Bleak prospects: young men, sexuality and HIV/AIDS in an Ethiopian town

Tadele, G.

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Summary

Studies about HIV/AIDS and sexuality among young people in Ethiopia have generally focused on knowledge, attitude, practice, and belief (KAPB). Little is known about their perceptions of love, marriage, or their sexual practices, and how their sexuality relates to other aspects of their lives. This study explores young people's sexual values, norms, and their perceptions of HIV/AIDS within a broader socio-economic context and within the framework of their ambitions, worries, and uncertainties in life. The study is the outcome of an ethnographic research carried out in Dessie a provincial town in northern Ethiopia. In addition to observations, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions designed to collect qualitative data, a brief questionnaire was used to gather quantitative data on some core issues. The main objectives of the study were to explore: How male school and street youths aged between 15-24 understand and express sexuality and HIV/AIDS in their daily lives; how poverty and other structural factors affect their sexual behaviour and practices and the spread of HIV/AIDS; how these groups of young people and key informants receive and evaluate HIV/AIDS interventions; and what can be done.

Chapter One provides a general context for the different chapters in the book by introducing the reader to conceptual, theoretical, and methodological issues. I sketch what I see as some of the major tendencies that have characterized sexuality and HIV/AIDS research conducted globally and in Africa, in Ethiopia in particular. I argue that sexuality research from a social science perspective in Ethiopia is in its infancy, and dominated by public health professionals and epidemiologists. This chapter also points out that explanations furnished to dilate upon the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa focus on cultural explanations, and pay only lip service to the socio-economic and political contexts that allow HIV/AIDS to thrive. To fill this lacuna, this study adopted a political economy approach as a framework to explore sexuality and HIV/AIDS among male youths. This chapter also reflects on the fieldwork, pointing out the thrills and perils of an 'insider' conducting research on a very sensitive issue (sexuality).

Chapter Two moves on to describe the underlying socio-economic and political situation of Ethiopia and Dessie to put the ethnographic data in context and show that existing structural problems have much to do with the sexual behaviour of young people and the spread of HIV/AIDS in the country. For more than three decades, Ethiopia has been afflicted by repeated war, famine, and political instability, and this situation has severely aggravated the problem of young people's access to educational and economic opportunities, thereby affecting their sexual behaviour and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Chapters Three to Five deal with issues of love and sexuality. Young people's perceptions of love, relationships, money, and the negotiation of relationships is discussed in Chapter Three. Young men repeatedly said that girls accept a relationship in anticipation of material gain, and not out of love or a need for emotional involvement. Mediators or awagiwoch are employed to initiate relationships. School pupils' perceptions of marriage and premarital sex are presented in Chapter Four. Male students aspire to get married, but their precarious economic condition and social expectations of marriage prevent their wish from materializing in the near future. Premarital sex is perceived as inevitable as marriage is unattainable. Furthermore, one has to learn the essential skills of love, which should be learned and practised during the premarital phase of life.

Chapter Four also deals with the impact of religion and religiosity on the sexual behaviour of young people. Although the informants were divided into two on the effects of religiosity on the sexuality of young people, most of them shared the view that religious places have become a pretext for getting away from home, particularly for girls who are subject to strict family supervision. This, however, does not mean that there are no devout young people who respect religious tenets pertaining to sexuality.

Young people's perceptions of different sexual practices and orientations such as multiple-partner sex, group rape, masturbation, different sexual positions, erotic approaches and techniques, anal/oral sex, and homosexuality are explored in Chapter Five. Most young people's understanding of 'normal sex' invariably prioritized the conventional, so-called missionary position. All other sexual
positions/practices and orientations were perceived as abnormal, alien, or harmful. Multiple-partner sex and group rape, however, were found to be widely practised and the young men I interviewed did not disapprove of them as such. Multiple-partner sex in particular was perceived as part of masculinity and belonged to the period of one’s youth.

Chapters Six to Eight deal with issues related to perceptions of HIV/AIDS and the impact of daily worries and concerns on sexual behaviour and the spread of HIV/AIDS. The arrival of HIV/AIDS prompted people to come up with different local explanations or narratives and metaphors about the epidemic. Chapter Six deals with various explanations given for the origin of HIV/AIDS and the metaphors that have proliferated with the thriving of the virus in society. As a reflection of local and global discourse on the origin of HIV/AIDS, young people in Dessie also came up with four different explanations concerning the origin of HIV/AIDS: a disease sent by foreigners (mainly Americans); a punishment from God; a disease that existed under a different name (amenmin); and of primate origin. Metaphors given to HIV/AIDS also show how HIV/AIDS is perceived as an impending danger that can devour its prey. Chapter Six also examines young people’s level of awareness about HIV/AIDS and the controversies surrounding condoms and condom use. It became clear that young people rarely used condoms, and this chapter explores different myths and misconceptions surrounding condoms and condom use.

Chapter Seven explores the impact of poverty on the sexual behaviour of young men and the spread of HIV/AIDS. It shows how young people’s sexuality and the spread of HIV/AIDS is influenced by the wider socio-economic environment. It looks particularly at young people’s worries, concerns, and the place of HIV/AIDS in the midst of their worries. It became clear that sexual behaviour and the risk of becoming infected with HIV/AIDS are not determined solely by conscious individuals who process the information they receive and avoid risks. There are other structural factors that influence sexual behaviour and the likelihood of HIV infection. Most young people were preoccupied with daily survival or their gloomy future, rather than with avoiding the risk of HIV infection. Street youths in particular were living a precarious life on the streets without love or the care of parents or society and felt that their life was not worth protecting. This chapter argues that to address the spread of HIV/AIDS, there is also an urgent need to address the problem of youth unemployment and to ensure them a future.

No vaccine or cure is yet available to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, and one way of reversing the tide is providing people with accurate and relevant education or information that suits their lifestyle. Chapter Eight looks at young people’s views concerning intervention programmes. It argues that HIV/AIDS educators do not communicate their message clearly to their audience. Most young people involved in the study expressed fatigue with the messages transmitted. They also seemed to have been exposed to conflicting and polarizing messages that often confused them roundly. Furthermore, the mainstream prevention strategies such as abstinence or a one-to-one sexual relationship did not seem to be realistic to young people in general and street youths in particular because of the deficiencies in the content of messages and the method of delivery compounded by their own precarious socio-economic situation. This highlights the need to redesign health messages that are clearer and more appropriate to young people and different communities; this requires the involvement of young people in all aspects of programme planning and implementation. All teaching and communication strategies, all leaflets, brochures and magazines that are being printed need to be carefully studied in order to make them more effective for and appealing to youths. This chapter also looks at other broader problems and controversial issues such as the lack of coordination and the virtually non-existent sex education, mismanagement of resources allocated for HIV/AIDS prevention, and lack of political commitment.

The final chapter summarizes the key findings. Although there are limits to what can be concluded from such a small-scale, largely qualitative study, this chapter strongly highlights the necessity of grounding HIV/AIDS prevention messages on broader sexuality issues, and more importantly on young people’s concerns, fears, pleasures, and dilemmas around sexuality. My ambition was to contribute to better ways of addressing the problem of HIV/AIDS, but as this study progressed I realized I could not come up with any clear-cut solutions. This chapter thus presents bleak prospects and frustrations experienced by those people involved in the study (including myself). By and large, protecting young people from HIV/AIDS infection requires an enabling socio-economic environment and providing them with employment and training opportunities, which is impractical in
the short term. Instead of making ill-conceived and unrealistic recommendations, I offer an open-ended ethnographic study to those involved in HIV prevention, suggesting they draw their own conclusions that best suit their programme and the needs of young people.