

# **The Vulnerability of Girls to HIV/AIDS: Research in Tanzania & Zambia**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## Executive Summary

In June 2003, World Vision launched a groundbreaking operational research project entitled “Window of Hope: Developing Interventions to Reduce the Sexual Exploitation of Girls and their Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS”. This project, herein referred to as the Window of Hope project, is a joint initiative between World Vision Canada, World Vision Tanzania, and World Vision Zambia.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the Window of Hope project, and more specifically, to outline some of the key research findings and implications for HIV prevention programming that have been generated by the initial phase of this project. In general, the findings and implications represent fundamental challenges and critiques to current approaches to HIV prevention and reducing girls’ vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

The Window of Hope’s research methodology included qualitative and quantitative methods that involved Maasai communities in Northern Tanzania, East Africa, and predominantly Lozi communities in Western Zambia, Southern Africa. The duration of the field research was approximately seven months, and included semi-structured group interviews (focus group discussions), interviews with key informants, and face-to-face interviews consisting of structured questionnaires. The sample sizes for the research in Tanzania included 470 child/youth and 204 adult participants in the quantitative research, along with 80 adult and child participants in the qualitative research. In Zambia, there were 630 child/youth participants in the quantitative research, and 90 adults and children participants in the qualitative research. In addition, the research in Tanzania and Zambia included in-depth interviews with male and female key informants. All of the research results were disaggregated by age and gender.

One of the most significant and effective components of the Window of Hope project was its involvement of children and youth throughout the duration of the project. In accordance with a rights-based approach, children’s participation was a major focus of the project; children and youth were engaged throughout the research project as research participants, research advisors, and most importantly, through their formal roles on the research teams.

One of the key findings of the research relates to the relationship between individual vulnerability, cognitive factors, and behavioral factors; this finding points to the need to focus on the social determinants of girls’ vulnerability. In particular, the study indicated that although participants conveyed a basic awareness of HIV and a basic understanding of the modes of transmission, it was evident that HIV/AIDS prevention initiatives have not sufficiently facilitated a genuine understanding of the disease, a concern for the deleterious impacts of the epidemic, nor have they adequately addressed the misconceptions and myths related to the disease. In relation to condom use, the findings varied significantly according to the context, but in general, the findings suggest that there needs to be a greater focus placed on the education about and provision of condoms. First and foremost, this will necessitate a greater commitment to addressing cultural and religious barriers that impede the inclusion of condoms in prevention programming.

Perhaps the most significant finding relates to girls’ societal vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. The findings illustrate a confluence of cultural, social, economic, and political factors that foster environments in which girls have little agency to reduce their susceptibility, and their negligible power to determine sexual relationships. The findings of the Window of Hope project indicate

that cultural values and ideologies represent powerful systems of convention that proscribe characteristics and behaviors to girls and boys that contribute to HIV vulnerability. In addition, traditional institutions, customs, and community norms foster social organization that disproportionately impacts girls' access to the instrumental factors that are essential to decreasing vulnerability, such as access to education, social services, health services, economic activities, resources, and political affairs. Furthermore, the study highlights that girls' vulnerability is further compounded by insufficient and poorly enforced policies and legislation that have often failed to protect girls' human rights, and in some cases, have actually contributed their vulnerability.

Consequently, a key implication of the research findings is that while sexual behavior is mediated, in part, by personal factors such as awareness, concern, knowledge, and access to commodities such as condoms, in fact societal factors corresponding to girls' socio-cultural environments play a more important role. Indeed, societal factors are ultimately what undermine girls' agency and determine their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. The paramount issues corresponding to the gender dimension of the HIV/AIDS pandemic are not the personal issues of awareness or knowledge, but social issues of power and self-efficacy – issues related to girls' capacity to make autonomous choices and affect change in their relationships and environments. To effectively reduce the vulnerability of girls to HIV/AIDS, there must be increased emphasis on empowerment and respect for the cultural values, customs, and general social organization that currently undermine girls' self-determination.

Research results also highlight the need for a critical evaluation of our own attitudes and assumptions about cultural diversity and the impacts of these on the development process and cross-cultural relationships.

Lastly, given the sensitive nature of cultural phenomena and identity, mainstreaming culture must include a reorientation towards culturally sensitive approaches and processes that appreciate the complexity of cultural change. The emphasis must be on fostering enabling environments in which broad-based community participation may be mobilized, and participatory, problem-posing methods may be facilitated that encourage group dialogue, critical awareness, empowerment, and self-determined social change. Ultimately, effective programs that target sensitive issues relating to culture must involve a renewed commitment to process-related issues, which, among other characteristics, will involve a shift of development ownership to the participating communities.

In conclusion, ***the Window of Hope study suggests that in order to effectively reduce the vulnerability of girls to HIV/AIDS, prevention programming must reorient its focus toward a social determinants of health approach (SDHA) with an emphasis on mainstreaming culture and creating enabling environments.*** The study challenges contemporary approaches that are characterized primarily by an individualistic conceptualization of sexual behaviour, which presumes that sexual behaviour is predominantly mediated by cognitive factors and technical capacity, i.e., negotiation skills. Similarly, it presents a challenge to the exclusive, or at least disproportionate, focus on technical assistance in HIV prevention programming, which conventionally includes information, education, communication (IEC) initiatives, individual skill development, and/or provision of services and commodities.

The Window of Hope study suggests that technical assistance alone will not substantially reduce girls' vulnerability. Although technical capacity is one element of enabling girls and

communities to reduce vulnerability, ***the most significant enabling factors relevant to girls' vulnerability is the creation of enabling environments that address the social determinants of health.*** The Window of Hope study recommends that these approaches will be characterized by broad-based community participation and include a focus on: collectively evaluating cultural/ideological values; adapting traditional institutions, customs, and normative behaviors; facilitating economic empowerment; enabling genuine participation in community and political affairs; and redressing insufficient policies and legislation.

In response to these research findings, the Window of Hope will be piloting programme and policy interventions in Tanzania and Zambia, in an effort to develop innovative and effective strategies to reduce the vulnerability of girls to HIV/AIDS. The results of the pilot interventions will be available in December 2005.