

An Investigation into the Extent of Knowledge of the Varembe Women Regarding the Hiv/Aids Pandemic

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Abstract: *The study sought to find out the impact of HIV/AIDS on the Varembe community who live on the South eastern part of Zimbabwe. The study adopted a mixed methodology approach where questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and transact walks were used for data collection. Findings were that HIV/AIDS was adversely affecting the lives of these conservative communities as evidenced by considerable numbers of child and female-headed families. The prevalence of the scourge led to loss of manpower, loss of cattle used as draught power through selling to finance medication, reduced production and deterioration in rural livelihoods. Although awareness levels were high, polygamy, promiscuity, and the Shona culture of kugara nhaka, were fuelling the spread of HIV/AIDS. Recommendations included setting up of voluntary testing centres in the resettlement areas and encouraging farmers to go for voluntary testing, involving churches in the education of farmers to influence behavior change and rolling out of antiretroviral programmes in the resettlement areas. There is an urgent need to come up with communicative strategies that will be accepted by these communities so that they can change their behavior before it is too late.*

I. Definition of Key Terms

- **Investigate** is to inquire, interrogate and examine the knowledge that Varembe women have regarding the HIV/AIDS.
- **Extent of knowledge** is facts, information acquired through socialization, education and experience. The development of knowledge in the context of this study will be through communication with the Varembe women. The sharing ideas, discussion, and coming to some consensus regarding the HIV/AIDS may influence them to change their perception about HIV/AIDS. The strategies used in the discussion should be chosen in such a way that both parties understand what is communicated. The discussion should lead to a new perception and conviction that leads to change in behavior
- **HIV** is Human immunodeficiency viruses that attack the immune system in the body weakening it to such an extent that the body fails to defend itself against attack by any disease.
- **AIDS** is defined as a syndrome of opportunistic diseases, infections and cancers, all of which has the ability to kill the infected person in the final stages of the diseases.
- **Varembe women** are women between fifteen and forty five years and above who live in Mberengwa in the South eastern part of Zimbabwe

1.1.1 Background to the study

Information dissemination concerning HIV among women in Zimbabwe is widely spread through health centres, churches, community centres and schools. Different communication strategies have been used to educate women on HIV/AIDS in some quotas of Mberengwa where Varembe are found in large numbers. Most of these women are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS partly because of cultural practices, values and beliefs that underlie the Shona society. The polygamous relationships that are common among the Varembe community, wife inheritance, and the general position of women in Shona society, make these Varembe women vulnerable to HIV/AIDS epidemic. The other factors that influence their vulnerability include poverty and low social status. Women in general, and Varembe in particular, do not have the authority to express or enforce their needs, and are not able to negotiate safer sex practices with their husbands.

The focus of this study is on the Varembe women who are part of the Shona tribe living in Mberengwa district in the South eastern part of Zimbabwe. The Varembe speak Shona though, through inter marriages, some of these people now speak Shona and Ndebele. Mberengwa is a district in Midlands province in Zimbabwe. The district is prone to droughts and high temperatures, but abundance of minerals like gold, iron ore and emeralds. The literacy levels of both Varembe women continue to be low and the school dropout rate is estimated at about 60%. The failure of these young women to proceed with education appears to also contribute to their ignorance regarding HIV/AIDS. Besides, Mberengwa district is ranked as one of the poorest districts in Zimbabwe (ZDHS 2010). It is against this background that an investigation into the extent of knowledge of the Varembe women regarding HIV/AIDS pandemic will be carried out.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

HIV/AIDS is a health threat to the Varembe women. It poses a serious threat to the social and economic development of the Varembe community, mainly because the disease is attacking the young energetic members of society. The need to bring about behavioral change aimed at curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS calls for new strategies of communication that may probably transform Varembe women's perception of HIV/AIDS. Effective communication strategies may probably stop promiscuity thereby reduce the large number of people, particularly women, dying of HIV/AIDS. Hence the focus of this study is to investigate into the extent of knowledge of the Varembe women regarding HIV/AIDS pandemic.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent of knowledge of the Varembe women in Zimbabwe with regard to HIV/AIDS. It seeks to investigate communication strategies for spreading HIV/AIDS information.

Research questions

The research questions that will guide the focus of the research will include the following;

- How much knowledge has the Varembe women acquired regarding HIV/AIDS pandemic and why?

