“Women at Risk”: How normative sexual behaviors challenge prevention paradigms

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“Know your epidemic”

“It is important for countries to take stock of where, among whom and why new HIV infections are occurring. Understanding this enables countries to review, plan, match and prioritize their national responses to meet these needs.” (UNAIDS)
FSWs

IDUs
FSWs

MSM

IDUs
FSWs

MSM

IDUs

MARPs
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C47</td>
<td>Reducing risk in adolescents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C48</td>
<td>Strategies for identifying most at risk populations (MARPs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C49</td>
<td>Discordant couples studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C50</td>
<td>Prevention in prison settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C51</td>
<td>Prevention among MSM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C52</td>
<td>Prevention among sex workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C53</td>
<td>Prevention among IDU and non-IDU substance using populations, including alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C54</td>
<td>Prevention among populations with multiple co-occurring epidemics/syndemics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C55</td>
<td>Prevention among emerging vulnerable populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C56</td>
<td>Prevention strategies for cross-nationally connected populations of MSM, sex workers and clients and IDUs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C57</td>
<td>Use of internet, social media and other e-devices to provide and link to prevention and treatment services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C58</td>
<td>Identification of acute and recent HIV infection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C59</td>
<td>Prevention interventions during acute infection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C60</td>
<td>Prevention in positives</td>
</tr>
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</table>
“HIV epidemics are in decline among general populations worldwide” except among “key populations” and among “young women and girls in southern sub-Saharan Africa.”

Beyrer & Karim 2013
PrEP and Risk Compensation Study

• **Aim 1:** Assess the effect that the availability of PrEP will have on sexual risk decisions among women at higher risk for HIV infection.
  
  – Women at higher risk defined as those having had at least one vaginal sex act in the last two weeks OR has had more than one sexual partner in the last six months

• **Focus groups with women ages 18-35 to develop vignettes about typical women in their communities**
  
  – 4 in Bondo, Kenya; 4 in Soshanguve, So. Africa
What is a typical woman attracted to in a casual sexual partner or a new partner

- Across both sites and all 8 focus groups, “Money” was a key theme

“Apollo gives her enough money to make her hair, boost her business, and for other small expenses. She also likes how Apollo satisfies her sexually and how he socializes with everyone around him.” (Bondo, V1, FG4)
“To afford her lifestyle, Nthabiseng has several casual sexual partners whom she calls ministers. John is the Minister of Entertainment, because he is the one who takes her out to groove and also pays for transport, drinks, movies, sports tickets, etc. Peter is the Minister of Finance, because he buys her clothes, airtime, hair salon, and groceries and also gives her some money to spend how she likes. She has lied to each one of them that she has a regular partner so that they respect her and understand that at some point she will be with her regular partner.”

(Pretoria, V3, FG4)
Transactional Sex as a Cultural Norm

- Not commercial sex work, but relationships where
  - “the giving of gifts or services is an important factor”
  - there is a definite motivation to benefit materially from the sexual exchange (Hunter, 2002)

- Can include exchange of cash, food, clothing, air time, western commodities, and school-fees

- Closely linked to socio-cultural expectations of gender
  - a man is expected to act as a provider to his partners
  - women expect compensation for 'giving' sex
Transactional Sex as a Cultural Norm

- Nothing new
  - Over 40 published articles on this type of transactional sex in Sub-Saharan Africa dating back to mid-1990s

- Can relate to livelihoods and food security
  - "Housing, medical, and food deprivation in poor urban contexts: implications for multiple sexual partnerships and transactional sex in Nairobi's slums." Greif, M. J. (2012)

- Or to social status desires/materialism
  - "'I just need to be flashy on campus': female students and transactional sex at a university in Zimbabwe." Masvawure, T. (2010).
Sexual Concurrency as a Cultural Norm

• Overlapping sexual partnerships where sexual intercourse with one partner occurs between two acts of intercourse with another partner (UNAIDS)
  – debate over definition and measurement
  – ample literature describing phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa

Gordon gives her financial support. He is always available for sex [unlike] her husband who works in Nairobi. Gordon also keeps her company and she loves him because of his social status in the community. (Bondo, V1, FG3)
The Layering of Risk for Women in SSA

- Norms around sexual relationships
- Materialism, gendered interactions
- Poverty, unemployment, underemployment, economic power imbalance

Cultural

Social

Economic
“Know your epidemic”
The Role of Social Science

• Keep normative behaviors of women in the general population on the radar of public health research and intervention efforts.
  – In the FEM-PrEP trial, placebo arm incidence overall was 5.0 per 100 person years

• Ask questions about the normative sexual behaviors of men.
Widen the lens through which we look at risk behaviors

- Interconnections between economic, social, and cultural factors
The Role of Social Science

- Lead efforts to incorporate women’s lives and roles into HIV prevention program and product development and communication.
  - Avoid stigmatizing or specializing prevention solutions
  - Recognize how normative behaviors change – or stay the same – across stages of a woman’s life
Merci beaucoup!