



The Pregnancy Intentions of HIV-Positive Women: *Forwarding the Research Agenda*

Introduction:

The face of the global HIV epidemic has changed over the past decade and increasingly is becoming the face of a woman living in the midst of her childbearing years. Today, women represent nearly half of the 38.6 million people living with HIV.

To date, research on HIV and pregnancy has generally assumed that women living in resource-limited settings who are HIV-positive will no longer want to bear children. However, with the dramatic increase in access to antiretroviral treatment (ART), greater numbers of HIV-positive women are living longer, healthier lives. In addition, increased access to ART has contributed to a substantial reduction in mother-to-child transmission in these settings.

The desire of many HIV-positive women to pursue options for having children presents a clear and urgent need for more research into this area, with the ultimate goal of putting women at the center of decision-making on their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Pregnancy Intentions Conference and Report:

A conference was convened in March 2010 at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston, Massachusetts, to identify gaps in knowledge, stimulate research and create comprehensive solutions. It was one of the first to convene representatives from across disciplines and experience, with participants from diverse country contexts engaged in a range of HIV/AIDS and sexual and reproductive health work.

“The Pregnancy Intentions of HIV-Positive Women: Forwarding the Research Agenda,” documents current knowledge and recommendations for moving forward in the following areas: desired pregnancy for HIV-positive women; HIV-positive women seeking to prevent pregnancy; safer pregnancy for HIV-positive women; and pregnancy termination for HIV-positive women. The report identifies points of consensus and points of departure amongst participants, and highlights suggestions for advocates, health professionals, program implementers and policy makers.

Proposed Research Agenda:

The conference report identifies key research needs in the overlapping contexts of: women’s experience (during contraception, testing and counseling, treatment during pregnancy and after delivery, pregnancy termination and forced sterilization); the community; the health system (with specific attention to the facilities and providers within that system); and the larger legal and policy context.

The following recommendations represent the most pressing research priorities identified by the conference participants. Further elaboration on research priorities can be found in the full report.

• *Research Needs in the Context of Women’s Experience:*

- Address HIV-positive women’s contraception-related needs, including assessing barriers to acquiring and using the forms of contraception available and acceptable to them.
- Explore the ways in which different forms of HIV testing and counseling impact sustained engagement of HIV-positive women with health services.
- Determine ways to ensure that HIV positive women have continued access to the treatment and care they need during and beyond the perinatal period within different economic, political and social contexts.
- Document the scope and impact of forced sterilization and unsafe abortion in different settings on the health and rights of HIV-positive women.

- **Research Needs in the Context of the Community:**
 - Measure the impacts of stigma, discrimination and violence on the pregnancy intentions of HIV-positive women, as influenced by family, health care providers and/or community members.
 - Address the potential role of community, including the role of traditional birth attendants, as a locus for support and care for women living with HIV, and as a link between community and clinical care locally and nationally.
- **Research Needs in the Context of the Health System:**
 - Explore health system challenges and opportunities for improving access to quality services for HIV-positive women, including antiretroviral therapy, contraception, assisted reproductive technologies and abortion services.
 - Compare the appropriateness of various service delivery models, including those that integrate HIV care with sexual and reproductive health services.
 - Explore mechanisms to enhance the knowledge of providers and promote communication of relevant information to HIV-positive women and their partners in non-judgmental ways.
- **Research Needs in the Context of Law and Policy:**
 - Explore the larger impacts of the legal and policy context on access to information and health services for women living with HIV and partners, and their influence on pregnancy intentions.
 - Assess the effective application and leveraging of health and human rights frameworks in these research efforts to fulfill the sexual and reproductive health and rights of HIV-positive women.

Conclusions:

Women living with HIV, like all women, have the right to determine the number and spacing of their children. Research should involve women living with HIV and their partners at all stages, and take a multi-disciplinary approach. This will help HIV-positive women realize their rights and stay healthy. A stronger evidence base that includes results from biomedical, economic, political and social science research will help provide more comprehensive information relevant to the lives of women and men living with HIV, and create demand for appropriate services and policy.

Researchers, program implementers and advocacy groups must combine efforts to ensure that there are adequate resources to conduct this research, to design studies across relevant disciplines and to disseminate important findings.

Only then will current gaps between knowledge and practice be effectively addressed, and provide HIV-positive women and their partners with the information and services they need to make decisions about their own health and that of their families.

For more information, read the full report,
 “The Pregnancy Intentions of HIV-Positive Women: Forwarding the Research Agenda”, at:
http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/pihhr/files/homepage/news_and_events/pregnancy_intentions_full_report.pdf

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