



# Gender, Sexuality and HIV:

## Report on the HEARD Get Together



WORKSHOP REPORT SEPTEMBER 2010

### Introduction

On August 18 2010, HEARD's Gender Equality and HIV Prevention Project hosted a successful 'Gender Get Together' workshop at HEARD. The workshop was the first forum to bring together researchers from diverse HEARD-affiliated projects for a reflective discussion about the role of gender and sexuality in their work – focusing on both what has been done, and what will be done into the future. The interactive meeting was facilitated by Prof Relebohile Moletsane (UKZN) and Samantha Willan (Gender Project Manager) and was attended by nine researchers, reflecting over 10 different projects funded fully or partially by HEARD. Reflections at the end echoed how exhilarating it had been to have a space for contemplation, debate and generating new ideas – especially regarding feminist theories and research in the context of HIV/AIDS.

### Background

HEARD's Gender Equality and HIV Prevention Project emphasises the crucial importance of understanding and addressing gender inequalities in responses to HIV/AIDS, while mobilising evidence to strengthen the gender response amongst African leadership. Since its inception in mid-2009, the project has focused on baseline

studies about the status of gender and HIV within southern and eastern Africa.

Although the project is unique within HEARD for its explicit focus on gender inequalities, other HEARD projects also examine gender and its relationship to HIV prevention. With this in mind, the project hosted a one-day workshop, drawing together a diverse range of HEARD-affiliated and funded projects that explored these issues.<sup>1</sup>

### Meeting Objectives

- ✂ To share work done on gender and sexuality in HEARD over the past year;
- ✂ To build linkages between projects;
- ✂ To discuss possible future directions and synergies, where appropriate within this research; and
- ✂ To provide a basis for new research post-2010.

### Summary of Participating Projects

Participating researchers briefly shared outlines of their projects, including aims and methods, theoretical/ideological location, and key findings, with a particular emphasis on their work's implications for gender equality.

***Structural Interventions for Gender Equality and HIV Prevention:*** This desktop review intends

Health Economics and HIV/AIDS Research Division

to map the inter-relationships between gender inequality, insecure livelihoods and HIV and identify and assess interventions that have sought to tackle these structural determinants of HIV to form the basis for recommendations for further research in southern and eastern Africa. While the project is not yet complete, its key findings to date are that despite growing discussion about the structural or social drivers of HIV, (i) there are very few examples of projects that seek to tackle these structural drivers, (ii) interventions which do are often hard to replicate, and (iii) questions remain about how to scale up these findings into meaningful policy.

***Tangible Skill-building and HIV Youth Prevention Intervention in rural South Africa:***

This mixed methods study evaluated an intervention in rural KwaZulu-Natal that sought to indirectly influence the sexual decision-making of youth by including HIV issues in literacy and drama lessons. The evaluation focused on whether the project had an impact on youth sexual risk-taking behaviour through identifying factors such as self-efficacy, deviant peer norms, parent-child relationships and gender dynamics. Qualitative findings demonstrated a tendency among peers and parents of blaming the “other” sex for the spread of HIV. Overall, the evaluation suggests that the project positively impacted sexual behaviour and attitudes towards condom use.

***Economic Globalisation, Growth and HIV/AIDS:*** This four-country study (Lesotho, Peru, Madagascar and South Africa) funded by HEARD and the IDRC (International Development Research Centre, Canada) explored the relationships between these three factors. Reflecting on gender inequalities and transactional sex became a central component of research as the project progressed. Two of the

teams presented at this meeting, South Africa and Lesotho.

The *South Africa* study reported on their qualitative study, which employed key informant interviews, focus groups, and in-depth individual interviews to examine how globalisation reshaped women’s HIV vulnerabilities in a peri-urban Western Cape township. Several findings reflect the persistence of gender inequalities, such as high levels of reporting of intimate partner violence; there was also a complex dynamic around transactional sex. Young women seemed to negotiate the social and economic constraints imposed on them—as women, as young people, and as [relatively] poor people—through engaging in transactional sex. This had contradictory outcomes, whereby they simultaneously challenged and reproduced traditional gender norms.