Sub problems

- How are cultural beliefs and practices influencing Varembe women's sexual behavior?
- What factors are enhancing irresponsible sexual behavior among the Varembe women?
- What are the most appropriate communication strategies that could be used to communicate HIV messages to Varembe women so as to influence change in behavior.

1.4.5 Research objectives

- To investigate the sources of knowledge about HIV/AIDS among the Varembe women.
- To investigate the attitudes, beliefs and opinions of the Varembe women regarding HIV/AIDS.
- To find out the communicative strategies that message deliverers can craft in order to reach the broader part of the Varembe community.

1.4.6 Assumptions

- That appropriate HIV/AIDS messages dissemination will influence change of behavior among Varembe women.

1.5 Significance of the study

It is hoped that the study will help both government service providers and NGOs to craft programmes that are readily acceptable to the Varembe women so that their level of knowledge is enhanced. It is also hoped that the increase of new knowledge on HIV/AIDS will also influence behavior change among the communities in Mberengwa. Change in perception that is brought about by new knowledge will probably help the Varembe in general to protect their lives through responsible behavior. Loss of life will probably be lessened.

1.7 Delimitation

The investigation will focus on the Varembe women generally found in Mberengwa district in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe. The investigation will be carried out against the understanding of unique Varembe's traditional and cultural practices assumed to be a stumbling block to their behavioral change.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

One of the major methodological limitations is that in African society discussion of sexual issues is taboo. In order to maximize discussion the researcher will use assistant researchers who work with women like nurses and social workers. A major limitation will be that of getting to the research sites due to poor road infrastructure, and long distances. Time will be another limiting factor since data will be collected during semester time. Using personnel working within the community will probably solve these limitations.

1.9 Review of Literature

This study will analyze the work of Nyoni (2008) in an unpublished thesis, that highlights the socio-cultural factors that impede behavioral change of Zimbabwean women in an era of HIV/AIDS. He concludes by suggesting that gender roles and cultural practices have a negative impact on women's quest to attain safe sexual behavior. He argues that the problem of HIV/AIDS remains complicated and awesome among Zimbabwe ethnic groups because of lack of control over sexual lives and behavior of husbands especially outside marriage. Nyoni

(2008) suggests that women argued that whilst they remained faithful, their husbands and partners were unfaithful and this is condoned by the Shona ethnic tribes. Nyoni (2008) does not come out with a practical solution to what women can do given the challenges they face regarding HIV/AIDS.

The major objective of this study is to bring out the extent of knowledge of Varembe women regarding HIV/AIDS. Whilst Nyoni (2008) focused on Zimbabwean women's socio-cultural factors and practices that impede behavioral change of Zimbabwean women, this study isolates the Varembe women who have peculiar cultural practices, and evaluate how the cultural practices impede their acquisition of knowledge about HIV/AIDS pandemic. In the light of the cultural practices, communicative strategies that may be crafted and taught will be evaluated in order to check the extent of change in behavior that may take place among the Varembe women. The filling of the gap will involve the crafting of communicative strategies that may empower the Varembe to change behavior thus safeguarding their lives.

This study will explore the perceptions of the Varembe women about HIV/AIDS. Perception plays an important role in the communication process. The success or failure of any communication behavior is based on the nature of perceptions (Verderber 1984). Perceptual theory tells us that the process of interpreting messages is complex and that these communicator goals may be difficult to achieve (Severin and Tankard 1997:73). (Samovar and Porter 1997:15) acknowledge that "perception is the internal process by which we select, evaluate and organize stimuli from the external environment. In other words perception is the conversion of the physical energies of the environment into meaningful experience." Fiske also suggests that in a communication process people will select what they want to hear. They organize the information they receive, interpret the information within their frame of reference. In the information that is distorted, there is the likelihood of misconceptions leading to the development of inaccurate, misleading information.

