

**UNDERSTANDING
THE DYNAMICS OF
CONCURRENT SEXUAL
PARTNERSHIPS
IN MALAWI AND TANZANIA
A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Concurrent sexual partnerships are hypothesized to be an important factor contributing to the high rates of HIV transmission in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the social and cultural factors that encourage concurrent partnerships are not well understood. A more complex understanding of the dynamics of concurrent partnerships is key to designing effective interventions to reduce concurrency and, ultimately, to reduce transmission of HIV.

Malawi and Tanzania are two neighboring sub-Saharan African countries with high rates of HIV and sexual concurrency. We conducted a qualitative research study to explore and better understand the social dynamics of concurrent sexual partnerships in these two settings.

Methods

The study was conducted in nine areas geographically distributed across Malawi and Tanzania to provide variation in sociodemographics and HIV prevalence. Study sites included Blantyre, Machinga, Mchinji, Kasungu, and Mzimba districts in Malawi and Dar es Salaam, Shinyanga, Iringa, and Mbeya regions in Tanzania.

A qualitative design was used to explore community perspectives and individual experiences with concurrent sexual partnerships. In total, 72 focus group discussions and 36 in-depth interviews were conducted with community members. An additional eighteen key informant interviews were conducted with community leaders. Respondents were purposefully selected to meet demographic (age and gender) and geographic (region and urban/rural location) inclusion criteria.

Interviews and focus groups were audio-taped, transcribed and translated into English for analysis from Chichewa in Malawi and from Swahili in Tanzania. Data were analyzed using thematic coding, and matrices were developed to compare findings by key participant characteristics. A second round of analysis used both a priori and emergent coding and re-examined findings in their original context. Final interpretations and summary statements were developed and reviewed by multiple individuals involved in different stages of the research process to ensure validity.

The study was approved by ethical review boards in Malawi, Tanzania, and the United States.

Key Findings

Environmental-structural factors that create an enabling context for sexual concurrency

In both Tanzania and Malawi, poverty and economic vulnerability, labor migration and the social and structural context surrounding alcohol use create an enabling context for sexual concurrency. Economically, poorer women and wealthier men may be more likely to have concurrent partnerships, as many sexual relationships have transactional elements. Poverty and larger economic systems lead to significant labor migration, which separates couples for long periods of time and can lead individuals to seek additional partners. Alcohol use can reduce inhibitions; however, participants

reported that the environment within which drinking takes place often creates an enabling context for sexual concurrency.

Social norms and understandings of sexual concurrency

Social norms that support gender inequality prevail in both Malawi and Tanzania. These norms create a gendered double standard by which concurrent partnerships are acceptable for men but not for women. In Malawi, language used to describe concurrent partnerships reveals greater condemnation of the behavior for women than for men. Terms such as “loose” or “minibus seat” (shared by many strangers) are used for women, while “excessive lover” or “one with hunger of the hips” are used for men.

In Tanzania, common metaphors compare extra-marital sex to an extra bucket to carry water (suggesting a second layer of security), and an extra stone to hold up the cooking pot (suggesting improved stability). Cultural support of polygamy also facilitates social acceptance of non-marital concurrent partnerships for men, and such partnerships can be legitimized as “wives in waiting.”

Relationship dynamics that encourage concurrent partnerships

Gender norms and social inequalities are reflected in relationship dynamics within couples. Emotional, sexual, and financial dissatisfaction with primary relationships can facilitate concurrent partnerships. Couples often lack the communication skills and conflict resolution techniques that might help address challenges within primary relationships.

In addition, power imbalances within couples, including large age differences and socioeconomic inequalities, may encourage concurrent partnerships or prevent individuals from leaving a relationship with an unfaithful partner. Furthermore, lack of motivation to work on relationship and remain with primary partner may also foster concurrency partnerships. Finally, secrecy surrounding concurrent partnerships was cited as one of the main factors distinguishing concurrency from formal polygamy and appears to compound many of the relational problems associated with concurrency.

Parental influence on adolescent sexual behavior

Parental influence on adolescent sexual behavior was seen as an important factor in either encouraging or discouraging concurrency. While some parents speak with their children about sexuality, many others are uncomfortable with this. Some parents were reported to model concurrency behavior to their children. In other cases, parents may send conflicting messages if they advocate abstinence but say nothing when they benefit economically from their children’s concurrent relationships.

Conclusions

In Malawi and Tanzania, concurrent partnerships are complex sexual behaviors embedded within larger social and economic systems that intersect with cultural and gender norms to influence individual behaviors. Interventions aiming to reduce rates of concurrency must understand these dynamics and work within these larger social and structural systems to enact change.

Recommendations

Findings from this qualitative study suggest several avenues for interventions.

Address environmental-structural factors that create an enabling context

Concurrent sexual relationships occur in a particular environmental, social, and economic context. Environmental-structural factors such as economic vulnerability, labor migration and the social context of alcohol use facilitate sexual concurrency and should be considered in intervention development.

- Poverty and economic vulnerability, particularly among women, facilitate concurrent partnerships; interventions such as microfinance and job training might reduce this risk.
- Separation of couples due to migration may be mitigated by interventions that make separation from loved ones easier or reduce the time spent apart from family, such as housing for migrant workers or changes to work schedules to facilitate family visits.
- To address the intersections between alcohol and concurrency, programs should consider both interventions that target the general population with messages on the risk of alcohol as well as interventions based in alcohol venues that are designed to address the specific social and structural context of sexual risk in these venues.

Address unequal gender norms and strengthen injunctive norms against concurrent partnerships

Many respondents disapprove of concurrency, but believe it is widely practiced. This appears to be a case where *injunctive norms* (what people believe should be done) conflict with *descriptive norms* (what people believe others are doing). Strengthening injunctive norms against concurrent partnerships for both men and women through positive role modeling and re-characterizing masculinity may help to discourage such behavior.

Strengthening injunctive norms, however, is unlikely to be successful without also addressing larger gender norms that support gender inequalities. Efforts to reduce transactional sex must consider the complexity of the beliefs underlying the practice and the intersections between power, gender, and poverty that shape it. Interventions to change norms should engage men and address structural factors that shape unequal gender norms. Further research is needed on the factors associated with success for interventions designed to change social norms.

Promote partner communication and conflict resolution strategies

Motivating couples to maintain and improve the quality of their primary relationships is key to intervention activities addressing concurrency. Promoting conflict resolution strategies and partner communication around sexual health and sexual pleasure in general and HIV prevention in particular should be part of comprehensive efforts to reduce concurrent partnerships. Social networks can be used to provide relevant information and build partner communication skills about the risks of concurrency. Moreover, conflict resolution skills for couples can be developed to improve the quality of relationships, leading to reduced interest in outside partners. Appropriate interventions could build on the traditional role of community elders and the extended family in conjugal conflict resolution and encourage HIV prevention interventions that target couples as a unit.

