

Combating HIV/AIDS: Promoting Gender Equality among Youth

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The principle cause of worldwide mortality among adults aged 15 to 59 has become HIV/AIDS (WHO, 2005). Half of the 5 million new cases of HIV infection occur in youth aged 15 to 24 (United Nations Population Fund, UNPF, 2003), pointing to the urgency of fighting HIV/AIDS among young people. One of the main challenges to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS has been cultural norms regarding gender roles which impact sexual behaviour. This challenge is particularly relevant for youth, who inherit these views from their cultural environments, act upon these beliefs with often disastrous health consequences, and transmit these views to their own offspring, perpetuating a cycle of gender inequality and related sexual behaviours. The present paper argues that addressing the challenge of cultural gender-related beliefs, paramount to combating the spread of HIV/AIDS among youth, must include interventions that target young men and parents, in addition to young women, and use local cultural traditions that promote female empowerment. Specifically, cultural beliefs related to the engaging in sex, condom use, and sexual coercion will be examined.

Recently, women empowerment has been repeatedly recommended as a main focus of funding in combating HIV/AIDS, particularly through general education, as well as through sexual and reproductive health education and negotiation skills (Global Campaign for Education, 2005; Herz & Sperling, 2004; UNPF, 2003). For example, studies in Zambia, Uganda, and Kenya found that educated girls are less likely to become infected with HIV (Herz & Sperling). Furthermore, education campaigns are discussing with youth, especially young women, how to refuse sex and how to insist on condom use in the face of pressure (UNPF). Although giving youth information about safe sex and teaching women to empower themselves are important parts of the equation, they are insufficient. Cultural gender-related beliefs and behaviours are

perpetuated by men, as well as women, and often by societies at large. Thus, it is important to target young men's and parents' gender-related beliefs about sex.

There are a number of recurring gender-related beliefs about behaviour surrounding sex that hinder safe sex. For example, in a number of cultures, it is expected for women to be passive, and assertive discussion about sex and sexually transmitted disease (STD) protection would be viewed as unfeminine (Levinson et al., 2004; UNPF, 2003). Furthermore, when young women ask questions to parents or teachers about sex, carry condoms, or attempt to discuss sex openly with partners, they are seen as promiscuous (Levinson et al.; UNPF). Women empowerment strategies might teach women to engage in these assertive behaviours and that it is their right to protect themselves, but they would no doubt encounter resistance and disapproval. Thus, education campaigns addressing the definition of femininity with young men and parents, as well as young women, would help change such prevailing views. The best way to counter the view that women should be passive is to use myths, proverbs, role models, and cultural traditions that promote assertiveness in women. This is not to say that cultural traditions do not promote views of women as passive, rather it is to say that there are often exceptions that can be found in any cultural tradition. For example, in Muslim countries, Khadija, Mohammed's first wife could be touted as a role model. She was Mohammed's boss, 10 years his senior, proposed to him, and gave him money and status (Brooks, 1995). Mohammed could be seen as a role model in how he accepted her assertiveness and leadership.

Cultural beliefs about masculinity also hinder safe sex. Views that men who have numerous sexual partners are studs, that sex with a virgin protects you from AIDS, and that men have to be quick, decisive, and not talkative might help spread HIV/AIDS (Levinson et al., 2004; UNPF, 2003). For example, in focus groups with Brazilian adolescent boys, researchers found

that boys did not engage in discussing safe sex with their partners for fear of being seen as not masculine because they talked rather than took action (Levinson et al.). Again, a promising strategy would be to use the traditions embedded in a given culture to counter such views. For example in Latin America, *machismo*, that is the strong adherence to a rigid masculine role that emphasizes dominance and authoritarianism, is customarily seen as promoting sexual inequities. However, machismo also includes features such as self-respect, dedication to one's family, and the responsibility to protect and provide for the family (Jaes Falicov, 1996; Torres, 1998, as cited in Ferrari, 2002). This could be used to counter the view that men should have multiple partners, and to promote the protection of women. The latter point could take the following format. Young men would be educated that women are more prone to HIV/AIDS than men due to biological reasons such as the nature of maturing reproductive tracts and the tear-prone quality of the vagina (UNPF). They would be told that 62% of young women aged 15 to 24 are living with HIV/AIDS worldwide, as compared to only 38% of young men (UNAIDS, 2001, as cited in UNPF). The role of men would then be defined as that of protecting women against this inherent vulnerability. Redefining masculinity within cultural limits could be promoted by male role models, such as sports celebrities. This type of approach would no doubt garner the support of more traditional parents and community leaders.

A paramount deterrent to safe sex is young women fearing sexual violence and young men coercing women to have sex, either through pressure or through rape. In particular, high levels of violence against women and girls are unremittingly present in parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Sachs, 2005). Girls' first sexual experience is often forced, with as high as 30% of first encounters being coerced in South Africa (UNFP, 2003). Sexual coercion is often condoned by adult men and seen as normal rough sex (UNFP). Although young women need to be taught to

say no to unwanted sex, there is often nothing they can do when a stronger man uses violence. Thus, awareness campaigns need to target young men and promote respect for women, denounce sexual coercion, and define rape clearly. Inherent in views that coercion is acceptable is the devaluing of female sexuality. That is, female desire and pleasure is seen as unimportant, and female pain is ignored. Again, values already present in specific cultures can be used to promote a view of the role of men as attending to women's needs for painless and pleasure-promoting sexual experiences. For example, in China, Confucius' Book of Rites could be used to promote the view that it is men's duty to care for his partner's emotional needs and sexual rights (Wolf, 1997). Similarly, Tao tradition indicates to men how to perceive whether women are enjoying the sexual act (Wolf). In India, the Sanskrit texts of the Kama Sutra and Tantric writings could be used to discourage rape and focus on female pleasure rather than ignoring female pain. For example, the Kama Sutra directly warns men, "A girl forcibly enjoyed by one who does not understand the hearts of girls becomes nervous, uneasy, and dejected, and suddenly begins to hate the man who has taken advantage of her" (Kama Sutra, as cited in Wolf). Such education might be endorsed by parents if it is framed in terms of their own cultural background and if they are told that the advice of elders quoted in the Kama Sutra was that even youngsters should study the Kama Sutra in preparation for marriage (Wolf).

Attending to gender-related cultural norms is of paramount importance in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Such an approach is not about being culturally insensitive or imposing Western values, it is about helping communities take the blindfold off when it comes to the reality of sexual behaviour and sexually transmitted diseases among their adolescents and young adults and finding culturally-significant ways of addressing this very important urgency.

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