Scott and Brydon (1997) identify three factors that will influence perception: one, the background in which the stimulus is embedded can either facilitate or impede perception and communication. This suggests that one cannot study a people in isolation because there are aspects of their lives that determine how a message is received. This does not mean that the louder, brighter or more vivid a stimulus, the greater the chances people will perceive it. Nor does it mean that there is always a direct and positive correlation between intensity and the meaning people give to a specific stimulus. The second factor is how loud or bright the stimulus appears. In a communication process messages need to be intensive enough so that people may perceive it. It should not be so intense that it violates people's expectations. The third and final factor is concreteness. Messages should be clear in such a way that they are understandable. Abstract concepts will not be understood. Generalizations should be avoided in order to tailor make the message to suit a particular community. Were (2003:14) points out that the messages that are received whether verbal or non-verbal should be culturally conditioned so that one's experiences in the social, economic and political fields. Gender neutral messages are not effective especially if you aim to change behavior. This study recognizes this as a factor and takes cognizance of the fact that women and men grapple with different issues.

It is also important to note that "blanket" messages no longer work. Harrison et al (2000:289) argue that focused, intensive and sustained interventions are needed to promote new messages. These messages should be given in the language and style of the target communities and in the context of the people's experiences. Thus in this study, the messages that are crafted for the benefit of the Varembe should be received whether verbal or non-verbal within their cultural context.

The study will discuss a culturally-based HIV/AIDS health models as presented by Wanyoike (2011) where she argues that health communication models are a new domain that is involved in the promotion of health and disease prevention. Health communication is thus concerned with the application of communication concepts and theories to transactions among individuals on health related issues. Health communication recognizes the fact that perceptions of illness and disease and especially its prevention plays an integral role in the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Health communication is closely linked to preventive health care therefore an investigation of the knowledge levels of the Varembe will become a launchpad for discussing preventive health strategies that Varembe could practice.

1.9.2 Research Methodology

The research is qualitative and descriptive in nature because the researcher wishes to uncover and understand the AIDS phenomena among the Varembe women. Qualitative research is said to be especially effective in studying the subtle nuances of attitudes and behaviors and examining social processes over time. Creswell 1994 stated that people's words and actions represent the data of qualitative inquiry. This requires methods that allow the research to capture language and behavior. The chief strengths of qualitative research lies in the depth of understanding it may permit and also the fact that the design plan may be flexible to suit the objective of the study (Babbie and Mouton 2001).

II. Research Design

The qualitative case study that will be used in this study is an approach that ensures that the Varemba's knowledge of the HIV/AIDS pandemic is explored through several lenses. As a result multiple facets of the phenomenon is revealed and understood. Robert Stake 1995 and Yin 2006 argue that one of the key approaches that guide case study methodology is that the topic is well explored and the essence of the phenomena is revealed. Through the use of a case study of the Varemba , a clear understanding of their knowledge of HIV/AIDS will be revealed thus helping them to take measures that protect them from this disease. Document analysis of contemporary health reports will be studied in order to compare views from respondents with documentary evidence. Triangulation of data sources will be done in order to evaluate the authenticity of information provided by respondents. Triangulation will enable the researcher to corroborate, elaborate and eliminate the research questions. The multiple methods used will reduce personal bias that accrues from using one method.

III. Research Techniques

The use of focus group discussions (FGDs) to interview Varemba women is in tune with social behavior in the African contexts in that group norms still operate in rural and semi rural areas where the majority people live. Kitsinger (1994a) asserts that the use of (FGDS) encourages interaction which highlights the respondents' attitudes, priorities, language and framework of understanding. It encourages a great variety of communication from participants tapping into a wider range and form of understanding, helps to identify group norms, provide insight into the operation of social processes in the articulation of knowledge. Through the examination of what information is censored or muted by a group one can encourage open conversation about embarrassing subject and facilitates the expression of ideas and experiences that might be left underdeveloped in an interview. Morgan (1998) points out that the hallmark of (FDGS) is to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without interaction in the group. Krueger (1994 :8) adds that " the (FDGs) is particularly appropriate to use when that goal is to explain how people regard an experience, idea, or event. This method is most suitable one to elicit information from the Varemba women about their feelings, views, and opinions.

The research will also hold in depth interviews with health professionals and other professionals having HIV/AIDS programmes in Mberengwa. These were purposely sampled for face to face interviews regarding Varemba women perceived HIV/AIDS in terms of their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and the role culture as a form of triangulation. The indepth interviews will be used to enhance a deeper understanding of the Varemba women's perception and give room for the interviewee's room to express their views, experiences, and opinions without restraint. The interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using content analysis.

