

research snapshot

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How Do Gender Norms Affect Our Risk for HIV?

What is this research about?

While HIV awareness continues to grow, general attitudes from the public are still shaped by gender norms about being male and female. Researchers have addressed the effect of gender norms on HIV risk, but typically do not go beyond looking at the outcome of sexual behaviour. For youth, even less is known about how they perceive gender norms, and its impact on HIV risk. How can our understanding of gender norms and HIV move towards a more complex and preventative strategy to reduce HIV risk?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers wanted to explore the impact of gender norms on the perceived risk of getting HIV, according to youth. They focused on an HIV-prevalent community in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. Three male focus groups and two female focus groups were held with 48 Grade 11 students who were a part of a school-based HIV-prevention program. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed and coded for key words by two researchers. The researchers also reviewed the focus group data for insights on the common ideas, areas of agreement or disagreement, differences between the genders, and areas of silence in the data.

What did the researchers find?

The focus groups revealed the diverse understandings that youth have with regards to

What you need to know:

Youth carry a diverse set of beliefs on HIV risk and responsibility. Prevention and education about sexual health must address gender stereotypes and inequities that are related to HIV.

gender and HIV risk. The dominant belief was that women were more vulnerable than men to contracting HIV, because of gender inequities. Many participants referred to factors such as the perceived dominance of men in sexual relationships, high-risk behaviours (like substance abuse), or poverty as reasons for women having a high risk for HIV. The participants also shared the idea that women were more vulnerable to HIV because they were biologically weaker. However, their beliefs did not refer to any evidence that supported the idea of women's increased biological risk for HIV.

Beliefs about risk were complex and diverse. Groups also reported that men were more at risk to contract HIV, or that both genders were equally vulnerable to HIV. A minority of men believed that men had a higher risk of getting HIV because they perceived men to have limited control or a biological weakness when it came to having sex. Participants who believed that both genders were equally at risk argued that HIV does not target only men or only women.

The focus group participants also shared their perceptions of who was more responsible for spreading HIV, although this was not originally a

question pursued in this research. Once again, views differed on gender and responsibility. The most popular attitude was that men were primarily responsible for spreading HIV. The reasons shared were fuelled by ideas of both male strength over women and men's weakness in controlling their sexual urges. A minority of men perceived women to be responsible for the spread of HIV. The researchers observed that the popular reasons for blaming men or women for spreading HIV also contradicted ideas about each gender's perceived strength, weakness or vulnerability.

Participants who felt that both men and women were equally responsible for spreading HIV referred to high-risk, careless behaviours as the cause. The researchers also observed that, interestingly, there was no reference to the idea of sexual pleasure by any of the focus groups.

How can you use this research?

This research may be useful for front-line personnel in the areas of health, education, or community work in HIV prevention. They may consider how:

- To create more up-front discussions for youth to speak about their perceptions of HIV, and strategize on interventions for the particular groups they intend to reach;
- To provide safe and acceptable spaces for youth to share their varied beliefs;
- To address the lack of accurate knowledge about biological factors and their impact on HIV risk, sexual health and the issue of "responsibility";
- To implement preventative programs with long-term, youth-led initiatives that work collaboratively with schools and health educators.

About the Researchers

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Knowledge Mobilization at York

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