The *Lesotho* study used mixed methods (surveys and in-depth interviews) to examine the economic globalisation-HIV/AIDS nexus in the textile and garment industry. The prevalence of HIV among the textile and garment employees—85% of whom are women—is nearly double the national rate of 23%. Findings suggest some promising aspects for HIV prevention within the industry, such as the existence of comprehensive workplace responses to HIV/AIDS and the increased economic autonomy experienced by women who are employed by factories. However, factors related to rural-urban migration increased the vulnerability of factory workers to HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, despite increased earnings women were not in a position to initiate or even feel sufficiently economically *and* politically empowered to control their sexual relationships.

***Gender and National Strategic Plans:*** An ongoing project within the Gender Equality and

HIV Prevention Project focuses on how gender is integrated into the National Strategic Plans (NSPs) of countries in southern and eastern Africa. Based on a critical review of evidence around gender and HIV and significant external input from experts in the field, a framework of 'good practice' is being developed reflecting how gender should be integrated into NSPs. Current NSPs will be measured against this framework to assess the extent to which gender inequalities are addressed. The final product will be a set of clearly defined recommendations to policymakers around how gender can be effectively integrated into NSPs.

**Microbicides and Gender Equality:** With the positive results of the CAPRISA 004 microbicide trial, staff at HEARD undertook a literature review and held discussions with key players from the International Partnership on Microbicides (IPM) to determine how microbicides might be rolled out to ensure both HIV prevention and women's empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). As a female-initiated HIV prevention technology, microbicides offer the opportunity for women's empowerment insofar as they may enable women to have greater decision-making power around HIV-prevention and open spaces for communication, discussion, and trust-building with male partners. However, more dialogue must occur between social scientists, civil society, practitioners and policy makers to ensure that microbicides are actively programmed both as a tool for HIV prevention *and* women's empowerment.

**Communities in Southern Africa: Developing and Implementing Evidence-based HIV-Prevention with and for Young People:** A collaborative research project between HEARD and the Southern African AIDS Trust (SAT) evaluated an initiative that focused on sharing

and disseminating information relating to 'key drivers' of HIV transmission with a range of partner organisations in five southern African countries (Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, South Africa). Qualitative case studies were undertaken to determine whether this information had effectively been integrated into a variety of organisations' programmes in a range of settings (urban, rural, informal settlements/peri-urban, border). Findings suggest that most organisations lacked specific programming for addressing multiple concurrent partnerships and intergenerational sexual relationships as different phenomenon, despite them having different implications for young men and women.

**Legal Obligations on Women's Equality in relation to SRHR and HIV:** In light of the renewed focus on sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) in relation to HIV, a review was conducted to examine the extent to which 18 countries in southern and eastern Africa have ratified and domesticated three key international treaties that support and promote women's reproductive health rights. The strongest and most progressive international treaty in terms of enabling and protecting women's reproductive rights and in relation to HIV was the African Women's Protocol. However, a number of countries reviewed had not ratified the African Women's Protocol, and even where ratification has occurred domestication is very weak. A promising finding was that even where countries had not ratified treaties, there were pockets of progress in relation to reproductive rights and gender equality.

### Emerging Issues in Gender and HIV/AIDS Research

The afternoon session entailed an unstructured and thought-provoking group discussion around

key crosscutting themes that emerged in the morning session. Many issues related to methodological approaches within gender research, illustrating the need for more spaces to explore these questions. The underlying conceptual problem was the need to clearly define and understand what is meant by 'achieving gender equality'—that is, the epistemological, ontological, and practical meanings of 'gender equality' within HIV/AIDS research, policy, and programmes. Key issues discussed were:

***How might we strike a balance between addressing epistemological and ontological concerns at each phase of research?***

Much of the initial discussion revolved around theoretical and methodological concerns about knowledge production and 'ways of behaving' as researchers conducting gender research. We discussed how gender and feminist researchers might balance reflecting on critical feminist methods and theories with action-oriented policymaking and programming. An important part of the research process should be identifying the position of our work and ourselves in the broader theoretical and ideological landscape. This may be especially difficult yet necessary for inter- and multi-disciplinary research teams.

***How should we conduct research in ways that better inform policy and interventions related to gender equality and HIV/AIDS?***

Increasingly research is called upon to demonstrate its relevance to policy and practice. Yet, good research, particularly on gender, is especially complex. Therefore, balancing the needs of policymakers with that of thoughtful research is imperative. A key concern was the need to be mindful of utilisation within the policy

realm from the outset of research. Engaging end-users at the beginning of research projects is an important way of enhancing utilisation while also improving community engagement.