Develop parenting skills to discourage concurrency

Parents should be provided with training to develop their skills for having open discussions with their children around relationships, sexuality, and the risks of concurrent sexual partnerships. Programs

should focus on developing parenting skills across a variety of dimensions of parental influence, including connectedness, behavioral control, respect for individuality, modeling appropriate behavior, and provision and protection. These efforts should be implemented in conjunction with interventions to engage communities and shift cultural norms around the acceptability of parent-child conversations about sexuality as well as interventions to address other social and economic vulnerabilities of young people.

In sum, concurrency is a complex behavior that is embedded within larger social and economic systems and intersects with gender norms and inequalities. To effectively reduce concurrent partnerships, interventions must acknowledge this complexity and intervene at multiple levels to address the larger socio-economic factors influencing individual behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

Concurrent sexual partnerships and HIV transmission

HIV prevalence in Southern Africa continues to be among the highest in the world. Sexual transmission of HIV is the most common mode of transmission in the region, and concurrent sexual partnerships, coupled with inconsistent and incorrect condom use, HIV-related stigma, and low levels of male circumcision, have been advanced as key drivers of the HIV epidemic in Southern Africa (Southern African Development Community, 2006; Jana et al., 2008). The recent attention given to concurrent partnerships has created an urgent need for a comprehensive understanding of the behavior in areas with high HIV prevalence.

Concurrent sexual partnerships facilitate the spread of HIV through sexual networks. While multiple partnerships pose a risk of HIV infection across various stages of HIV infection, concurrent partnerships pose a potentially greater risk because they increase the number of potential transmissions in the acute infection stage.

When an individual is newly infected with HIV, viral load increases dramatically, making the person more likely to transmit the infection to his or her partners. Sexual partner concurrency increases the number of partners who are potentially exposed to HIV during this phase, and these network effects are what make concurrency particularly problematic (Morris, 2010; Morris, 2001; Mah & Halperin, 2010). Nonetheless, there is no consensus on the role that concurrent sexual partnerships play in the spread of HIV. Debate over the relative role of concurrent partnerships in the spread of HIV in sub-Saharan African has escalated in recent years (Sawers & Stillwaggon, 2010; Lurie & Rosenthal, 2010; Mah & Halperin, 2010; Morris, 2010).

While there is debate over the *relative* role of concurrency in HIV transmission dynamics, there is little argument that concurrency does play a role in the sexual transmission of HIV. There are also strong indications that partner reduction has been a factor in reduced HIV prevalence in many countries, including Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Thailand (Wilson, 2004). As Morris (2010) has argued, programs have little to lose and potentially much to gain by including concurrency reduction as part of comprehensive HIV prevention efforts.

HIV and concurrency in Malawi and Tanzania

Malawi and Tanzania are both sub-Saharan African countries with high rates of HIV infection. Although estimates vary widely by gender and region, HIV prevalence is estimated at 12.7% in Malawi (UNAIDS, 2009) and 5.7% in Tanzania (THIMS, 2007-08). In both countries, HIV prevalence is higher in women compared to men, and in urban compared to rural areas. Heterosexual sex is the predominant mode of HIV transmission (Malawi NSO & ORC Macro, 2005; TACAIDS, et al., 2008).

In Malawi in 2004, only 1.1% of women ages 15-49 reported having more than one sexual partner in the past 12 months, compared to 11.8% of men (Malawi NSO & ORC Macro, 2005). It is worth noting that women typically report fewer sexual risk behaviors than men in most demographic and health surveys (DHS) and other large surveys (Curtis & Sutherland, 2004). In the same survey, 26.9% of sexually active

men reported having higher-risk sex—defined as sex with a partner other than a spouse or cohabiting partner—in the past 12 months. Only 8.3% of women reported this behavior (Malawi NSO & ORC Macro, 2005).

In Tanzania, 48% of sexually active young people reported having multiple sexual partners within the last 12 months (Population Services International, 2008). Younger women in Tanzania are more likely than older women to have multiple partners, whereas older men are more likely than younger men to engage in multiple partnerships (TACAIDS, et al., 2008).

Polygamy exists in both Malawi and Tanzania. In Malawi, men and women in polygamous unions have higher rates of HIV than those not in polygamous unions or not currently in a union (Malawi NSO & ORC Macro, 2005). While polygamy is formally the practice of having more than one spouse at one time, some have argued that in Southern Africa, formal polygamy has been eroded by urbanization and economic upheavals. It is argued that polygamy is increasingly being replaced by relationships in which women “play the role of ‘semi-wives’ forming casual but frequently transactional, longer-term liaisons with multiple men who provide them with material support of various kinds” (Epstein & Stanton, 2010).

There are numerous reasons why people engage in concurrent partnerships, and these reasons vary by age and gender. Some of the main reasons which have been reported in the literature to date (Jana et al., 2008) include

- emotional, sexual, and financial dissatisfaction with a steady partner
- the desire for money or material goods
- sexual desire, and
- cultural and social norms

A recent meeting held by UNAIDS and Soul City Institute in Johannesburg, South Africa focused on the issue of multiple concurrent partnerships. Several themes came out of the meeting, including the importance of gender inequality in facilitating concurrent sexual partnerships. It was also noted, however, that women are often active pursuers of sexual partnerships as a way to gain material goods, power, and satisfaction (Crooks-Chissano, 2008).

Study objective

Concurrent sexual partnerships facilitate the spread of HIV, yet the factors that facilitate or discourage concurrent partnerships in different settings are not well understood. Following the *UNAIDS Reference Group on Estimates, Modelling, and Projections: Working Group on Measuring Concurrent Sexual Partnerships* (2010), we define concurrent partnerships as “overlapping sexual partnerships in which sexual intercourse with one partner occurs between two acts of intercourse with another partner.” The overall objective of this study was to understand the social dynamics surrounding and linked to concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi and Tanzania in order to inform HIV prevention intervention development and future research.

METHODS

Research setting

The research was conducted in nine areas in Malawi and Tanzania. In both countries, sites were purposefully sampled for diversity in geography as reflected in multiple regions and both urban and rural settings. Study sites were diverse in terms of sociodemographic characteristics, such as ethnicity and religion, and HIV prevalence.

In Malawi, data were collected from five districts across all three regions of the country: Blantyre and Machinga in the Southern Region, Mchinji and Kasungu in the Central Region, and Mzimba in the Northern Region. Blantyre district includes the city of Blantyre, the commercial and economic capital of Malawi and the largest city in the country. Blantyre also has the highest HIV prevalence in the country at 22% (Malawi NSO & ORC Macro, 2005). HIV prevalence is lower in the more rural districts of Machinga (11.8%), Kasungu (4.1%), and Mzimba (5.1%) (Malawi NSO & ORC Macro, 2005).

