

Reaching men, girls and young

By Elvis Basudde

With 540 young women between the age of 15 and 24 getting infected with HIV every week, there is cause to worry. The above statistics translates to two young women getting infected with HIV every hour.

According to experts, unless something fundamental is done to reverse the trend, more girls and young women will be infected in the days ahead.

When it comes to men, regrettably, many are not going for an HIV test, so many do not know their serostatus, which is a dangerous position to be in.

As Uganda joins the rest of the world to commemorate World AIDS Day. It is an opportunity for people to unite in the fight against HIV, to show support for people living with the virus, commemorate and mourn those who have died from an AIDS-related illness.

This year's global theme is *Right to Health* and the national theme is: *Reaching men, girls and young women to reduce new HIV infections*. The venue for the national event is Kole district.

According to the acting director general of the Uganda AIDS Commission, Dr Nelson Musoba, the selection of the national venue is premised on addressing the vulnerabilities that fuel HIV infection in the community.

Kole district is situated in northern Uganda, which is a high HIV prevalence region. It lies on an international highway linking Mombasa in Kenya to Juba in Southern Sudan with emerging hotspots along the way and it is a post conflict area.

Musoba says the national theme is in line with the main area of focus for the *Presidential Fast-Track-Initiative on eliminating the scourge of HIV/AIDS in Uganda by 2030*. The initiative which was launched in June follows concerns by the President about the increasing prevalence of the killer disease in the last few years, despite tremendous achievement in the past.

The theme focuses on men, girls and young women. It also recognises these people's right to access quality HIV and AIDS services in line with the global World AIDS Day theme.

Five objectives are cited within the presidential fast-track-initiative.

The first is "to engage men in HIV prevention and close the tap on new infections particularly among adolescent girls and young women."

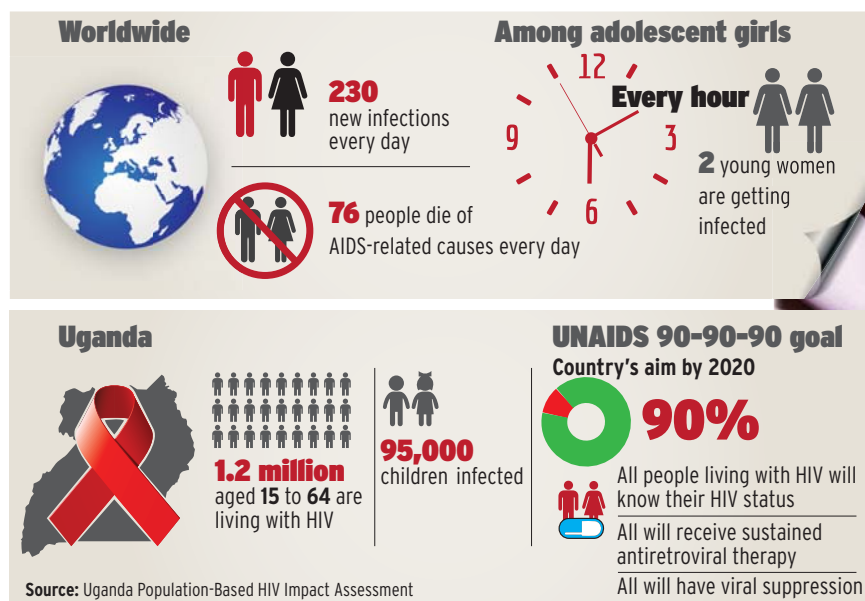
The second objective is to accelerate implementation of "test and treat" and attainment of 90-90-90 targets particularly among men and young people.

The Uganda Population HIV Impact Assessment (UPHIA) preliminary report demonstrates that Uganda has made a stride in the national HIV and AIDS response with HIV prevalence declining from 7.3% (Uganda AIDS Indicator Survey



There are still several bottlenecks in the HIV/AIDS fight, such as reversing new HIV infections the majority of which are among young people that need to be addressed

Scale of HIV infection today



not be interested in a boy of her age, she may want an older man. That is why we are delicately targeting the two groups. And if these are targeted and there is a positive response, there will be a significant milestone in the epidemic's fight. The theme is timely and evidence based, derived from what our data says."

Targeting men

While launching the presidential fast-track-initiative, President Museveni observed that men are a stumbling block in the fight against HIV/AIDS. He said men are not keen at seeking counselling and HIV testing services.

Musoba regrets that poor health seeking behaviour has meant that the majority of men would go for medical care when they are only critically sick and their immune system drastically compromised, presenting with a high viral load. This increases risk of dying from the disease.

Etukoit adds that data consistently shows that men are missing out, they are not there and the majority do not know their sero-status. Even those who test and turn out HIV-positive, have shown reluctance to enrol for antiretroviral drugs (ARVs).

"At TASO, for example, 70% of our clients are women and it has been consistent from the time we started

Report 2011) to 6% (UPHIA) 2016.

The number of new infections in adults reduced from 99,000 in 2010 to 52,000 in 2016. There was a further reduction in the number of new infections in children from 26,000 in 2010 to 4,600 in 2016. The observed reduction in new infections is as a result of the high level partnership in the implementation of HIV Combination Prevention approach that was adopted by the country in 2011.

"However, while the country has made great achievements, there are still several bottlenecks that we need to jointly address," Musoba says.

These include, reversing the 52,000 new HIV infections majority of which

are among young people, especially girls and 4,600 new HIV infections among children below 15 years.

