

# 12 Nurturing Women Advocates for HIV/AIDS Related Treatment Issues

## What is advocacy?

Advocacy is a process to bring about change. The process is directed at changing policies, programmes and positions. Advocacy involves pleading for, defending or recommending an idea before other people or persuading influential people to change. Advocacy on treatment issues can be done at different levels ranging from local community, health facility or centre, to national or regional and international levels.

Advocacy work is not new. It takes many shapes ranging from a mother defending her daughter against an abusive father or brother - at family level, a group of women pleading for their children at a school- at community level or groups of organisations defending the rights of people living with HIV and AIDS - at national, regional or international levels.

## Who can do advocacy?

Anyone can do advocacy. Everyone should do advocacy on treatment issues. You do not need to be educated or living in an urban setting to do advocacy. You do not need to be an adult. You do not even need to belong to an organisation. You do not need to be on HIV and AIDS treatment or to be HIV positive for you to advocate on HIV and AIDS treatment issues. You do not need to be a very large group to do advocacy. It is possible to advocate for yourself as well as for other people.



## Meaningful involvement of People Living With HIV and AIDS Principle (MIPA).

As with a lot of effective advocacy, acknowledging the value of empowering communities most affected by the issue, meaningful and active involvement of PLWHA especially women and girls, is crucial in HIV and AIDS advocacy for access to treatment in particular. Therefore, women living with HIV should be actively involved. Having the virus in one's body does not automatically make one an effective advocate. It is important for a group or organisation to invest in capacity building PLWHA especially women living with HIV. They are to be part of the whole planning process.



It is good for an organisation to budget both time and resources for training women PLWHA as part of the advocacy activities.

“We do not need someone to take our voices, we can speak loud, give us the chance to speak”

## Urgency

Since access to treatment is about averting a lot of needless deaths, the strategies do not always conform to the rules and expectations of society, and policy makers. The advocacy is a result of passion, often driven by anger, fear and desperation. For such a group, time is a luxury that the advocates do not have because, illness and death are real and treatment gives the much-needed hope. A lot of emotion is involved especially when it comes to women dying leaving young orphans, unfulfilled ambitions and so on.

“We need ARVs now!”

## Challenging stigma and discrimination

Because of its links to sex and sexuality, major efforts in HIV and AIDS advocacy should be directed at changing social norms and attitudes as well. Stigma and discrimination have been known to be barriers to care and support. Accordingly, efforts to ensure accessibility of treatment should also address stigma and discrimination especially in view of the fact those ideas about and expectations of women and men create inequalities between them. Inequalities in status, power and control lead to different vulnerabilities and capacities to cope with HIV and AIDS. Women living with HIV and AIDS are therefore more stigmatised than men.

“Do not let stigma and discrimination keep you away from helpful services”

## How is advocacy done?

Common steps in the Advocacy process

### Step 1 — Know who you are.

- As you think of undertaking or continuing advocacy work as an individual, group of girls or women, or an organisation, it is vital for you to be clear about what it is that you stand for - your mission, vision, goals and values.
- You need to objectively look at yourself and identify your strengths and challenges so that you can capitalise on your assets and determine the means to complement areas in which you are challenged.

- Consider the additional skills and knowledge that you need and how capacity can be built either within your group, organisation or as a member of a network or coalition.

### Step 2 — Know the Policy environment

- In addition to looking inward, it is crucial to look at the policy and the political environment.
- Try as much as possible to understand the history of the issue. Look at how access to treatment has been addressed over time ie the legal and policy documents that either support or undermine the issue in your country as well as in the region.



- When looking at the policy environment, as advocates you need to look at how women and girls are familiar with policy change. In situations where they are less aware of their rights, as advocates, you should budget for time and money to inform/educate them on their rights.
- Look at the general policies on women and girls

### Step 3 — Define the issue

- It is critical for you as a group of women or girls or individual advocate to be in a position to clearly define the issue.
- Be clear as to what exactly the problem is. If an issue is clearly defined it is therefore easier for goals and objectives to be articulated.
- With a clearly defined issue, it is easier to prioritise issues.

### Step 4 — Set advocacy goal and objectives

- An advocacy goal is the general statement of the change the group hopes to achieve in the long term while the advocacy objectives describe the short term, specific achievements that help to realise the goal.
- Examples of a goal and an objective may be to have a policy that enables women and girls who need treatment to access HIV and AIDS treatment while the objective can be that the group hopes to gain government's commitment to strengthen the health care system.
- It is important to choose short and achievable objectives.

### Step 5 — Identify Target audiences

- There are primary target audiences – decision-makers that have the authority to bring about the desired change and secondary audiences –

those people who have access to or are able to influence the primary audiences. These may be friends, donors, the media, religious leaders etc.

- After identifying the audiences, advocates should go on to find out how the audiences feel about access to treatment and what they know.
- Go on to identify ways to reach them with treatment information so that they re informed about the issue. Hold workshops to educate the media, religious leaders etc on treatment literacy.

### Step 6 — Build support

- As advocates, you need to find potential collaborators with whom to form alliances.
- By attending conferences, reaching out to acquaintances and searching on the Internet, the group's interest areas can be identified.
- The larger the support base, the greater the chances of success. It is of greater benefit to work as part of a coalition or network than to go solo. It is important to have PLWHA groups as well as women pressure groups in the coalition.

### Step 7 — Develop the message

In designing the advocacy messages, ask these questions:

- Who are you trying to reach with the message?
- What do you want to achieve with the message?
- What action do you want the recipient of the message to take?

As messages are framed for the target audiences, they should not reinforce stigma and discrimination. There should also be messages specifically for the general community as well as for the infected especially to turn fear into hope.



## Remember

### Common advocacy steps

1. Select an issue or problem that you would like to address
2. Gather information on the issue and analyse it
3. Develop aims and objectives for your advocacy work
4. Identify your targets – the influential people whom you want to change
5. Identify your allies – your friends who will help you
6. Identify your resources – where will funding come from, if it is needed
7. Create an advocacy plan
8. Implement, monitor and evaluate

## What issues can be advocated for in the area of women and HIV and AIDS treatment?

The following are some of the issues that you can advocate for:

- Protection of girls and women from risk of HIV infection by older men (Prevention as part of treatment)
- Active measures to keep girls in school
- Ensuring that girls and women are informed of their reproductive health rights in ways that they understand
- Removal of barriers that prevent girls and women from accessing medical care and treatment
- Stigma and discrimination related to women and girls
- Availability and accessibility of Post Exposure Prophylaxis
- Availability and accessibility of PMTCT+
- Raise self -esteem and self worth among women and girls to achieve some assertiveness

Do not let lack of support and opposition stop your advocacy efforts, keep advocating and the rays of success WILL shine through.

## Remember

- The power of networking- there is power in numbers.
- You do not have to be very educated to be a good advocate.
- Women's rights are human rights.
- Do not overlook your important role as a girl or woman advocate in your community.