In Tanzania, data were collected from four regions across the country: Dar es Salaam, Shinyanga, Iringa, and Mbeya. While Dar es Salaam is the commercial capital and largest urban center in the country, Shinyanga, Iringa, and Mbeya regions are predominantly rural (Tanzania National Bureau of Statistics, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d). HIV prevalence across these regions ranges from 7.4% in Shinyanga to 15.7% in Iringa (TACAIDS, et al., 2009).

Study design

The study design was exploratory and descriptive in nature and utilized qualitative research methods including in-depth and key informant interviews and focus group discussions in each setting. All respondents were purposefully sampled to meet demographic and geographic inclusion criteria.

Across both countries, a total of 72 focus group discussions (FGDs) were held among men and women of reproductive age (15-49) to ascertain community perspectives and social norms surrounding concurrent partnerships. Each FGD was composed of approximately 7 to 10 individual participants. FGDs were stratified by age and gender of the participants to facilitate more comfortable group dynamics and open discussion of ideas. Thus, in each of the 9 study sites across the two countries, two FGDs were conducted with each of the following four age and gender categories:

1. Men aged 18-29
2. Men aged 30-55
3. Women aged 18-29, and
4. Women aged 30-50.

Overall, 298 individuals participated in FGDs in Malawi and 231 in Tanzania, for a total of 529 focus group participants across both countries.

In addition, in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with a total of 36 community members across both countries to examine individual perspectives on and experiences with concurrent partnerships. To

include a variety of perspectives from interviews, the same age and gender categories were used as for FGDs, and one individual from each of the four age and gender categories was interviewed from each of the 9 study sites. In addition, approximately half of interview participants were men and women who reported having concurrent partnerships, while the other half did not report concurrency.

Finally, key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with two community leaders or gatekeepers in each of the 9 study sites, for a total of 18 KIIs.

Data collection

Recruitment was conducted with the assistance of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or local government officials at each site. Data collection was conducted by trained staff using field guides focused on the following domains:

- definitions and forms of concurrent sexual partnerships
- motivations and justifications for engaging or not engaging in concurrency
- cultural factors that foster concurrent partnerships
- how gender and socialization relate to concurrency, and
- local resources for addressing concurrent partnerships.

Questions were open-ended and interviewers used follow-up probes to solicit greater levels of depth. Field guides to structure both in-depth interviews and focus groups were developed using a priori concepts from the literature, then adapted in collaboration with local partners in each country. Final revisions were made after pre-testing of the instruments by the local research team.

FGDs, IDIs, and KIIs lasted two hours or less and were conducted in the local languages of Chichewa (in Malawi) and Swahili (in Tanzania). Sessions were audio-taped and transcribed, then translated into English for analysis.

Data analysis

Transcripts were read and data were manually coded based on a priori categories from the field guides. Following coding, researchers examined all data corresponding to a given coding category and then re-read and synthesized the data per category across transcripts. Matrices comparing findings by gender, age, and location were created. Preliminary findings were compiled based on patterns and themes that emerged from coding and matrix construction. Researchers then re-read the original transcripts in their entirety to confirm the preliminary findings, re-situate them in their original contexts, and initiate a second round of data analysis where key themes were explored more deeply going back to the original data. This round of analysis used Atlas.ti (version 5.2, Scientific Software Development GmbH, Eden Prairie, MN) to facilitate coding using both a priori and emergent themes. Insights and connections made between themes were developed through memos and summary statements. To improve validity of results, the final analysis was reviewed and approved by multiple individuals who participated in various stages of the analytic process.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by ethical review boards at the National Research Council and the Health Services Research Committee in the Ministry of Health and Population Services in Malawi, the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) in Tanzania, and the Johns Hopkins University in the United States. Additional permissions were sought from appropriate regional, district, and local authorities in each site, and all individual respondents provided informed consent for participation.

RESULTS

Respondents discussed a wide variety of factors related to concurrent sexual partnerships. These are described below and grouped according to four major themes

1. Environmental-structural factors that create an enabling context for sexual concurrency
2. Social norms and understandings of sexual concurrency
3. Relationship dynamics that encourage concurrent sexual partnerships
4. Parental influence on adolescent sexual behavior

Findings were relatively consistent across study sites, age, and gender of respondents. Unless indicated, results presented here are applicable across both Malawi and Tanzania.

Environmental-structural factors that create an enabling context for sexual concurrency

Respondents reported that a variety of environmental-structural factors, such as economic vulnerability, migration and the social context surrounding alcohol use, facilitate sexual concurrency.

Economic vulnerability

Tanzania and Malawi are among the poorest countries in the world. Economic opportunities are limited across all strata of society. Participants felt that economic vulnerability, particularly for women, was an important factor in sexual concurrency. As one female respondent from Malawi explained:

The reason for women leaving the house to engage in multiple affairs is poverty. Poverty chases women from their spouses. If food, groceries, and other necessities are lacking in the home to sustain the family, a woman will seek aid from another man.
[Older female, FGD, Malawi]

Respondents also believed that because of the transactional nature of many sexual relationships, where men are expected to provide small gifts or money to their female partners, poor women and wealthy men were particularly likely to have multiple partners. Conversely, socioeconomic status can prevent concurrency among wealthy women, who do not need financial support from additional partners, and poor men, who cannot afford to support additional partners.

Finally, respondents said that in addition to absolute poverty, relative poverty or consumer desire could also motivate concurrency, as women might still choose to have multiple partners to get consumer goods they could not afford on their own. As one woman from a focus group discussion in Malawi described:

These days, it is different from the past. These days, girls can have several boyfriends, five or even six. One man gives them K500 they go and buy a jeans skirt, another one gives them K200 and they go and buy Fair [Fair and Lovely lotion]. Not in the past, the main reason is that they want to raise some money to buy what they want. [Older female, FGD, Malawi]

Thus, transactional sex occurs along a continuum, from providing for basic needs such as food and shelter to consumer goods and luxury items.

Migration

Related to poverty and economic vulnerability is the issue of migration. In both Malawi and Tanzania, poverty and regional labor markets lead people to migrate significant distances in search of work and economic opportunities. This larger economic system encourages patterns of migration that create opportunities for sexual concurrency.

In Malawi, mining and retail are cornerstones of the economy, and most workers in these fields migrate from their homes in search of jobs. Male miners live in mining camps, separate from their wives, while sales people travel frequently to buy or sell their goods. Separation for long periods of time and physical distance between partners may encourage concurrency. Respondents said that both individuals who migrate for work and their spouses left at home are at increased risk of concurrency.