Also testing and enrolling an additional 300,000 people who have contracted HIV but are not aware, and scaling up interventions that target male involvement among others.

Focus on girls and young women

Musoba insists that there is a need for the focus to be shifted to include adolescent girls. The infection rate in this group has tripled compared to the boys in the same age group of 15 to 22 years.

Every child, right from nursery school to university, should be given

the opportunity to test for HIV. He says: "The youth make up the largest HIV negative group in the population. If we neglect them, by the time they are in the 20-30 age groups, they will be infected."

Dr Michael Etukoit, the executive director, TASO, agrees with Musoba, saying that data shows that there are more young girls who get infected at a young age than boys of their age.

"The young girls and women are the most vulnerable of our population that is why the theme puts emphasis on this category. It is not uncommon to see men of 30 and above interacting with girls of age 15 to 24," he says.

He adds: "A girl of 15 to 24 will

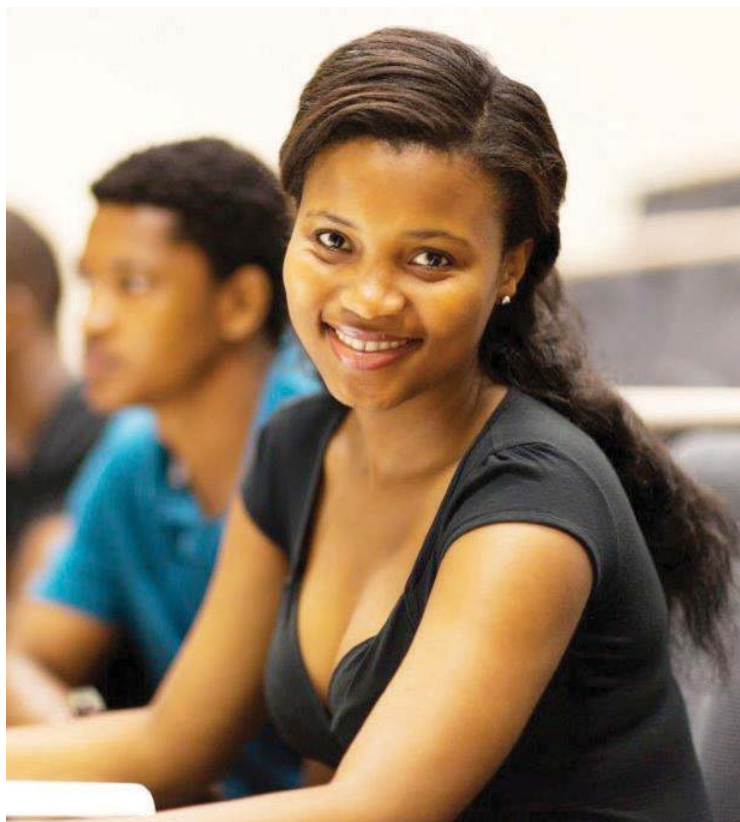
women to reduce new infections

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documenting data. The trend is the same for every HIV facility in the country," he says.

He adds: "That is the reason why this theme for this year has to focus on men. Ending the HIV epidemic without involving men will be impossible if they are not brought on board."

He, however, says the issue of fewer men involved in the health care is not limited to Uganda, it is a global problem.



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Etukoit says in the case of HIV it is aggravated by the stigma and cultural behaviour. The setup of health facilities gives one a sense of HIV being a case for women. Even before HIV came, it is women one would

find in health facilities, they are the ones who take children to hospital and care for the sick.

The reason why men shun testing and are reluctant to initiate treatment, according to Musoba, is due to both male-controlled and social norms where they are considered bold. It is also coupled with stigma, ignorance and humiliation.

Most-at-risk populations

Men who have sex with other men are at a higher risk of getting HIV he says. This is because homosexuality is a crime in Uganda and an anti-gay attitude makes it difficult for gay men to access HIV services.

There is no clear government position on HIV service provision to female sex workers, mainly because their line of work is illegal.

Female sex workers are offered more money for unprotected sex, than protected sex, which fuels transmission rates. This makes them the most at-risk group among the population.

Way forward

In order to further address existing challenges and augment reversal of the HIV epidemic, the country is implementing the National HIV and AIDS Strategic Plan (NSP), which provides guidance to all stakeholders.

Musoba says the NSP has a thrust towards individual and leadership commitment at all levels. The plan,

which is in line with the universal 90-90-90 targets, has set up ambitious targets to be met if the objectives therein are to be met. Current trends indicate the need for targeting sub-population groups that contribute greatly to the current trend of the epidemic and special attention is being made to the adolescents and young people who are highly vulnerable.

To avert the emerging epidemic, in 2014, the world embarked on fast-track to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. In 2016 at the high level meeting during the United Nations General Assembly, the 2016 Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS was adopted. This resolution reaffirmed the commitment to the Fast Track Initiative to end the AIDS as a public health threat by 2030.

Additionally, this year marks 35 years of the fight against HIV/AIDS in Uganda and 25 years of Uganda AIDS Commission.

"As we reach this landmark, it is a time to reflect on what has been done and what needs to be done to achieve an AIDS free generation," Musoba says.

He says activities marking 25 years of UAC since it was constituted in 1992 will be incorporated in the commemoration of World AIDS Day as well as documentation of the HIV and AIDS response in the country since the first cases of AIDS were reported in the country in 1982.