

HIV and gender-based violence: welcome policies and programmes, but is the research keeping up?

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Abstract: *The global HIV policy arena has seen a surge of interest in gender-related dimensions of vulnerability to HIV and violence. UNAIDS and other prominent actors have named gender-based violence a key priority, and there seems to be genuine understanding and commitment to addressing gender inequalities as they impact key populations in the AIDS response. In the quest for evidence-informed interventions, there is usually a strong connection between the research conducted and the policies and programmes that follow. Regarding gender, HIV and violence, is this the case? This discussion paper asks whether the relevant peer-reviewed literature is suitably representative of all affected populations – including heterosexual men, transgender men and women, women who have sex with women, and men who have sex with men – as well as whether the literature sufficiently considers gender norms and dynamics in how research is framed. Conclusions about violence in the context of heterosexual relationships, and with specific attention to heterosexual women, should not be presented as insights about gender-based violence more generally, with little attention to gender dynamics. Research framed by a more comprehensive understanding of what is meant by gender-based violence as it relates to all of the diverse populations affected by HIV would potentially guide policies and programmes more effectively.* © 2014 Reproductive Health Matters

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Gender-based violence as both a cause and consequence of HIV raises significant health and human rights concerns. In recent years, the global HIV policy arena has seen a surge of interest in gender-related dimensions of vulnerability to HIV and violence, resulting in notable policy and programmatic advances with the aim of addressing gender-based violence. Policy directives addressing HIV, gender and violence would seem to call for an evidence base that elucidates how HIV-related violence is mediated by gender roles, norms and dynamics. However, it is not clear that the bulk of empirical research has kept pace with these developments. Within the global

policy realm, the concept of gender as a set of norms, as a structurally and institutionally supported system of social relations and as a socially constructed identity, is understood to be distinct from the concept of biological sex. Although the term *gender-based violence* implicitly recognizes this distinction, the key question is whether researchers are publishing studies that provide insight into how and why gender matters in relation to HIV and violence.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to raise two concerns about the peer-reviewed literature at the intersection of HIV and violence. First, we question whether the literature is suitably

representative of all highly affected populations – women and girls; men and boys; men who have sex with men (MSM); and transgender populations. Second, we look at how the concept of gender-based violence as connected to HIV research may get conflated with the concept of violence against women, and how a lack of clarity about the meaning of gender-based violence may undermine the evidence base.

We conducted two literature reviews that inform this discussion: the first, to assess the extent to which researchers studying HIV and violence have focused on the diversity of populations affected by this issue, and the second, to provide some insight into how researchers use the term “gender-based violence”. Both reviews were restricted to peer-reviewed original research articles. For the first review, standard literature review methodologies were used to identify 174 English-language articles that reported on quantitative or qualitative research findings relating to HIV and violence. The articles were located by searching the following databases: EconLit, LegalTrac, LexisNexis, Medline, PAIS International, PolicyFile and Social Science Citation Index. The second review identified recent articles that included the term “gender-based violence” in their titles. A sample of articles was obtained by searching PubMed using the following search string: (“*hiv*”[MeSH Terms] OR “*hiv*”[All Fields]) AND *gender-based violence*[Title]. The search was further narrowed to identify original research published during the years 2008–2013, with the time period chosen to capture the research that is most likely to be informing current policy and programmatic efforts. The abstracts of articles were screened, and articles that did not include a primary focus on HIV were eliminated.

We start with a background section summarising the current state of knowledge with respect to HIV, gender and violence, and move to the discussion of which populations are represented in the literature and how the meaning of “gender-based violence” is communicated. The paper concludes with reflections about key points and recommendations for how research can better inform policy and programmatic work on HIV and violence in the future.

Background

HIV and gender

An estimated 35.3 million people were living with HIV worldwide at the end of 2012, with

the number of new infections during that year thought to be 2.3 million.¹ The global HIV epidemic poses complex challenges for women, MSM and transgender populations.

Worldwide, 57% of all people living with HIV are women, and HIV is the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age.² A 2007 systematic review found that MSM in low- and middle-income countries have a 19 times greater risk of being infected with HIV than the general population.³ More recently, UNAIDS reported that MSM globally are estimated to be 13 times more likely to be living with HIV than the general population.¹ While national surveillance data are not routinely collected on transgender individuals, studies have also shown a high prevalence of HIV among this population.^{4–6}

Understanding of the linkages between gender and vulnerability to HIV has evolved, and major international institutions now explicitly recognize the ways in which gender norms and gender inequality are drivers of HIV infection.^{7,8} Concurrently, the global HIV community has become increasingly concerned about the issue of HIV and violence as it affects not only women but also MSM and transgender individuals. All of this is reflected in a proliferation of policy and programmatic initiatives that are intended to be sensitive to gender concerns across the spectrum of HIV prevention, treatment, care and support.

UNAIDS highlights addressing gender inequality as an example of a structural intervention included within combination HIV prevention, alongside behavioural and biomedical approaches.⁹ Additionally, attention to gender is recommended as part of national and sub-national combination HIV prevention planning efforts and monitoring and evaluation activities. Combination prevention, as articulated by both UNAIDS and the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), includes addressing gender-based violence.^{9,10}

It is thus increasingly apparent that addressing gender-related considerations and promoting gender equality are seen as essential for realizing the full benefits of recent advances in HIV treatment and prevention.⁷ Along these lines, there is programmatic evidence that gender-sensitive and transformative HIV and anti-violence interventions with heterosexually active men are more efficacious than gender-neutral programmes.^{11–13} Such programmes attempt to modify narrow and constraining aspects of hegemonic male norms in

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