In Tanzania, labor migration is also common across districts, and regional trucking routes facilitate the movement of individuals and goods. As in Malawi, respondents in Tanzania said that separation of couples promoted sexual concurrency, as sexual desire, loneliness, or boredom can cause people to seek other partners. According to one male respondent in Tanzania:

For example I had a lover, she was staying far, I am here and she is far, as you know men are men it reaches a certain point you start having lust, you can journey all the way to follow that person while you may be having financial problems, and waiting for that period of time is not possible, so then you get involved in another relationship with someone who is nearby but at the same time you are still involved with the one who is far away. [Younger male, FGD, Tanzania]

Migration in search of economic opportunity is thus part of larger environmental-structural patterns that shape individual risk and concurrency behavior.

The social context surrounding alcohol use

In both countries, men and women said that alcohol use can encourage concurrency by fostering disinhibition and by providing opportunities to meet potential sex partners. Fewer participants commented on recreational drug use, but those who did acknowledged that cannabis and other drugs can similarly impair judgment.

Some participants emphasized the sexual disinhibition caused by drunkenness. As one participant in Malawi described it: “When you are lit up there is darkness in your eyes and everything becomes bright and beautiful.”

Other respondents, however, focused on the social context and atmosphere at bars and other forms of alcohol venues that are conducive to new, casual partnerships. An older male respondent from Malawi explained:

It is not beer drinking that makes people have multiple sexual partners. Rather it is where they drink. When you go to a bar you know who is there for beer and who is there for women, or for both. Those that go for beer concentrate on their drinking. Those that go there for women will focus less on beer and you can tell what they are up to. You can tell from how they look around, who they talk to and where they sit or stand. [Older male, FGD, Malawi]

This context in which alcohol is consumed serves as a social and structural environment that facilitates risk behavior, including concurrency.

Social norms and understandings of sexual concurrency

Although many respondents said they themselves disapproved of concurrent partnerships, they felt that the behavior was widespread in their communities, and social norms frequently served to support sexual concurrency.

Gender norms

In both Malawi and Tanzania, respondents said that larger social norms support gender inequalities between men and women, where men are expected to hold power and make decisions and women are expected to be subservient. These larger norms are reflected in social norms around concurrency, where a gendered double standard exists that holds that concurrent partnerships are acceptable for men but not for women, as a female respondent in Tanzania explained:

Having more than one lover at a time is okay for the man but shameful for the woman.
[Younger female, FGD, Tanzania]

In Tanzania, men tended to explain this double standard by making reference to cultural traditions and norms. Women, however, explained it in terms of differential power dynamics:

Because men have power. For them what they want goes. Even if you see he is doing bad . . . he can't listen to you if you advise him. Him, just because he has decided it is him, even if it is 6, 7 partners. [Older female, FGD, Tanzania]

Similarly, in both countries, social norms allow men relative independence and freedom of movement, while women are expected to remain in the household and are less free to come and go as they please. This makes it easier for men to engage in concurrent partnerships. Moreover, gender norms make it difficult for women to challenge partners who engage in additional relationships. Women who ask too many questions about their husbands' behavior may risk social disapproval or physical violence in retaliation. "If you dare ask him, he will beat you," said one female interviewee in Tanzania. As a result, respondents said that many women resign themselves to tolerating their husbands' infidelity.

In Malawi, in both rural and urban communities across different districts, respondents frequently repeated the phrase *mwamuna amanyenga, mkazi amanyengedwa*, or, "the man is the sexual initiator while the woman is the consenting party." This saying suggests that men can aggressively seek sexual relationships with women, while women are expected to be the docile recipient of sexual advances.

Social pressure and social status

Respondents said that social pressure from peers and parents can encourage concurrent partnerships. Social pressure from peers may take the form of pressure to conform to group norms. Among women, there may be social pressure to accept a partner's concurrent relationships, to accept a man's sexual advances, and to acquire material belongings. Among men, there may be social pressure to have concurrent partnerships to conform to group norms and prove sexual prowess and dominance in accordance with larger gender norms, as described by one young man in Tanzania:

When I meet with my best friends, they boast to me that they have more than one girl and that they are surprised saying, "how can one girl satisfy you?" Some of them might have two so when you are in a group like this you are pressured to find another girl so that you are at one level with your friends. For girls, they can also ask, "how can you have one partner, one boyfriend while we have different ones." [Younger male, FGD, Tanzania]

In addition, respondents reported that having multiple partners was a source of prestige and social status, particularly among men, but also among younger women. In Tanzania, women described this as "a source of pride" or "being a boss," and men overwhelmingly confirmed this notion. In Malawi, respondents also talked about the social status that comes with having multiple partnerships, as one man in Malawi described:

It is because some men want to be popular. They want to be famous say, Mr. Banda that one has five wives . . . so and so has six. It is about influence. Having more women makes men feel being famous. Yeah, because they feel "big." They call themselves "big man" because they moved up from one woman to two, then three up to four. They feel proud and admired, because people talk about him, that he has three, he feels great. [Male, IDI, Malawi]

Respondents also said that for women, concurrent relationships could reinforce a sense of attractiveness and desirability.

Among adolescents in particular, economic vulnerability appeared to intersect with social expectations and interactions with peers, as one woman from Malawi explained:

For instance, my friend comes with new clothes and she tells me that she has another sexual partner who has also given her some money for shopping. By then you do not have anything in your pocket. The next day that friend of yours comes again with new clothes then you ask her if it is her husband who bought the clothes for her and she tells you that "my friend, you are wasting your time, you are just delaying yourself . . . try it and see for yourself..." You are tempted to try because you feel that that is the way everybody lives. [Female, IDI, Malawi]

Language and metaphor

Examining the language used to describe concurrent partnerships can provide a lens into how these partnerships are understood. Terms used to describe concurrent partnerships were similar in both Tanzania and Malawi and generally fell into three categories:

- insults (either humorous or more serious)
- metaphors that conveyed a sense of additional security and stability
- terms associated with disease

In Malawi, language used to describe concurrent partnerships suggests greater condemnation of the behavior for women than for men. Terms used to describe women with concurrent partners tended to be derogatory, such as “loose,” “minibus seat” (shared by many strangers), or “prostitute.” Terms used to describe men with concurrent partners, on the other hand, more frequently conveyed some admiration and humor, such as *wam’chiuno* (excessive lover) or *wanjala ya m’chiuno* (one with hunger of the hips). However, these terms still conveyed a slightly biting humor with derogatory undertones.

