

Sexism, Youth and HIV in South Africa

Friday 7 April 2006, by [HJORT Linn](#) (Date first published: May 2004).

The HIV/AIDS crisis in southern and South Africa has spread enormously wide and has caused a lot of social problems and individual suffering on a general level. Among all people living with HIV/AIDS, there are some groups who are especially affected by it; two of them are women and youth.

In South Africa, around 5,3 million people live with HIV. 10,2 per cent of all young people are infected, according to a recent study. Of the five million people all over the world who were infected during 2001, 58 per cent were below the age of 25. On the African continent, HIV/AIDS hit young people specifically hard. A large proportion of Africa's population is very young and most of them live in deep poverty - with few possibilities to quality education, jobs with a living wage, and proper health care. This situation that affects so many of Africa's young people impacts on their possibilities to gain knowledge about HIV/AIDS and thereby their power to protect themselves.

Â Women of all ages are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS than men. Of all adults who became infected in sub-Saharan Africa in the year 2000, 55 per cent were women. Some of the reasons for this may have biological explanations. For example, there is more virus in sperm than in the discharge of the vagina, and women are more sensitive to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), which in turn increases the risk of getting HIV. But it is the social circumstances in patriarchal societies - that is, societies where men have more economic, social and political power than women - that is the main force behind the higher number of infected women.

In South Africa, women make up a small part of the formal workforce. In 2001-02, only 36 per cent of workers holding down a formal job were women. Despite the very high unemployment rate in South Africa, and despite the very low wages and insecure working conditions of many jobs, men in general have more financial stability than women as they make up the majority of formal workers. When women work, they often have the lowest paid and most insecure jobs in the market. This situation directly impacts on women's ability to protect themselves from getting HIV. Women who are economically dependent on men are less able to make demands in their sexual relationships. In order to keep a partner - and thereby a source of income for themselves and perhaps their children - many women find it difficult to ask for the use of condoms, or demand monogamy (to have only one sexual partner). Women who have no source of income and turn to prostitution are particularly vulnerable.

The very high levels of gender-based violence against women in South Africa - which includes sexual abuse, rape and domestic abuse - is another reason why more women than men acquire HIV. The fear of violence may prevent a woman from demanding the use of condoms, in case her partner would suspect her of being unfaithful or maybe consider her sexually 'loose' and respond violently to the request. Rape and forced sex are considered other ways the HIV virus is transmitted.

When it comes to teenage girls and young women, the picture is bleak. In a recent survey, quoted in THISDAY on 19 May, it was discovered that of all HIV-infected young people (between 15 and 24 years), a whole 77 per cent were female! This difference between young men's and women's infection rates is much higher than has been noted in any other international study, according to one of the researchers. While more research still needs to be done to find out why this is the case,

factors such as use of condoms and poverty do play a role. 31 per cent of all youth in the study had never used a condom, and the infection rates were the highest around poor areas like informal settlements.

But sexist attitudes and violence amongst young people directed at young women are most certainly very important reasons behind this shocking finding. In 1999, a study was carried out amongst youth to lay a basis for the South African television programme Soul City. That survey found that gang rapes carried out by an (ex-) boyfriend and his friends as 'punishment' - perhaps for suspected unfaithfulness or for having been left by the girlfriend - was 'not unusual'. Women and girls were generally seen as subordinate (less worthy) people, who simply had to obey any sexual demands their male partners might have. Rape was blamed by many on the 'challenging' clothes women wear. The majority of young people who took part in the survey did not think that forced sex within a relationship was rape, and they generally thought that once girls get into a relationship, they have to agree to whatever their boyfriends want them to do sexually. Several studies have found that the first sexual experience of up to 30 per cent - that is one third - of all girls in South Africa was forced.

This indicates that women and girls from a very early stage have very little or no control over their sexual lives and choices of who to have sex with, when and under what circumstances, and this makes them very vulnerable to HIV infection. Economic dependency, sexism and women's oppression is - literally - a deadly combination. UNAIDS, the United Nation's HIV/AIDS organisation, and the World Health Organisation clearly state that gender inequalities and oppression of women fuel the spread of HIV/AIDS, and to overcome the pandemic, women must be empowered and poverty must be fought.

When young people get involved in organisations like LoveLife and the Treatment Action Campaign, they show they take the issue of HIV/AIDS seriously and that they understand it is important to stop the spread of the virus. When they organise in the Anti-Privatisation Forum and the Anti-Eviction campaign, they show they understand that poverty must be defeated in order to build their present and their future. In whatever struggles youth take part in southern and South Africa, the link between women's oppression, the future of young people, poverty and HIV/AIDS must always be there. Only when the full picture of all factors that feed the HIV/AIDS is clear and they are all included in the struggle for a better tomorrow can the swelling tide of death through disease be reversed.

P.S.

* An edited version of this article was published in Khanya College Journal no. 6, June 2004.