

GENDER AND CONCURRENT SEXUAL PARTNERSHIPS IN ZAMBIA

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS FINDINGS

BACKGROUND

- UNAIDS Reference Group on Estimates, Modelling, and Projections meeting; Nairobi, Kenya 2009
To differentiate between concurrent sexual partnerships (concurrency) and serial monogamy, concurrency was defined as the occurrence of sexual intercourse with one partner between two acts of intercourse with another partner.
- Southern African Development Community meeting; Maseru, Lesotho 2006
Concurrency was identified as one of the key drivers of the epidemic in southern Africa.
- Evidence from empirical studies and mathematical models suggests that concurrency during the period of acute infection increases the potential for HIV transmission to more people.

- Overlapping concurrency distinguished concurrency and rapid serial monogamy.

METHODS

Between May 2009 and January 2010, researchers undertook a qualitative study to explore the social, cultural, and behavioral factors that contribute to concurrency in Zambia.

Before implementing the research, the field team conducted community engagement activities at each site and obtained approvals from the Ministry of Health, the National AIDS Council, district and provincial AIDS task forces, district health offices, district commissioners, and traditional leaders.

The study took place in seven geographically diverse sites in Zambia: Kaoma, Kitwe, Livingstone, Lusaka, Nakonde, Nyimba, and Solwezi. There researchers enrolled 301 men and women who perceived themselves to be in stable relationships and who agreed to participate in in-depth interviews. The goal of the interviews was to collect information on specific sexual partnerships and related social, cultural, and behavioral practices.

For those who had engaged in sexual activity, the 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 dates of the first and last sexual events with each partner for each month. Participants were then categorized as follows:

Overlapping concurrency	Overlapping sexual partnerships in which sexual intercourse with one partner occurs between two acts of intercourse with another partner
Sequential partnerships	Two or more sexual partners in the 12-month recall period, with no overlap in sexual activity between any two partners
Monogamous partnerships	One, and only one, sexual partner during the 12-month recall period
No sex	No sexual partners during the 12-month recall period

PURPOSE

This study was designed to produce strategic information on determinants of sexual behavior, focusing particularly on social, economic, and cultural factors that promote concurrent sexual partnerships (concurrency). Its goal was to inform national gender interventions to prevent HIV.

KEY FINDINGS

Overlapping concurrency is prevalent

- More than 70 percent of the men and just under half of the women who were interviewed in a nonrandom but diverse sample from seven sites across Zambia reported having had overlapping concurrent relationships during the previous 12 months.

“Faithful” is not perceived to mean sexual fidelity

- People perceived “being faithful” to mean being supportive and respectful.
- A person can have multiple sexual partners and still behave in a faithful way towards each partner.
- Maintaining respect and household harmony is part of being faithful.

The use of crude measures of concurrency can result in misleading estimates of male and female concurrency

- The measure that looked at overlaps in sexual events by partners identified significant differences in concurrency between men and women.

FUNDERS/ PARTNERS

- U.S. Agency for International Development
- National AIDS Council of Zambia
- Family Health International
- The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
- United Nations Children’s Fund
- United Nations Population Fund
- International Organization for Migration
- World Health Organization
- Tropical Diseases Research Centre

PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me why you had different sexual partners?

PARTICIPANT:

Now it's due to current occupation. I'd leave my wife, go very far, and you are there two to three weeks and you feel like having sex. What do you do? You get one... I'll be told fat women are sweet so I'd go for fat ones... Then another tells me that slim ones are warm, then I go for slim ones, and that short ones are tight. So these are things that were causing me to have a long chain of women.

INTERVIEWER:

How does faithfulness apply to your relationship?

PARTICIPANT:

Well, he is faithful and so am I. He supports me. When I don't have money, he gives me money, and he is the one who pays school fees for my children. So yeah... he is faithful, though he has a wife. I don't expect him to marry but at least he can support me.

RESULTS

Overall, 94 men and 75 women reported overlapping concurrency in the previous 12 months. Of these, 81 men and 57 women reported having had at least one new sexual partner during that period.

perceive "being faithful" to mean being supportive and respectful, and some explicitly stated that a person can have multiple sexual partners and still behave in a faithful way towards each partner.

CONCLUSION

The study's preliminary results confirm trends seen in quantitative studies regarding concurrency in Zambia. They also provide details about the context and pattern of concurrency that had been missing. Overlapping concurrency was frequent among both men and women who identified themselves as

Percentage of partnership types reported in previous 12 months, by gender

Partnership type	Men (%)	Women (%)	Total (%)
	(N=133)	(N=162)	(N=295)*
Overlapping concurrency	70.68	46.30	57.29
Sequential partnerships	5.08	3.16	3.99
Monogamous partnerships	14.41	48.73	34.06
No sex	0.85	0.63	0.72

* The gender of six of the participants was not noted.

Among those reporting overlapping concurrency, men averaged three partners and women two partners.

Participants reported that a number of factors contribute to the formation of concurrent partnerships. Economic need (for money or material goods) and the separation of partners because of job mobility were the two most commonly cited. Dissatisfaction with one's stable partner 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."

Responses to questions about the meaning of "faithfulness" indicated that people

being in stable relationships. A perception that risk is low combines with a number of social and economic factors to entrench the practice of concurrent partnerships, with few disincentives noted. Increased understanding of the role of concurrency in HIV transmission is needed.

Quantitative measures should be standardized and adopted to accurately capture the dynamic pattern of concurrency in Zambia. HIV prevention efforts must reflect a better understanding of both the sexual and nonsexual dimensions of "faithfulness."

Data analysis is ongoing, and a full report of the results will be available in August 2010.



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