In Tanzania, two metaphors were commonly used to describe extra-marital sex. The first, *mafiga mawili hayainjiki chungu*, means that two cooking stones cannot hold a pot. The second, *mbeya maji kwa ndoo hubeba kidumu pia*, suggests that a person needs a spare container, lest he/she spills the water in the bucket. Both metaphors suggest that concurrency provides an extra level of stability and security, or a back-up plan in case the initial strategy fails. Some respondents explained that the metaphors represented the sexual and material security provided by multiple partners:

They say you must carry *a ndoo kubwa* (a big bucket) and *kidumu cha maji* (water gallon) so that if the big bucket falls, then you still have water in the gallon. . . So you are sure that your *kidumu* (other man) is always going to be there, you will continue to survive because there is something small that you get from the *kidumu*. [Older female, IDI, Tanzania]

Similarly, in Tanzania, a concurrent partner can be called a “spare wheel,” providing an emergency back-up in case the first wheel fails.

Finally, in Malawi but not in Tanzania, respondents shared terms for concurrent partnerships that referenced death and disease. The phrase *kwathu maliro kwanu maliro*, literally “death on your side, death on my side,” can refer to any “promiscuous” man or woman. Some younger participants said having multiple concurrent partners was *kuika moyo pa fast-forward*, “putting life in fast forward,” or *kukwela yo banduka*, “riding the fast one,” or even *kukwela ya kumalembe*, “riding to the grave.”

While some of these phrases may be a response to the HIV epidemic, respondents also mentioned fear of other sexually transmitted diseases including syphilis and gonorrhea. They also linked concurrent partnerships to malnutrition and frailty, possibly reflecting the wasting associated with end-stage AIDS.

Polygamy

In both Malawi and Tanzania, cultural support of polygamy also facilitates social acceptance of concurrent partnerships for men. Respondents stressed that polygamy is socially different from other

types of concurrency. Children born in polygamous relationships are considered legitimate, and co-wives are respected as married women. Respondents felt that some men may take advantage of the general acceptance of polygamy to engage in extra-marital concurrency with the excuse that extra-marital partners are simply “wives-in-waiting.” Respondents considered the main difference between polygamy and concurrency to be the level of secrecy, as one man from Malawi explained:

There may be similarities between *mitala* (polygamy) and the other multiple sexual relations and extra-marital affairs. For example, you are married and you get another wife or you are married and you have an extra marital sexual partner outside marriage, what is the difference? The only difference is in the openness when running the affairs. In *mitala* you are open while in the other, *zibwenzi*, you hide it. In both scenarios you have ‘2 in 1’ where the 1 is yourself and the 2 are the women. [Male, IDI, Malawi]

Relationship dynamics that encourage concurrent sexual partnerships

Gender norms and social inequalities are reflected in relationship dynamics within couples. Respondents from both Malawi and Tanzania described relational issues that might encourage one or both members of a couple to engage in concurrent sexual partnerships.

Sexual desire and sexual dissatisfaction in primary relationships

Sexual desire and dissatisfaction with primary sexual relationships may lead individuals to seek additional partners. Many respondents believed that inability to control sexual desire was at the root of concurrency, particularly for men:

For those who can’t control that [sexual desire], even for those whose religion doesn’t allow them to have more than one wife he goes out and cheat because he has failed to control himself. That is the main reason. [Older male, FGD, Tanzania]

Sexual dissatisfaction with a primary partner was also a common reason given for concurrency. Male FGD participants complained of their wives or primary partners not being interested in sex, or not having sex frequently enough. One young woman in Tanzania explained:

For a man you might find he is having a wife at home; it may happen that at the time when a man needs sex his wife is not ready. Therefore, it will force him to look for somebody else who will quench his needs. [Younger female, FGD, Tanzania]

Female FGD participants occasionally said that husbands with several other wives or partners would not have sex with their primary partners frequently enough, leading to feelings of frustration.

Respondents also cited the need for variety in sexual partners as a motivating factor for sexual concurrency. As one respondent explained:

There is another one you will hear, there is a saying these days, “I cannot eat vegetables every day,” so . . . when he goes out he gets something different [different sexual partner]. [Younger female, FGD, Tanzania]

Material and emotional dissatisfaction with primary relationships

In addition to sexual dissatisfaction, respondents also reported material and emotional dissatisfaction with primary partners. Such dissatisfaction often took the form of the partner failing to live up to expected gender norms, with men expected to provide economically for the family and women expected to bear children and tend to the home and family. When men are not seen as fulfilling their role as provider, participants reported that some women may seek financial and material assistance for themselves and their children from another man. Similarly, when women are perceived as neglecting their duties at home or not being attentive enough to their husbands, men may seek outside partners.

Emotional needs, including trust, commitment, security, and love, were also described as necessary for sustaining a healthy, satisfying primary relationship. When these emotional aspects were lacking in a relationship, respondents felt that concurrency was likely.

Finally, some respondents suggested that it was unlikely for any one individual to be able to provide complete sexual, financial, and emotional satisfaction, and, therefore, concurrent partnerships are necessary to satisfy different needs:

I have three girlfriends, I like all of them. One because she is beautiful, the second because she is well mannered . . . she is not demanding . . . the third because she is sexually good . . . she is entertaining . . . I like all of them because *amanditsangalatsa* [they please me well in different ways]. [Male IDI, Malawi]

Communication skills and conflict resolution

Respondents said that couples often lack the communication skills and conflict resolution techniques that might enable them to address the challenges that frequently occur within partnerships.

Jealousy was a common reaction to infidelity from both men and women. In Malawi, many women responded to infidelity with confrontations. Such confrontations could be verbal or physical. For example, it was reported that women might destroy an unfaithful man's property. Women were also reported to use the silent treatment: avoiding communication with their partner, refusing to eat at home, ignoring housework or neglecting their responsibilities to their partner's relatives. Men were also said to use passive-aggressive punishment, usually by cutting off money and gifts to an unfaithful wife.

Revenge is also a common reaction to suspected infidelity. Women may take on a new partner to get even with their cheating husbands. Revenge and retaliation may also be accompanied by violence against either the spouse or the spouse's partner. This often precipitates the end of the relationship. Gender differences, however, were also reported with regard to revenge, as an older woman in Malawi described:

When a man finds out that his wife goes out with another man he will just send her off to her home. That is the end of the marriage. But when a woman finds out that her husband has other love affairs, she may just grieve inside. Sometimes out of fear that if she confronts the husband he might send her away, or even beat her up. It is painful. But when she has had too much, she might confront the other woman instead of her husband. [Older female, FGD, Malawi]

Power imbalances within couples

Respondents frequently discussed power imbalances within couples, usually due to age or socioeconomic status. In these discussions, women were always portrayed in the less powerful role.

