

## **The significance of understanding social scripting of sexual encounters, diverse sexual cultures and sub-cultures in developing HIV Prevention programs relevant to South African women**

It has been repeatedly found that information in and of itself is insufficient to produce risk-reducing behaviour in preventing the transmission and spread of HIV, particularly in South Africa where a lot of investment has gone to the mass production of Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials that have not significantly persuaded the individuals in changing risk taking behaviour. The challenge is that the South African researcher has focused on the calculus of behavioural frequencies and statistical correlates that aim to explain sexual risk behaviour. This calculus information has played a key role in the development of national HIV intervention policies and programs with limited consideration to cross-cultural contexts where most of these "risky sexual practices" are encrypted and take place.

This paper aims to initiate a different African discussion on the meaning of sexual practices to the people involved, the context in which they take place, the social scripting of sexual encounters, diverse sexual cultures and subcultures. A secondary aim is to put the "woman" that is considered to be mostly vulnerable to HIV at the centre of the discussion. This paper wish to put to the foreground issues like structural violence, poverty or economic dimensions and gender power imbalance as the key structural matters that have an impact on the sexual vulnerability of the woman in acquiring HIV.

### **1. Structural Violence**

The concept of structural violence can be closely linked to social injustice and the social machinery of oppression. Galtung, J (1960) in Farmer, E et al (2006) saw social structures such as economy, politics, legal, religious and culture as having a potential to perpetuate violence through inhibiting individuals and social groups from reaching their full potential. It is argued that structural violence is often embedded in longstanding social structures, normalized by stable institutions and are almost invisible and infused in our ways of understanding the world. Farmer, et al (2006) sees structural violence as speaking to those social arrangements that put individuals at harm's way as they are embedded in political and economic organizations that facilitate access to resources such as health care, education and employment.

Tamale, S (2011) sees the concept of structural violence as dating back from the time that African cultures and sexualities were framed as different, less urbane and regarded as inferior to those of the West. This "othering" of African sexualities was and still is important in the understanding of how social scripting has occurred and defines current sexual encounters that might be predisposing the African woman to sexual violence and HIV/AIDS. Interestingly Hunter, M (2010) has a similar argument about the role of the historical scripting of the African male masculinity by the infusion of Western values that has eroded safe sexual practices such as thigh sex (no vaginal penetration) and virginity testing in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. In his argument Hunter (2010) states that Africans in south Africa were more sexually conservative before colonialism and reflected on the persistent oral accounts of the locals' arduous investments in preserving virginity for marriage, and how multiple sexual partnership was frowned at and even chastised.

New dynamics that came into play such as urbanization, industrialization, increased casualisation of employment and employment of women have contributed to the changed collective identity and collective goal of keeping and maintain a household. Hunter (2010) argues that long distance relationships, unavailability of the wife, insufficient money to maintain a rural home has eroded the family structure and promoted sexual networking or multiple sexual partnerships. These imposed social injustices have challenged the African family's ability to maintain social order and deter dangers like vulnerability to diseases like HIV/AIDS and general "social fibre" erosion.

## **2. Poverty and economic dynamics**

Central to the South African discussion on drivers of HIV is the issue of transactional sex, unemployment, poor housing, lack of sanitation and other basic services such as electricity. While post-apartheid South Africa has given what seem to be an equal opportunity for women to access jobs and other basic services, this has not been the case for most. A case in hand is the one presented by Hunter (2010) at the Isithebe Industrial Park in KwaZulu Natal where it has been found that women are mostly employed to do domestic and menial tasks and as such earn on average R75 (US\$7) a week and men who perform industrial work earn about R600 (US\$60) a week. These income disparities have been exarated by the slow pace of rolling out basic services such as housing and government generated employments. These inequalities as Hunter (2010) argues have produced a class of

Landlords, a class of residents with access to small plots of land and a class that owns nothing.

The current trend in South Africa is that even with the state of unemployment people still migrate in large numbers to the urban areas where they become vulnerable to “landlords”. These harsh economic conditions then define the available range of sexual possibilities in terms of partners, sexual practices and circumstances that predispose one to HIV transmission. For most women sexual economy then becomes a lucrative option as a source of survival. Ironically though is that there is not a static perception of transactional sex and that at most it is not regarded as prostitution. Hunter argues that while transactional sex has many similarities with prostitution, these terms should not be used interchangeably. There is also an acknowledgement that transactional sex which mostly is with multiple sexual partners has been identified as one of the social drivers of the HIV epidemic in South Africa.

While in both instances this is a non-marital sexual relationship, mostly the casual partners are structured differently as girlfriend / boyfriend or prostitute / clients (Hunter, 2010). The second distinction is the transaction itself as in the other gifts can be broad depending on the availability of resources from mobile telephone, food vouchers or even cars, while in the other there is a cash payment expected after each sexual encounter. However even in the case of transactional sex which is not “prostitution” there is still another layer to it. Hunter learned that for those young women who had working parents where shelter and food was provided for, transactional sex was mainly for acquiring fashion items like clothes and hair products, while for the desperate young woman who came to the urban area for work their acquisition was meant for survival and even remittal to their impoverished families.

Of importance in this discussion is the lesson that women interpret their sexual positioning differently and their social vulnerabilities vary. Hunter argues that women “approach” transactional relations not as passive victims but rather as a way of accessing power and resources in ways that challenge and reproduce patriarchal structures. Therefore we should be noting the different social positions and the varied meanings even though these women are said to be coming from similar backgrounds. Hunter therefore argues that central to these discussions is the fact that women have an agency which determines their non-passive engagement in sexual relations. This realization might explain to us then why blanket HIV programs that assume women vulnerability do not seem to be decreasing the HIV prevalence particularly in highly burdened communities of KwaZulu Natal.

### **3. Gender Power Imbalances**

Sexuality and gender are said to be creations of culture and society and they play a central and crucial role in maintaining power relations in our society. Tamale (2011) views sexuality as embedded in the meanings and interpretations of the gender systems and as such gender provides the critical analytical lens through which sexual scripting is interpreted and understood. Zeidenstein and Moore (1996) argue that sexual violence and abuse are manifestations of unequal power relations. Violence or threat of violence play a role in the construction of sexual preferences in that it enforces compliance to sexual intercourse even if unacceptable to the other partner. The threat of violence is said to construct unequal power between men and women. This power imbalance is then mediated through expectations about the acceptable sexual behaviour such as passive / submissive characteristics in women and aggressive characteristics in men.

### **CONCLUSION**

This discussion has taken forward the known argument that information in and of itself has been insufficient in turning the rising tide of HIV prevalence particularly in South Africa where it's proving to be difficult to stabilize the epidemic. Information obtained from national quantitative surveys has assisted countries in understanding the prevalence, the biomedical and social drivers of the epidemic however; there is lack of information on the cultural and social understanding that has been encrypted about sexual engagements at community level. This paper foregrounds issues such as structural violence, poverty and economic dynamics and gender power imbalances as issues to be considered in further understanding how societies and women in particular understand their vulnerability to HIV.

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