Sexual orientation and risk factors for Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome transmission

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Introduction

- The efforts to prevent the HIV scourge face an uphill task when there is increasing resistance from traditionalist forces and religious bodies as well as governments (Misra & Chandiramani, 2005).

- Lack of political willpower to articulate and implement the right approaches to curb the HIV/AIDS pandemic is costing South Africa (and many other countries) the battle against eradication and control of the disease (world-wide).

- When culture and religion take precedence over the political willpower to address the direct effect of the sexual activities of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) sector and other youths, individuals and society are rendered vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.
Introduction…. 

- Lack of will power also blurs the vision to formulate an articulated and effective HIV/AIDS policy that would address the pandemic ravaging the region in question.
- The impact of the efforts to control HIV/AIDS in South Africa has not been felt despite the fact that the government has put in enough financial and human resources.
- In South Africa (like in many other parts of the world), the current HIV/AIDS programme attempts to intervene at the last minute with limitations to behavioural change.
Introduction....

- This informs the populace about the existence of HIV and its dangers, hoping the awareness campaign on HIV/AIDS and its dangers would prompt people to abstain from risky sexual behaviours and/or move from high-risk to low-risk sexual activities.
- In this case, the formulated AIDS policy ignores the fundamental causes of the epidemic (Abaver, 2008).
- The programme should take into consideration the predictable declining health crisis, economy, food security, the direct biological effect and social activities of the populace that subject society to the susceptibility of HIV/AIDS.
Introduction

- In South Africa, Government incentives in the form of child grants to youth who have children and the legalisation of abortion, are clear indications that policies formulated to prevent the transmission of HIV/AIDS in this part of Africa may not yield the desired results.

- There are concerns regarding the public health implications of homosexuals (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Transgender and Intersex-LGBTI).

- These have to be viewed in the right perspective in order to understand and tackle the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (Misra & Chandiramani, 2005).
Introduction

- Besides the lack of the right approach from government, the relative difficulty in identifying LGBTI individuals who usually hide their status; and the refusal to disclose their sexual orientation to their healthcare providers (Hinchliff, Gott, & Galena, 2005) militate against provision of comprehensive HIV/AIDS healthcare services.
- This problem is compounded when healthcare providers with negative attitudes towards same-sex behaviour choose to provide limited care for LGBTI individuals (Eliason & Schope, 2001).
- Among the LGBTI sector, the transgender people are identified as one of the most-at-risk populations in the 2012–2016 National Strategic Plan for HIV, STIs and TB (SA National Department of Health, 2011).
Aim

- The current study attempts to provide insight into the factors that militate against the prevention and control of HIV/AIDS.
- by presenting views of a larger students’ body from the five campuses of WSU in terms of social life, cultural and religious views as determinants of risk factors for HIV transmission.
Materials and methods

• Sample

- In this cross-sectional study, a total of 3048 participants were recruited from the five campuses of Walter Sisulu University (Mthatha, Ibika, Buffalo City, Potsdam and Queenstown). Their ages range from 18-40 years.
- The proportion of male and female was 42.2% and 57.8% respectively.
- Participants were adequately informed on the purpose of the study, and were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity. After oral consent, participation therefore, was voluntarily.
Materials and methods....

• *Data collection*

- Data collection was done with the aid of self-report questionnaire and interviews, administered in the five campuses of Walter Sisulu University (Nelson Mandela drive, Mthatha, Ibika, Buffalo city, Potsdam and Queenstown).

- Questionnaires were distributed to students who completed and returned them to the researchers.

- Besides baseline socio-demographic information and knowledge, attitudes as well as behaviours of the LGBTI group, the questionnaires and interviews were used to access the cultural and religious affiliations and practices as determinants of risk factors for HIV transmission.
Materials and methods....

• Ethical issues

➢ The Ethical committee of the Walter Sisulu University approved the study design and the research.

➢ Permission for the study was approved by the Directorate of Research Development, Walter Sisulu University, The Walter Sisulu University’s Centre for HIV/AIDS (WSU-CHA), Eastern Cape LGBTI Organization and Eastern Cape AIDS Council.

➢ Informed consent was obtained from all participants before administering the questionnaires.

• Statistical analysis

➢ Demographic and other data were analysed descriptively (percentages) using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0.
Results

- Among the students of Walter Sisulu University, the awareness of homosexuality is very high (69.8%).
- Most (84.7%) participants confirmed they were straight/heterosexuals;
- Few identified themselves as bisexuals (3.6%), gay (3.1%) and lesbians (3.2%).
- The majority (77.3%) of the students agreed that, generally, sexual activities are predisposed risk factors for the transmission of HIV/AIDS.
- In addition, the knowledge that homosexuality is a risk factor for transmission of HIV/AIDS, STDs, and STIs was not in doubt (57.4%).
- Unprotected sex was regarded as a major cause of HIV/AIDS transmission (87.9%).
Results....