***Understanding gender and sexuality as separate yet related constructs***

Whether research is explicitly conducted through a gender lens or not, we must distinguish between gender and sexuality before exploring their interconnections with HIV/AIDS. Failure to separate out these two issues may undermine the usefulness of research and obscure complex relationships. Gender is a socially and culturally constructed system of widely shared expectations and norms about appropriate male and female behaviour, characteristics and roles. Sexuality is related to gender, but can be distinguished as the social construction of a biological drive, pleasure, and desire. Sexuality often refers to one's sexual orientation and sexual attraction, which may or may not be consistent with one's normative gender role. Gender and sexuality are constructed by a complex interplay of social, cultural and economic forces that determine the distribution of power.<sup>2</sup>

***Attention to the dominant and marginalised discourses and language related to desire, sex, sexuality, pleasure and HIV***

Although HIV in SSA is largely transmitted via heterosexual sex, we must be careful not to ascribe to heteronormative understandings of sexual behaviour, attitudes and desire, and their association with HIV transmission. Moreover, researchers should also make space for narratives of sexual pleasure and desire in relation to what are often constructed as risky sexual practices. We must allow space for nuance and contradiction about gendered and sexual

identities, desires and practices to emerge in our research findings. Such an approach requires at least gaining a sense of local socio-linguistic meanings of desire, sex, sexuality, pleasure and HIV within the social, cultural, political and historical context.

***Improved analysis of 'power' from study conception through to analysis.***

Researchers need to actively theorise understandings of power, change, and empowerment, especially where the research settings are characterised by persistent political, social, economic and gender inequalities, throughout a project. Only through a strong theoretical analysis of power will research grasp the role of power and provide spaces for change.

***Consider the implications of the invisibility of men and boys as gendered subjects within HIV/AIDS discourse and practice, and work towards a balance in approaches that involve men and women.***

Special attention to women is certainly warranted in light of the vast inequalities and burden of responsibility women continue to face in an era of HIV/AIDS. However, the feminisation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic does not necessarily warrant a 'feminisation' of research. Research needs to explore gender as the relations between men and women to allow for more nuanced understandings how femininity and masculinity are constructed and implicated within the epidemic, and how to encourage change in favour of gender equality.

***How might technical and economic 'solutions' assist in achieving gender equality?***

Technical, biomedical and economic 'solutions' (including microbicides, medical male

circumcision, condoms, conditional cash transfers and microfinance initiatives) do not necessarily have an inherent ability to reshape gender relations. Rather they have greater potential if they are delivered alongside efforts intended to achieve gender equality. There is a risk with a discrete, female-initiated method such as a microbicide of implicitly placing a further burden on women while removing responsibility from men. Furthermore, economic empowerment 'solutions' may have limited impact outside the economic realm if they do not also actively tackle gender inequalities in their delivery and uptake. Dialogue and collaboration among social scientists, civil society and policymakers will enhance the design and roll out of these gender-sensitive technical programmes.

***What does gender equality look like such that HIV risk is effectively reduced? How do we address gender equality (through research, policy, interventions) in ways that are meaningful for HIV prevention?***

Evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that HIV disproportionately affects women in multiple ways. Considering the vast resources that have been aimed at technical, knowledge- and behaviour-based interventions and gender equality policies, women's lives have not significantly changed. We must make space for more nuanced understandings and contradictions in our findings about gender, so as to better reflect people's context and lived experiences. Consideration must be paid to the complex losses and gains for women if they challenge established gender norms. Perhaps we must revisit the principles of a critical feminist movement and invite self-reflexivity amongst researchers, while considering the HIV agenda and the need for specificity and utilisation in our work. The first

step in this regard may be reimagining what gender equality for HIV prevention looks like.

## Workshop Participants and Organisations

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Tumelo Tsikoane (Prof, University of Lesotho)

Jo Vearey (University of Witswatersand and Project Co-ordinator for regional HEARD-funded project)

Samantha Willan (Gender Project Manager and Research Associate, HEARD)

Yanga Zemba (Medical Research Council)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, only a selected number of HEARD-affiliated projects that have examined gender were able to attend.

<sup>2</sup> Gupta, Geeta Rao. Gender, sexuality and HIV/AIDS: the What, the Why, and the How. *Plenary Address XIIIth International AIDS Conference, Durban, South Africa*. 12 Jul 2000.