In both Malawi and Tanzania, respondents reported that sex between young girls and older men was common. There was a consensus that young girls are generally naïve and easily manipulated by older men. In Tanzania, respondents used the term *Fataki* to describe these types of relationships. The term comes from a local HIV prevention mass media campaign depicting a man named Fataki who uses money and gifts as a way of getting multiple young sexual partners. As one man described it:

Fataki is . . . those who most of the time go after students or female children who are students, you find that you are a man maybe you do not have anything to do, you do not go to school, you just have some issues in the streets you become someone who gets into sexual relations with female students people like to call you *Fataki*, that you like destroying students. [Younger male, FGD, Tanzania]

Socioeconomic inequalities between men and women also prevented women from leaving unfaithful partners. Older women frequently said there was little they could do if their partners were seeing other women, since their husbands held the money and power in the relationship:

What do you do, you just leave him [alone to continue seeing other women] in the hope that one day he will come back. He is a man, he can do whatever he like; you cannot stop him. After all he is the one who proposed love to you. [Older female, FGD, Malawi]

This quote speaks to the cultural expectation that wives should be submissive and defer to their husbands. In contrast to men, women cannot demonstrate power by doing whatever they like.

Secrecy

Secrecy was cited as the main factor distinguishing concurrency from more legitimate polygamy. As quoted above, one Malawian man stated that the “only difference” between *mitala* (polygamy) and *zibwenzi* (concurrency or extra-marital affairs) is “the openness when running the affairs.”

Respondents also felt that secrecy creates or compounds many of the problems associated with concurrency. Some saw a relationship between secrecy and HIV risk:

If his relationship is the secret one, he goes out and does in secrecy, and that is why you may find a woman is having HIV without knowing where she got it, and a man with HIV without knowing where he got it because of committing adultery in secrecy . . . you may find a person is having HIV till you are surprised. This woman does not commit adultery, she is a woman of respect, how come! It is that secrecy, they understand a lot that having a lot of women and men is a problem but they still commit adultery in secrecy . . . so AIDS is still coming in, in secrecy. [Older female, KII, Tanzania]

The gender dynamics of secrecy were also emphasized. Respondents said that women with concurrent partnerships were more likely to be secretive about them than men, as women face greater public

humiliation and potential rejection or violence from their husbands if discovered. One older woman in Malawi explained:

For a woman her marriage is going to break if she is caught with another man, or if her husband finds out that she goes out with another man. He might also just chase her and let her go to her home. Men will fight or even kill each other if one of them finds out that the other one is going out with his wife. Husbands will not accept to see their wives having extra-marital affairs with other men. [Older female, FGD, Malawi]

Parental influence on adolescent sexual behavior

Parental influence on adolescent sexual behavior was seen as an important factor either encouraging or discouraging concurrency.

Parent-child communication about sexuality and relationships

Some older respondents often said that they and others in the community talk to their children about sexuality and discourage concurrent partnerships:

We tell them (children) that the current situation is not good . . . therefore try to be faithful . . . you should study well because if you will start these things (sex) you won't go even to the university . . . you should avoid these relationships so that at least you come to take care of your relatives and your family. [Younger female, FGD, Tanzania]

Respondents also said that many parents fail to have open conversations about sexuality with their children. Parents were said to lack the time, knowledge, or comfort level needed to engage in these types of conversations. When they do occur, many of these conversations are fear-based, with parents warning their children not to have sex or not to have multiple partners because of the risk of “diseases,” “infections,” and “death.” In addition, communication may be inadequate, confusing, or inaccurate, as a younger woman in Tanzania described:

There is a problem there. Most parents are not open to tell their kids about what they should not do and when they shouldn't do it. They would simply tell the kid that you are a grown up, don't get involved with men . . . but how? Does it mean that she should not go near them or walk with them . . . it is not easy to understand, not even for me. Some even tell their daughters that if you touch a man then you will get pregnant . . . Parents are so secretive on such matters, they are not open. [Younger female, FGD, Tanzania]

There was limited discussion about healthy sexuality and relationships or protective measures. Few parents seemed to discuss the pressures to engage in sexual behavior that their children might experience.

Parent modeling of concurrent sexual behavior

In addition to communication between parents and children, respondents also suggested that some parents have concurrent partnerships themselves, thus modeling and legitimizing the behavior to their children:

It can follow, I have a bad behavior and my child will also follow that same behavior and she will have a bad behavior and when she gives birth her child will also follow the same and it continues being bad one way. [Older female, FGD, Tanzania]

In Malawi, this was expressed as a proverb: *make mbuu, mwana mbuu*, which literally translated means “mother grey, child grey.”

Parents benefiting from their children’s transactional relationships

Respondents said that impoverished parents sometimes benefit from extra income in the household provided by their child’s sexual partners. They may thus encourage their children to enter into sexual relationships, or their silence on the topic may tacitly encourage concurrency. One younger woman in Tanzania explained:

The child has not any job but she comes home with 6000 [shillings], she [the mother] doesn’t ask. She [the child] may come with many clothes, she may give some to her mother, she [the mother] doesn’t ask, she neither prohibit nor support her, so even such parent contributes in some ways, because the child is not working to earn money for buying a five thousands vest, instead of asking her where did you get that, [the mother is] supporting her and she does not stop her, and then tomorrow she puts on nice clothes. . . But she [the mother] is the source, she discovered early but she kept quiet. [Younger female, FGD, Tanzania]

Such behavior, which may come from the same parents who tell their children to avoid sex, can send contradictory messages to children.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study are supported by previous studies in Tanzania and Malawi, as well as studies from the broader region. Previous research has suggested that socially prescribed gender norms state that it is acceptable for men to engage in multiple partnerships because they cannot control their sexual desires (Jana et al., 2008; Rweyemamu, 2008; Leclerc-Madlala, 2009).

Gender norms encourage male initiation of sex while discouraging women's expression of sexual need or desire. As a result, it is not normative for women to refuse unwanted sexual advances, thereby exacerbating their inability to negotiate safer sexual practices (Lary et al., 2004; Jana et al., 2008). Peer pressure has also been reported as a factor in the decision to engage in multiple partnerships (Rweyemamu, 2008; Jana et al., 2008).

In Tanzania, poverty or a desire to augment one's income has been found to be a motivation for engaging in multiple partnerships, including concurrent partnerships (Rweyemamu 2008; Desmond et al., 2005; Kapiga et al., 2002). One study conducted in a mining community in the northwestern region of Tanzania found that limited opportunities for women led them to engage in transactional sexual partnerships to supplement the little money they could earn on their own. The mine, however, was a source of income for the men, thus enabling them to pay women for sex (Desmond et al., 2005).