IV. Ethical Considerations

Before embarking on the study authority from the headmen and chiefs in areas where the Varemba live will be sought so that they provide permission. The benefits that will accrue to the community will be explained so that the elders can authorize the study. Thereafter authority to discuss the subject under study will be sought from the respondents. Any respondent who is not prepared to be involved in the study will not be forced to give her /his views.

V. Sampling Methods

Convenience sampling will be used as it is a common method used for selecting participants in focus groups. Varemba women aged fifteen to forty will be conveniently selected in the sample.

VI. Findings

Theme on level of knowledge

The findings have been discussed under a number of themes. The first theme deals with the level of knowledge that the Varemba have regarding HIV/AIDS. The Varemba women described HIV/AIDS as a punishment for wrong doing inflicted by god. Other women argued that it is as a result of bewitchment. Yet another group of women believed that it is a result of angry spirits due to failure by society to appease the spirit world. In one of the focus group discussions (FDG) an elderly woman argued that

Aids is a disease that has wiped off a generation of people.

(FDG) elderly woman in Mwenezi)

From the FDGs it is clear that Varemba women had a wide range of beliefs regarding the origins of HIV/AIDS. Most of the explanations for the origins of HIV/AIDS are based on traditional religion that when society fails to appease the spiritual world, some form of pestilence befalls the community. Secondly the responses show that whilst the majority women are informed about HIV/AIDS, some are ignorant of the actual causes of HIV/AIDS. The reasons could be partly because most Varemba women leave school at an early age to get married. As a result the lessons learnt by other pupils at primary and secondary level are not learnt by these women.

Theme on position of women in society

The position of women in Shona and Ndebele traditional societies have been that of minorities thus they have been treated as minors even after getting married and having had a number of children. As a result women were not consulted in making any decision. They could be betrothed to a husband of the parents' choice without their input or consent. Women were not allowed to make or do anything without authority from father or husband.

At independence, Zimbabwe became a beacon unto the world by passing a law that eliminated women's minority status under its multiple legal systems. The Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA), adopted in 1982 shortly after independence, provided that all Zimbabweans-female, male, African, white-attain full adult status at the age of eighteen, "for all purposes, including customary law." A product of the independence revolution, LAMA was in itself revolutionary in addressing the central issue of women's disadvantage under African customary law: their total lack of capacity to act as legally recognized adults, capable of owning property, entering into contracts, and making legally enforceable decisions without male consent. In reporting to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1998, Zimbabwe proudly cited LAMA and was in turn congratulated by the Committee for having adopted it.

The major problem is that whilst the country has legislated important laws that emancipate women, the Varemba women living in the remote villages of Mberengwa are not aware of these legislations and continue to live in their traditional way. Polygamy is still prevalent in Zimbabwean communities. The moment men become affluent they marry other women under the traditional community marriage act. The first wife will only learn of the other wives when they visit the traditional rural home. When the husband works in an urban setting, he might cohabit with a woman until they have children. A lot of men find themselves living a polygamous marriage because of the first wife is encouraged to look after the rural home whilst the husband lives in town, mine or farm with another woman. One of the women whose husband took another wife stated the following in a FGD.

My husband just informed me that he had taken another wife. I was unhappy initially but now we help each other to do chores within the family. (FDG middle aged woman.)

When asked whether they are not afraid of getting Aids since the husband sleeps with different women these rural women argued they remain faithful to their husbands. But within the same community there are polygamous families that were wiped away by Aids and the Community explanation was that these individuals were bewitched. It is clear from the discussion that women in rural Mwenezi and Mberengwa are not aware of their rights and a lot of these women are dying after being infected by husbands who are promiscuous.

Theme of traditional practices

Women were asked if they saw any relationship between polygamy and Aids infection.

In an FGD a number of women respondents stated the following:

Men sleep around and in the process they are infected with Aids. When they come home it is not possible for the wife to refuse having sex with him. So husbands infect their wives with AIDS.

One observation from the study shows that whilst women might have knowledge of what HIV/AIDS has had a devastating effect on society by killing family members, Varemba women have very little power to protect themselves from the disease. Information from NGOs working in the communities in Mwenezi and Mberengwa where the Varemba live argued that the views of Varemba women regarding HIV/AIDS is distorted by cultural beliefs, and a lack of education. When a woman is found to be HIV positive and she divulges this information to the husband, men will not accept to go and get tested for HIV/AIDS. Men are always in denial and women are blamed for the disease.