- While 25.3% confirmed that their religion encouraged them to accept people with any sexual orientation,
- 47.3% observed that their religion saw homosexuality as unnatural and wrong.
- Over twenty per cent (21.8%) said their religion did not address issues of homosexuality.
- The findings of this study also show that 68.2% participants believed that the view of their religion on homosexuality was justified,
- though 15.55% participants felt their religion should change their views
Results....

- Seventy per cent (70%) of the participants confirmed that their culture did not accept same-sex relationships.
- Discrimination against homosexuals was also noticed.
- The findings of this study reveal that 45.2% participants reported witnessing discrimination against members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) sector.
- However, discrimination against the LGBTI sector was received with mixed feelings: some respondents (28.8%) were angry about this discrimination,
some (20%) approved discrimination against the LGBTI sector
yet 29.4% did not feel strongly about it.
It was the general advice of some participants (59.5%) that the university should consider addressing the issues of discrimination against homosexuals,
and 58.6% expressed the view that, the introduction of programmes to address same discrimination against homosexuals in the university community is a way forward.
Results....

- Violence and abuse against homosexuals, 32.4%
- Violence and abuse were considered wrong, 47.7%
- Violence and abuse justified, 6.6%
- Indifference to violence and abuse, 25.5%
- Some respondents (41.6%) advised that the university should condemn violence and abuse against homosexuals
Discussion

- This present study was premised on the preliminary study conducted by Abaver, Cishe, Twaise, & Goon (2014), which characterised the attitudes and behaviour towards LGBTI individuals at the Walter Sisulu University (WSU) community comprising a diverse student body.

- The results of this current study agree with the results of the preliminary study in many aspects. The high knowledge of the existence of homosexuals in the WSU community found by the preliminary study (64.3%) was reflected in this current study (69.8%).
Discussion…..

- However, to establish comprehensive and exact statistics of the LGBTI sector in this part of Africa poses a big challenge.
- Factors that compounds the disclosure of one’s status as a member of this sexual minority (LGBTI sector) are the stigma and discrimination among other negative perceptions around the group.
- Yet, since most homosexual-related stigma and discrimination are relational, it is important to understand the socio-cultural and religious context in which the stigma and discrimination may manifest.
- The view of Health24 HIV/AIDS (2014) is that South Africa is considered to be one of the most countries worst affected by HIV/AIDS in the world.
Discussion....

- The reasons for this are complex; nevertheless, certain sociocultural factors have been identified as being responsible for the rapid spread of the disease,
- and these include government policies, sexual violence, stigma and discrimination, cultural beliefs and practices, among other reasons (personal observations)
- In the face of abject poverty, the daily struggle for survival overrides any concerns people living in poverty might have about contracting HIV (South African National Department of Health, 2011).
- Poverty level has led many lesbians to adjust to bisexuality in order to maintain sustenance coming from the male partners (personal communication)
Discussion....

- Though this study did not consider aspect of migration from one sexual preference to another, personal communications and observations revealed that many a bisexual female would opt for being pregnant in order to benefit from the child grant provided by the welfare department.

- This may explain why the good intention on the part of the government of South Africa to institute child grant programmes may be misconstrued by many to mean poverty alleviation, which would lead many young girls living below the poverty level not to think of protection while having sexual intercourse.
Discussion....

- Violence encompasses a wide range of social relations, including same-gender sexual relationships, as witnessed in this study (32.4%).

- Violence directed at the LGBTI sector because of their sexual orientation could limit one’s willingness to disclose his or her sexual orientation as a homosexual (Hinchliff, Gott & Galena, 2005).

- As a result, HIV programmes targeting this minority group are not effectively delivered, meaning that many members of the group cannot access the benefits of the programme due to non-disclosure of their status (Hinchliff, Gott & Galena, 2005).
Discussion....

- The issue of violence and abuse targeted at members of the LGBTI sector among WSU community is expressed by the respondents in this study with mixed feelings.
- Where 47.7% of the respondents considered violence and abuse against homosexuals as wrong, 6.6% justified the act, while 25.5% were indifferent.
- Though in the minority, those who justified violence against homosexuality might have been speaking from the context that homosexuality is not accepted in the community generally.
Discussion....

- Same-sex relationships may not receive the blessings of students of WSU due to their cultural beliefs
- About 70% confirm that their culture does not accept same-sex relationships,
- Nevertheless, cultural activities among South African youths (some of whom are members of the LGBTI sector) predispose this section of the population to high risk of contracting the HIV/AIDS disease
Male circumcision (MC) in adults is a measure of reducing the risk of HIV infection,
but that is only when the risk reduction effect of MC can be modified by the type of circumcision (medical, traditional and religious) and sexual risk behaviours after circumcision (Ediau, Matova Byaruhanga, Tumwesigye, & Wanyenze, 2015).
Discussion...

- Besides the use of the same locally made surgical tool on all patients in a traditional and religious circumcision ceremony (known as ‘initiation’ among South African youths),
- the resumption of sexual intercourse before wound healing,
- inconsistent condom use
- and having sex under the influence of peers are considered significant risk factors for HIV infection (personal communication)
Discussion….