However, other studies in Malawi and Tanzania have suggested that the transactional element of many relationships may not be purely a function of poverty, but may in fact reflect meaningful social ties and a way for women to obtain validation of their worth from partners (Swidler & Watkins, 2007; Wamoyi et al., 2009). Wamoyi and colleagues (2009) suggest that exchanging sex for money can be partially attributed to cultural expectations that men provide for women, and though this traditionally occurred within the institution of marriage, it has carried over into premarital sexual relationships. They found that most Tanzanian respondents—both parents and adolescents—were supportive of transactional relationships, and felt that women's sexuality was a valuable commodity that should not be given away for free (Wamoyi et al., 2009).

A few studies from sub-Saharan Africa have identified alcohol use and the social context surrounding alcohol use as factors associated with multiple partnerships (Jana et al., 2008; Ghebremichael et al., 2008; Kapiga et al., 2002; Desmond et al., 2005). Alcohol use is intertwined with socialization and cultural norms in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and these intersections may provide opportunities for HIV risk. A recent systematic review of the literature from sub-Saharan Africa found that alcohol use, frequency of use, quantity of consumption, and use in sexual contexts were all significantly associated with HIV infection (Pithey & Parry, 2009).

At the relational level, the need to satisfy strong sexual desires has also been identified by previous studies as motivation for men to engage in concurrent partnerships (Maganja et al., 2007; Rweyemamu, 2008). Mistrust and insecurity within steady relationships and marriages have been similarly associated with the decision to seek partners outside their steady relationship (Rweyemamu, 2008; Lary et al., 2004; Maganja et al., 2007). Moreover, the infidelity of one partner can cause the other partner to seek additional partners outside the steady relationship as a form of revenge for their partner's behavior

(Desmond et al., 2005; Rweyemamu, 2008). Poor communication between sexual partners about sexual and reproductive health has been reported to contribute to sexual dissatisfaction, which can lead one or both partners to seek sexual relationships outside of their stable relationship (Jana et al., 2008).

Parent-child communication about sexual relationships has also been identified as an important influence on adolescent sexual behaviors (WHO, 2007). In Tanzania, previous research suggests that such communication often takes the form of warnings, threats and physical discipline. Parents are also uncomfortable using explicit language to talk about sexuality and perceive talking about sex with their children as shameful, immoral and encouraging the child to have sex (Wamoyi et al., 2010). In addition, previous research supports the fact that some parents send contradictory messages, urging their daughters to abstain from sex while accepting money and gifts from their daughters' sexual partners without question (Wamoyi et al., 2009).

Supported by evidence from previous research in similar settings, findings from this qualitative study suggest several avenues for interventions aiming to reduce concurrent partnerships.

Address environmental-structural factors that create an enabling context

In both Tanzania and Malawi, concurrent sexual relationships take place and must be understood within a particular environmental, social, political, legal and economic context (Francisco et al., 2010).

Environmental-structural factors such as economic vulnerability, migration and the social context surrounding alcohol use facilitate sexual concurrency in both settings and must be taken into consideration when developing interventions.

In both Tanzania and Malawi, poverty and economic insecurity are commonplace, and women are often particularly vulnerable. Economic vulnerability of women does not necessarily imply victim status; girls and women may actively seek resources and power through relationships. However, their lower social and economic status still facilitates concurrent partnerships and thus provides a focus for intervention.

Economic empowerment interventions such as microfinance and job training may provide one avenue for reducing economic vulnerability and HIV risk (Pronyk et al., 2006; Kim & Watts, 2005). Another avenue may be conditional cash transfers (CCT). In Malawi, CCT for school attendance among young women led to significant declines in early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and self-reported sexual activity (Baird et al., 2010). In Tanzania, CCT to encourage young people to reduce risky sexual behavior led to fewer sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (de Walque et al., 2010). These different approaches to CCT, which rewarded staying in school and remaining free of STIs, warrant further programmatic consideration.

Migration is also related to poverty and economic insecurity. In both Tanzania and Malawi, most migration occurs within the larger economic system as most migrants move in search of work or economic opportunity. While it is difficult to change regional patterns of economic opportunity and labor migration, previous studies have suggested that even small changes may make separation less difficult. For example, one study conducted among truck drivers in Zimbabwe suggested that raising salaries, limiting overtime, providing childcare so that wives could travel with their husbands, and

improving telephone access so that truckers could keep in better touch with partners could all potentially reduce extra-marital partnerships and HIV risk (Wilson et al., 1994 cited in Parker et al., 2000). Other intervention opportunities include housing for families of migrant workers or changes to work schedules to facilitate family visits.

Finally, our findings suggest that alcohol affects the decision to engage in concurrency through a number of pathways, including intoxication and the enabling environment of alcohol venues. Programs should consider both interventions that target the general population with messages on the risk of alcohol, as well as interventions based in alcohol venues that are designed to address that specific context. While HIV prevention interventions in alcohol venues in low- and middle-income countries are still relatively novel, pilot studies in South Africa and India have suggested that such interventions are feasible and potentially effective (Kalichman et al., 2008; Sivaram et al., 2004). In addition, structural interventions, such as changes in opening hours of alcohol venues, should be considered in settings where policy makers or venue owners and managers are supportive of HIV prevention efforts.

Address unequal gender norms and strengthen injunctive norms against concurrent partnerships

Findings from this study suggest conflicting community perceptions of concurrency. On the one hand, there appears to be general condemnation of sexual concurrency, and on the other, it is perceived as common and normal behavior. This apparent conflict between injunctive norms (what a person believes should be done) and descriptive norms (what a person believes others are doing) may foster a *laissez-faire* attitude in which people find it difficult to speak out publicly against concurrency, even if they believe that it is wrong (Limaye et al., 2010).

Previous studies have suggested that injunctive norms moderate the effects of descriptive norms on behaviors (Rimal & Real, 2005; Rimal, 2008), while others have found that injunctive norms are the stronger predictor of behavior (Sheppard et al., 1988; Klein & Boster, 2006). Strengthening injunctive norms against concurrent partnerships for both men and women and addressing gender inequalities may help to change these social norms and reduce sexual concurrency. Different approaches to strengthening injunctive norms should be considered, including specific strategies such as positive role modeling and re-characterizing masculinity.

Unequal gender norms around concurrency are just one expression of a larger system of unequal gender norms and practices in both settings. Gender inequality shapes a wide variety of behaviors related to concurrency and partner choice, particularly related to the transactional nature of sexual relationships. Past research has shown that transactional sex may offer a way for women to gain power within relationships, and that their bodies may be seen as a valuable asset that should not be given away freely (Wamoyi et al., 2009).

Efforts aimed at addressing transactional sex must consider the complexity of the beliefs underlying the practice and the intersections between power, gender, and poverty. In addition to focusing specifically on unequal norms around concurrency, interventions should emphasize challenging unequal gender norms and practices broadly. Interventions should also consider structural changes to laws and

economic policies that might reduce women's economic vulnerability and their dependence on their bodies as an economic asset. Gender norms cannot be disentangled from economic issues, particularly for women.

