

Making Marriage Safer

Recently, there has been emerging but compelling evidence that married adolescent girls face an increased risk of HIV compared to their unmarried sexually active counterparts. Once married, intercourse is much more frequent and condom use is virtually non-existent. In rural areas of Nyanza Province 9 percent of girls are married by age 15, and 53 percent are married by age 19.¹ In Kisumu, 33 percent of married girls are HIV positive compared to 22 percent of unmarried sexually active girls.^{2, 3} A study in Kisumu demonstrated that husbands of married adolescents are considerably older and much more likely to be HIV-infected compared to the boyfriends of unmarried girls. Analysis revealed that the age and HIV profile of girls' husbands is a risk factor that overrides risk related to the multiple partnerships of some unmarried girls.⁴



Issues around early marriage are explored during Magnet Theatre

Photo: PATH, C.Y. Gopinath

For girls in traditional rural settings, marriage or engagement often marks the beginning of their sexual life and, indeed, of HIV risk. Similarly, girls' marriages are frequently arranged by parents who wrongfully assume that marriage protects them from HIV. Traditionally, young brides move to their husbands' homes where they have low status, are relatively isolated, and lack decision-making power, including sexual decision-making. Couples who know each others HIV status before marriage have tremendous potential to prevent transmission. Despite this, few, if any, programs in Kenya have addressed the HIV risk of pre-married and married adolescent girls, a sizeable, high-risk population, and most programs have been located in urban areas where early marriage is less prevalent.

In October 2005, PATH, in collaboration with Population Council, began implementing a project in rural areas of Rachuonyo District in Nyanza to bring awareness to the risks associated with early marriage, promote couples voluntary counseling and testing, and empower girls. PATH is utilizing a variety of innovative approaches including radio, theatre, transportation subsidies for VCT clients, and mentoring programs through married girls clubs.

Formative Assessment

Prior to implementation, Population Council conducted formative research to inform the project's messages and strategies for reaching married or pre-married girls and their families. The significant findings from this assessment were:

Girls marry to solve problems without knowing their partner well.

Girls' movement and associations are controlled after marriage.

Married girls think they are protected from HIV.

Wife inheritance without knowing HIV status is still prevalent.

Fear and lack of money are major barriers to VCT uptake.

There is a great fear in couples testing and disclosure is uncommon

There continues to be a great deal of stigma.

Despite availability of ART feelings of despair among those who are positive is common.

PATH improves the health of people around the world by advancing technologies, strengthening systems, and encouraging healthy behaviors.

For more information, contact:
Irene Chami
Program Associate
ichami@path.org

As a result of these findings, PATH and Population Council are implementing the following activities:

Using radio, theatre, and community leaders to raise awareness of HIV risk associated with early marriage;

Promoting couples VCT through community promotions and transport subsidies; and

Supporting and empowering newly married adolescent girls in the early stages of marriage through community level married girls clubs.

Radio

PATH developed radio spots, based on the findings from the formative research, that have been broadcast on Ramogi FM, a popular radio station in Nyanza. The radio spots, recorded in Dholuo, address issues related to early marriage and target different audiences. The following are radio spots that have been broadcast.

Yudie ma ber-ber urges young girls to look for a marriage partner who is their same age.

Nyon mos, which roughly translates to “tread carefully,” counsels young women not to rush into marriage and to go for VCT with their partner before becoming intimate.

Jagam, which means go between and is the term use for match makers, urges match makers to include HIV status as one of their criteria for determining good suitors.

In *Wuon par wa* a married adolescent urges her spouse to use protection until he confirms his status through VCT if he has been unfaithful.

Magnet Theatre

PATH has successfully used its Magnet Theatre approach in several projects to engage youth in discussions and problem solving on a variety of HIV and AIDS-related topics. Magnet Theatre is community theatre that typically takes place in outdoor, public spaces and has a regular schedule at a fixed venue. The actors perform a drama that presents a dilemma based on community problems. The audience participates by offering suggestions to the characters as well as acting out solutions to the dilemma themselves. Magnet Theatre encourages dialogue and allows the audience to discuss and test solutions to problems, in order to bring about individual and community-wide change. In Rachuonyo, theatre groups were strategically selected based on population density, accessibility, and HIV prevalence in their divisions. PATH trained members of eight theatre troupes in Magnet Theatre, HIV and AIDS, and the risks of early marriage. Since the training in November 2005, these troupes have facilitated an average of nearly 50 theatre outreach activities a month. Theatre troupes offer referrals to VCT centres near their performance sites.

Increasing Couples VCT

In collaboration with district-level Ministry of Health staff and eleven VCT centres in Rachuonyo district, PATH and Population Council worked to increase VCT uptake by offering transportation subsidies to clients who come for testing through a coupon referral system. Data analysis is currently underway, but anecdotal reports from counselors at the VCT centres indicate there has been a significant increase in numbers of couples coming for testing since introducing the subsidies.

Married Girls Clubs

PATH is working closely with a number of churches in Rachuonyo, to establish married girls clubs to provide girls venues through which they can receive information, advice, and social support. The clubs are managed by a local faith-based organization and include livelihood and mentoring opportunities with adult married women and periodic assembly of larger extended family groups, including husbands and in-laws. VCT for married couples is promoted through these clubs and the clubs offer support for those who have been tested (both HIV positive and negative). The clubs offer young women an opportunity to be mentored by married women mentors on a variety of issues related to marriage.

1. Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) [Kenya], Ministry of Health (MOH) [Kenya], and ORC Macro. Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2003. Calverton, Maryland: CBS, MOH, and ORC Macro; 2004.

2. Glynn JR, Caraël M, Auvert B, Kahindo M, Chege J, Musonda R, Kaona F, Buvé A, and the Study Group on Heterogeneity of HIV Epidemics in African Cities. Why do young women have a much higher prevalence of HIV than young men? A study in Kisumu, Kenya and Ndola, Zambia,” *AIDS*. 2001;15(suppl 4): S51–S60.

3. Bruce J, Clark S. *Including married adolescents in adolescent reproductive health and HIV/AIDS policy*, background paper presented at WHO/UNFPA/Population Council Technical Consultation on Married Adolescents, Geneva, 9–12 December 2003.

4. Clark S. Early marriage and HIV risks in sub-Saharan Africa. *Studies in Family Planning*. 2004 35(3): 149–160.