one-child policy has exacerbated the situation by creating a wave of abandoned girls at greater risk of being forced into transactional sex and drug abuse.

A lack of adolescent sex education in school curricula also fuels the growing sex disparity in HIV among young people. Conservative attitudes about sex lead to inadequate and irrelevant sex education for young people. Many Chinese people believe that talking about sex will cause children to engage in sexual activities "too early and too often." Therefore, school sex education only focuses on physiological changes and often ignores basic knowledge about safe sex and self-protection from sexual abuse. Concurrently, in a rapidly changing Chinese society, adolescents have begun to engage in an exceptionally high level of sexual activities. The lack of knowledge, together with biological differences, makes young girls particularly vulnerable to HIV infection.

Internal migration is a major problem in China compounding these other factors. Since China started the opening and reform policy in 1979, the country has gradually relaxed its system of household registration or *hukou*. Allured by the flourishing economic opportunities in Chinese cities, millions of rural peasants are flocking to urban areas in search of better jobs and incomes. At present, China has a "floating population" of more than 140 million, the majority of whom are young, male peasants away from home during the most sexually active period of their lives.

Internal migration places adolescent women at high HIV risk in two key ways. On the one hand, young poorly educated male migrant workers are often easy targets of drug sellers and sex workers. Their young wives or partners, who stay in home villages to provide care to the elderly and children, become susceptible to HIV when infected male migrants return home. On the other hand, increasing labor mobility provides young Chinese girls in rural areas with freedom to move to cities to seek better lives. Away from

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of violence in schools go far beyond current risk of drop-out and subsequent HIV vulnerability; it affects future generations, as well.

New Programs Promoting School Safety

The good news is that there are a growing number of programs addressing the vulnerability to violence in schools and subsequent risk of drop-out and HIV/AIDS. For example, programs in Mexico, Nigeria and Cambodia work to promote gender sensitivity and violence awareness and prevention among bus and taxi drivers, and to modify school buildings and grounds to promote safety. The World Bank reports that South African school girls feel most unsafe at school gates, where students are able to congregate in large groups, at latrines or toileting areas in the absence of private latrines, and in male teachers' staff rooms and dormitories. This research has led to programs that emphasize building private latrines and training and hiring an increased number of female faculty and staff members.

Other efforts at creating a safe school environment take a more systemic approach. In Tanzania, the government has established a Mlezi (Guardian) system in which one teacher in each of the 185 primary schools is designated to support girls who have been sexually abused, need advice or seek to report an incident. Girls in schools with a mlezi state that they are much more likely to report harassment than girls in schools without such a guardian.

Plan Togo has implemented a national program to train teachers and increase accountability; modify curriculum to include violence, health and equity; improve school infrastructure; advocate for appropriate government support and resource provision; and engage parents and the community in preventing

violence, all while simultaneously working to ensure that all children receive a successful basic education.

Similarly, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has launched a Safe Schools Program (SSP), that has begun pilot projects in Ghana and Malawi and conducted needs assessments in Jamaica and Ethiopia. SSP will take a similarly holistic approach to developing violence-free schools, and will provide adaptable training manuals on life skills and violence prevention, power dynamics in the classroom, and psychosocial support for survivors of violence. SSP is still quite small-scale and appears to be moving rather slowly, with needs assessments having begun in 2003 and programs still reaching only around 50 schools.

The Global AIDS Alliance, Global Action for Children, and other partners in campaigning for universal access to free basic education are now incorporating a safe schools agenda into all of our education work. Education is one of the greatest HIV prevention strategies available, yet when we send girls to unsafe schools, their chances of succeeding in school, and of subsequently breaking the cycle of poverty that puts them at risk of both violence and HIV are severely threatened. It is essential that our work focus simultaneously on advocating for the scale-up of successful models for preventing school violence and on continuing our efforts to secure education for all.

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the social constraints of home, commercial sex work can become a temptation for an easy and lucrative means of income.

China's shift to a free-market system has also increasingly put the burden of health care on individuals, resulting in a failing public health system. A recent report released by China's State Council Development Research Center indicates that China's medical insurance system currently covers less than half of urban and only 10 percent of rural residents. Due to the lack of medical insurance and social welfare programs, it has become exceedingly difficult for young girls to access affordable, quality adolescent health care and counseling, especially in China's poverty-stricken countryside. Young girls again bear the brunt under a failing health-care system.

Keeping Open the Window of Opportunity

There is a narrowing window of opportunity to prevent a new generation of

young females living with HIV/AIDS. It is time to learn from the experience in other regions. Many interventions are on a reasonable wish list, including sex education, expanded access to schooling, and quality health care, particularly in rural China, as well as programs to enhance HIV awareness and life skills among migrant workers. To do so, public health authorities and NGOs should work with the whole society to alleviate repressive attitudes toward drug use and commercial sex work to provide better outreach and health services.

Yet, it is the need for adequate data on the impact of HIV on the young female population in China that is perhaps most immediate and urgent. If we are to avoid a new generation of AIDS in China, the existence of young girls as valuable human beings and their intensifying vulnerability to HIV infection must first be seen and fully recognized in the society.

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Only in October 2006, after many attempts, a national law was finally passed in Argentina that established sexual education at all levels without permission of students' parents. Educating girls about sexuality and safe sex are crucial ways of decreasing the rate of infection. In the words of one Argentine AIDS activists, without this knowledge, "we are sending them into battle without arms."

Also, young people must be reached by campaigns and messages in the mass media as well as face-to-face training to achieve a better rate of condom use, which is currently low and non-existent in stable relationships. It is necessary to continue strengthening interventions to promote the use of condoms among young people, particularly women, including free distribution. The bottom line is that young women must perceive their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and they must have access to prevention methods, to confidential/ voluntary testing and counseling, and access to "friendly" health-care services, including HIV/AIDS care and treatment provision.

There must also be cultural change to eliminate sexual inequality. Abstinence only and fidelity programs are not effective for girls and women in the LAC context of poverty and gender imbalance. Also, girls and women need to increase the generation of income to be economically independent, an important factor in controlling the epidemic.

Finally, policies to decrease poverty to improve the economic income of girls and women and access to education are the best ways to slow the spread of HIV. Religious and conservative opposition as well as economic constraints must be defeated by governments in LAC to succeed in the fight against HIV/AIDS and to avoid the suffering of girls and adolescents.

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