- Religious and cultural beliefs therefore become influential determinant risk factors for the transmission of HIV/AIDS.
- Divergent religious views expressed by respondents in this study brought to the fore the contentious issues surrounding sexual orientation.
- While 25.5% participants confirmed that their religion encouraged them to accept people with any sexual preference (against 2.5% participants with contrary view), 47.3% participants observed that their religion saw homosexuality as unnatural and wrong.
Discussion....

- The debate on religious views on homosexuality further shows 21.8% participants saying their religion did not address issues of homosexuality.
- Over sixty per cent (68.2%) believed that the view of their religion on homosexuality was justified,
- while 15.55% participants contended that their religion should change its views on homosexuality, which appeared to be a negative perception.
Discussion....

- Discrimination and stigmatisation of homosexuals may not be unconnected with the government’s position on the thorny debate surrounding homosexuality in South Africa.

- There is still significant denial of the existence of homosexuality in the black community and a history of poor government interventions focused on gay people (Health24, 2014).
Discussion....

- On the other hand, the government of South Africa upholds the protection of rights of the LGBTI sector, and forbids discrimination based on sexual orientation (Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, 2008).
- The outcome of this study where fewer research subjects identified themselves as gay (3.1%), lesbian (3.2%), or bisexual (3.6%) than heterosexuals attests to the findings of the Health24 HIV/AIDS (2014) report.
Discussion.....

- The Health24 HIV/AIDS (2014) report shows that the violence often suffered by young homosexuals as a result of social stigma
- may cause members of the LGBTI sector to hide their sexuality and not to access information that could help protect them against HIV infection
Discussion....

- The divergent views of this discrimination against homosexuals as expressed by the students of WSU community where some respondents were reported being
- angry against this discrimination (28.8%),
- some consenting to the discrimination (20%),
- and 29.4% not feeling strongly about it,
- puts members of the LGBTI sector in a precarious situation and compounds their dilemma.
Discussion....

- It also puts to test, the question of acceptability of members of this group in the university community in particular, and society at large.

- While working closely with identified members of the LGBTI sector on this study (who were very reluctant to disclose their sexual preference publicly though),

- it became clear that every member of the group would like to benefit from the health care programme targeting the group.

- However, the unwillingness to disclose one’s sexual orientation for the fear of violence, abuse and discrimination takes precedence.
Discussion....

- Students of WSU are quite aware of what constitutes risk factors for HIV transmission (77.3%).
- A study conducted to determine HIV prevalence and exploration of knowledge, attitude, perception and behaviour among students at Walter Sisulu University shows that
- HIV prevalence among students of this institution was found to be 4.3% rate of the 2.2% population of the university examined (Twaise, Dana, Abaver, & Goon, 2014).
Discussion...

- The study of Twaise et al (2014) which was a follow-up to a national study conducted in 2009 by the Higher Education HIV and AIDS Programme (HEAIDS)
- amongst Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL),
- in which 13.3% students of Walter Sisulu University were HIV positive,
- shows a significant reduction in prevalent rate of HIV among these students.
Discussion....

- The preliminary study was carried out with a principal objective to determine whether there has been a change in the knowledge, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of WSU students after some interventions were introduced.
- The findings of the present study therefore, demonstrate that students’ knowledge of sexual activities as risk factors for transmission of HIV/AIDS (77.3%) could have been responsible for the decline in prevalence rate of HIV.
Conclusion

- Although the government of South Africa legalised same-sex marriages,
- termination of early pregnancy (abortion) and
- legislated against all forms of discrimination
- the general perception of most students of WSU is that
- homosexuality, which constitutes a risk factor for HIV/AIDS transmission,
- is abnormal and unnatural, and therefore, should be condemned
Conclusion....

- The stance of these students, which contradicts the position of government on the issues of homosexuality.
- May not only bring clashes and animosity among the student population,
- But may also be responsible for homophobic actions that result in cases of
- Discrimination,
- Violence and
- Abuse
- Targeted at members of the LGBTI sector.
Therefore, the need to institute intervention programmes on campus to address the issues of homosexuality cannot be overlooked.

When effectively executed, these programmes should not only attempt to modify the attitudes of homosexuals with a resultant reduction of risk factors for HIV transmission, but should also seek to pacify those who are unprepared to accept homosexuals as part of the society.
Conclusion....

• When secured:
  - members of the LGBTI sector would willingly identify themselves within our universities and larger society, and therefore
  - avail themselves of the HIV/AIDS intervention programmes that target them as a group with special healthcare needs.
Conclusion....

- AIDS prevention among homosexuals has overwhelmingly focused on sexual risk alone.
- Other health problems among this group are not only important in their own right,
- but also may interact to increase HIV risk.
- HIV prevention might become more effective by addressing the broader health concerns of homosexuals while also focusing on sexual risks.
Thank you for listening
Acknowledgement

1. The Research and Innovation Directorate, Walter Sisulu University, Eastern Cape, South Africa
2. The Eastern Cape AIDS Council, South Africa
3. LGBTI organization, Eastern Cape, South Africa
References


References