One of the factors that influence the ignorance of some Varemba women regarding HIV/AIDS is the location of their rural areas. Some of these women live in the most remote parts of Zimbabwe where even radio links are not available. These communities are conservative such that information that is common knowledge to some people is unknown in this area. Failure to access important information has a bearing on the ignorance of some of the Varemba women

Theme on communication on HIV/AIDS

The Varemba culture has a large bearing on the spread of HIV/AIDS. Cultural practices though they sustained the Varemba in the traditional society have become a bomb ready to explode. There is need for the government of Zimbabwe to design communication tools that will force the Varemba to have a paradigm shift from the traditional way of life to a new mind where some of their practices should be abandoned for the sake of progress. Communication in the mother language should be designed to convince the leaders of society that

polygamy, the practice of inheritance, and child marriages to older men should be abandoned in order to protect society from HIV/AIDS.

The Varembe women are too dependent on their male counterparts. Though the age of majority Act was passed in Zimbabwe, legally empowering the girl child to legally have equal rights with a male at age 18, in practice this law is not implemented by society of the Varembe. They are still afraid of the wrath of the spirit world if they do something against their culture. The community leaders and menfolk should be staff developed so as to appreciate that culture is dynamic and that there is need to move forward and stop some of the cultural practices since they are compromising the health of the nation.

Government of Zimbabwe should enforce the law that stipulates that all children should have access to primary education. Enforcement of such a law will ensure that forced marriages will be a thing of the past. Through education both boys and girls will realize the importance of safe guarding their lives through not indulging in sex before marriage. The dangers of having multi partners will be known. At primary and secondary school learners will be exposed to what is HIV/AIDS in their mother tongue. Empowering girls through education and communicating about HIV/AIDS freely will mean they will develop empowered to say no to practices that endanger their lives. Empowerment through education will entail that the girl child in the Varembe community will develop power over her sexuality. Awareness of the spread of HIV/AIDS from mother to child will also ensure that the community safeguards itself from the dangers of infection through responsible behavior.

Education can change spiritual and cultural beliefs. Instead of regarding HIV/AIDS as a curse from god, the Varembe community will learn that HIV/AIDS is a result of poor choices, wrong beliefs, fear of poverty and wrong teachings. It is critical that the education provided to the girl child should also be given to the boy child. A change in values, beliefs, norms and culture by the community will lead to change in behavior.

One other vehicle for the spread of HIV/AIDS among the Varembe community is poverty. A number of women have had sexual relationship with people who are HIV positive because they needed income. Empowering women economically will ensure that they do not indulge in sex as a means of abating poverty. Such projects could include the provision of small loans to these women so that they could start economically viable projects

Communicative campaigns through the use of the mother tongue understood by the Varembe will go a long way at influencing the minds of the Varembe communities. The mother tongue should be used to influence both men and women to behave responsible so as to protect their health. Through the educational campaigns done in the mother tongue women should be empowered by discouraging the girl child from marrying at an early age. The communication campaigns should influence the elders of the community on the dangers on enforcing some of the cultural practices. Modes of communication regarding HIV/AIDS should be discussed through drama, church organizations, use of brochures and posters, health group seminars and the use of peer educators. The use of pictures with HIV/AIDS patients, video presentations of the impact of HIV/AIDS on communities will go a long way in influencing the communities of the Varembe to change behavior.

VII. Conclusion And Recommendations

The study found out that the question of illiteracy among the Varembe women has a bearing on the community's knowledge regarding HIV/AIDS. Most of the Varembe women were not knowledgeable about how the human body functions mainly because most of the girls leave school in order to get married. Varembe women low knowledge of HIV/AIDS was shown to be influenced by traditional beliefs and mere ignorance. The low position of women in Varembe society renders them powerless from their menfolk. As a result it is difficult for women to improve their position in order to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS.

There is need for government to enforce the laws they have enacted such as the age of majority act. The empowerment of the girl child to have same rights with boy child will ensure that girls will refuse to be forcible married to older men and society will support them. Government needs to channel resources to educate the community on the dangers and facts about HIV/AIDS. This could be done through use of posters, drama in indigenous languages, films on HIV/AIDS, community discussions and religious seminars. Such open forums will go a long way in changing attitudes, beliefs and values of the Varembe. It will ensure that both men and women work together to fight HIV/AIDS.

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