

GENDER AND MULTIPLE AND CONCURRENT SEXUAL PARTNERSHIPS IN LESOTHO

PRELIMINARY REPORT OF FINDINGS, NOVEMBER 2008

Between April and September 2008, researchers undertook a qualitative study to explore the social, cultural, and behavioral factors that contribute to concurrent sexual partnerships in Lesotho. Evidence from both empirical studies and mathematical models suggests that concurrency during the period of acute infection increases the potential for HIV transmission to more people.

The research was conducted at five sites in Lesotho: the urban capital of Maseru, a foothills urban site, a lowlands rural site, a border town, and a rural mountain site. Before implementing the research, the field team conducted a community engagement process at each site and obtained approvals from the district administrator, the district council secretary, the principal chief, the town or village chief, and the community council secretaries.

Focus group discussions were used to understand social and gender norms, cultural practices, and the perceived impact of economic factors on sexual partnerships. In-depth interviews were used to collect information on specific sexual partnerships and related social, cultural, and behavioral practices.

In each of the five research sites, key stakeholders were invited to participate in a focus group that included men and women of a wide range of ages. Gender-specific focus groups were then held with women aged 15–34 (three focus groups at each site) and men aged 18–44 (two focus groups at each site). The gender-specific focus groups were divided by age and, for women, by marital status as well. In-depth interviews were held with individual men and women in each district; approximately 18

interviews were conducted at each site. For both interviews and focus groups, researchers sought to enroll people of both high and low socioeconomic standing. In total, 30 focus groups and 92 interviews were conducted.

RESULTS FROM THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

For the in-depth interviews, researchers enrolled men and women who perceived themselves to be in stable relationships. A few of those enrolled had not engaged in any sexual activity with their partners in the previous year. For those who had engaged in sexual activity, the in-depth interviews elicited detailed information on all sexual partnerships during the previous 12 months. With memory aids and careful probing, researchers asked participants to provide the date of the first and last sexual event with each partner for each month. Participants were then categorized as follows:

Concurrent partnerships	Two or more sexual partners in the same calendar month during at least one month in the 12-month recall period.
Sequential partnerships	Two or more sexual partners in the 12-month recall period, with no overlap of those sexual partners in a single calendar month.
Monogamous partnerships	One and only one sexual partner in the 12-month recall period.
No sex	No sexual partners in the 12-month recall period.

About a third of those interviewed reported at least one concurrent relationship in the past 12 months. People with more than one sexual partner tended to have concurrent, rather than sequential, partners. On average, people with concurrent partnerships had 3.1 partners and

Total # IDI	Concurrent	Sequential	Monogamous	No Sex	Data Missing
92	35	5	42	8	2

PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

Moderator:

But what are the reasons that motivate a married man to end up having many other partners?

Participant:

Being praised- being praised since you see that we males are very silly [greedy], and the boys [see] Ntate's wife here passes by while we are still drinking [and] you will hear us saying "wow, do you see her hips?" and there will be one of us who will say "I want her." And the truth is he may succeed, only to find that he was also her target while she was walking around.

Young people, either boys or girls are low maintenance! It doesn't cost as much to support them as it does to support an older person; because an older one can want to buy a fridge; she'll have many needs if she's a woman with a family; so Ntate can't afford them all. The girl just wants only R40 to go to Durban, the boy on this side when 'm'e has put him close to her, he'll never say in there the children are sitting in hunger! He's only looking at himself, to have fun, I've done what I wanted, satisfied my body. When she's given R50, it's enough, she's given him what she can, they run away from support!

those with sequential partnerships had 2.4 partners; no one reported more than 10 partners.

Male participants accounted for 20 of the 35 concurrent partnerships (57%). This is not a large gender difference, given the small sample size.

The 35 people who reported concurrent sexual partnerships tended to have multiple partners during only a few months (average 2.7) out of the year. Most months (average 6.4) they had only one partner, and some months (average 2.8) they had no sexual activity.

RESULTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

In the focus groups, people reported that a number of factors contribute to the formation of concurrent partnerships. Dissatisfaction with one's stable partner and the role of money or material goods in relationships were the most commonly cited factors. Economic need, the separation of partners due to job mobility, and the influence of peers and family were also commonly cited, along with the impact of alcohol consumption on behavior and what was described as "male sexual greed."

Age mixing, particularly older men with young girls, was perceived to contribute to multiple partnerships. There was also some discussion about older women and young boys or younger unmarried men, but it was unclear how common such relationships were.

Women and men expressed dislike for male condoms in a number of focus groups, which has obvious implications for HIV prevention programming. Some men and women reported beliefs that condom use could cause a decrease in the physical attractiveness of women by, for example, causing acne and "shiny" legs or "jelly-like" thighs.

The researchers encountered considerable difficulty in translating the English concept of sexual faithfulness into Sesotho, and responses to questions about the meaning of "faithfulness" reflected this linguistic challenge. People perceived "being faithful" to mean being supportive and respectful, and some explicitly stated that a person can have multiple sex partners and still behave in a faithful way toward each partner.

CONCLUSION

Preliminary results from the study confirm trends seen in quantitative studies regarding multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Lesotho and provide missing detail on the context and pattern of concurrency. While monogamy was most frequent among those who self-identified as being in stable relationships, concurrent partnerships were also commonly reported by both men and women. Very few participants reported sequential partnerships. Low risk perception combined with a number of social and economic factors appears to entrench the practice of concurrent partnerships, with few disincentives noted. Increased understanding of the role of concurrency in HIV transmission is needed.

Better quantitative measures need to be developed to accurately reflect the dynamic pattern of multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Lesotho. HIV prevention efforts must reflect a better understanding of both the sexual and non-sexual dimensions of "faithfulness" and proactively address a range of anti-condom sentiments.

Data analysis is ongoing, and a full report of the results will be available in February 2009.

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