Across a variety of settings, interventions to challenge gender norms have successfully used a variety of approaches to address structural factors and social norms that lead to HIV risk behaviors such as concurrency.

- In South Africa, the *Intervention with Microfinance for AIDS and Gender Equity* (IMAGE) study showed that a structural intervention combining a microfinance arm with a training curriculum around gender and HIV led to reductions in intimate partner violence (Pronyk et al., 2006). The addition of the gender and HIV training component was found to be important to reducing risk of other health outcomes (Kim et al., 2009).
- In Brazil, Promundo and partners have created a curriculum that engages men in challenging unequal gender norms that facilitate HIV risk (Promundo, MenEngage Alliance, & UNFPA, 2010).
- In South Africa, Brothers for Life is a national campaign that targets men to reduce the risks associated not only with having multiple and concurrent partnerships, but also with the intersecting issues of sex and alcohol, gender based violence, HIV testing, male involvement in prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, and health-seeking behaviors in general (Brothers for Life, 2010).

These interventions suggest that to change norms, programs must engage men and address structural factors as well as social norms that lead to gender inequality and vulnerability. Further research into the efficacy of interventions targeting gender norms and the characteristics of programs associated with efficacy is also needed.

Promote partner communication and conflict resolution strategies

A poor quality relationship with a spouse or primary sexual partner, especially in the sense of lack of trust and sexual dissatisfaction, appears to facilitate concurrent partnerships (Muntifering et al., 2010). The context of limited partner communication makes the issues of lack of trust and sexual dissatisfaction particularly problematic. Promoting partner communication around reproductive health in general and HIV prevention in particular should be part of a comprehensive effort to reduce concurrent partnerships.

Drawing on evidence from the field of family planning, social networks can be used to provide relevant information and build partner communication skills about the risks of concurrency. Similarly, developing conflict resolution skills for couples could reduce conflict and improve the quality of relationships, leading to reduced interest in outside partners. Appropriate interventions could build on the traditional role of community elders and the extended family in conjugal conflict resolution. For example, traditional marriage counseling practices, such as *miyambo ya m'banja* in Malawi, provide a basis for promoting the involvement of respected members of the community in resolving conflicts that could potentially encourage concurrency. In addition, HIV prevention interventions that target couples as a

unit rather than intervening with individuals could promote couple communication about HIV prevention and other topics.

Develop parenting skills to discourage concurrency

Findings from this study suggest that although many parents in Tanzania and Malawi do discuss sexuality with their children, many others do not. Parents may hesitate to engage in these conversations due to lack of time, knowledge, or comfort level. Some youth receive mixed messages from parents who may themselves engage in concurrent partnerships, or who may subtly encourage their children to engage in sexual partnerships for economic gain. In multiple ways, parents can be a significant influence on their children's decision to engage in concurrent partnerships (Fehringer et al., 2010).

The World Health Organization (2007) has identified five dimensions of parental influence on adolescent behavior:

1. connectedness and love in the parent-child relationship
2. behavioral control
3. respect for individuality
4. modeling appropriate behavior
5. provision and protection.

Findings from this study suggest that several of these aspects of parental influence are encouraging concurrency among adolescents. When parents model concurrency behavior, their children are influenced to adopt similar behaviors. When impoverished parents cannot fulfill their role of providing children with adequate material and economic goods, their children may be encouraged to engage in sexual relationships to fulfill the role of provision for themselves. And when parents do not exercise behavioral control over their children, it may enable concurrency behavior among their children.

To discourage concurrency among adolescents, programs should strengthen parenting skills across these five dimensions of parental influence. Such programs can promote parent-child communication around sexuality and concurrent partnerships and foster changes in social norms that increase the acceptability of these discussions. Parents should be encouraged to talk with their children in an open and honest manner, and before their children are sexually active (Obasi et al., 2006). Parents should also be encouraged to model desired behavior and exercise appropriate behavioral control over their children.

Programs should focus on skills training so that parents are able to give appropriate, timely and non-contradictory information. For example, programs can provide language for how to start a discussion about sexuality with adolescents— a barrier often expressed by parents who know that their children may be sexually active and at risk of HIV, STIs, and unwanted pregnancy, but who feel uncomfortable discussing such matters (Wamoyi et al., 2010).

However, developing parenting skills alone will only be successful if it is combined with interventions that address the specific social and economic vulnerability of youth. Adolescents who experience pressure from their friends or who feel their basic needs are not being met by their parents may enter into sexual relationships for a variety of reasons despite their parents' disapproval. To have a real

impact on youth behavior, a multi-level approach is necessary to address the variety of factors that facilitate concurrent sexual partnerships among adolescents.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Strengths of this study include its broad geographical scope, covering nine diverse sites in two countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and the diversity of respondents, including men and women, older and younger adults, community members and community leaders, and individuals who did and did not report currently having concurrent partnerships. In addition, multiple qualitative methods allowed for methodological triangulation, strengthening the reliability of the findings.

Limitations of this study include the potential for socially desirable responses, given the sensitive nature of the topic. Participants tended to be well-informed about HIV/AIDS and familiar with the link between HIV and concurrent partnerships. This may have limited their willingness to reveal less socially desirable responses. In addition, it was challenging to define sexual concurrency in settings where the concept could not necessarily be directly translated in the local dialect. Researchers tried to distinguish between serial and concurrent sexual relationships by emphasizing that in concurrency, two or more sexual relationships occur during the same time period. However, the extent to which this concept was well understood by all respondents is not clear.

CONCLUSIONS

In Malawi and Tanzania, concurrent partnerships are complex sexual behaviors embedded within larger socioeconomic systems that intersect with cultural and gender norms to influence individual behavior. Across a variety of studies, similar findings suggest that environmental-structural factors, social norms that support gender inequality, relationship dynamics, and parental influence on adolescent sexual behavior all contribute to concurrent sexual partnerships. Understanding these dynamics and working within these larger social and structural systems is essential to the success of programs intending to reduce concurrency and, ultimately, to reduce HIV transmission in these settings.

In the short term, interventions should promote partner communication and develop conflict resolution strategies to strengthen primary relationships between couples. Interventions with parents should focus on skills development across multiple dimensions of parental influence. In the longer term, campaigns to address unequal gender norms and to strengthen injunctive norms against concurrent partnerships are needed, along with creative interventions to modify risk that comes as a result of larger socioeconomic forces.

Concurrent partnerships are complex behaviors embedded in larger cultural and economic systems and shaped by factors at multiple levels. Interventions that address these multiple levels synergistically are more likely to lead to reduced sexual concurrency and reduced HIV transmission.

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