Chapter 15

Examining Sexuality in the Context of HIV/AIDS Knowledge among Students of the North-West University Mafikeng Campus: Does Gender Matter?

Paul Bigala
North-West University – Mafikeng, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The study investigated gender differences in attitudes towards sexuality in the context of HIV/AIDS among undergraduate students. The cross-sectional study was conducted among 1,498 randomly selected students. The majority of the students interviewed were females at 53.9% (M=20.24, SD=2.98) compared to 46.1% males (M=21.67, SD=3.35). More Males (16%) responded in the affirmative with regard to having more than one sexual partner than female students (10%). Also, more male students (32.7%) than female students (18.6%) indicated that using condom reduces sexual pleasure and over 40% of both sets of respondents indicated that sexual intercourse should only be done between married couples. This study underscores the need to strengthen HIV/AIDS programmes to include issues on sexuality and encourage undergraduate students to attend these programmes.

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2013, UNAIDS (2013) reported that about 95% of 35.2 million people living with HIV/AIDS worldwide were residing in developing nations and indicated that sub-Saharan Africa is affected the most by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In sub-Saharan Africa, the southern African sub region remains the most affected with South Africa having the largest population living with HIV/AIDS in 2012. Despite the knowledge about HIV/AIDS pandemic the prevalence rate in South Africa continues to increase.

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(Makhoahle & Bagali, 2012; Reddy & Frantz, 2011; Republic of South Africa, 2012). This indicates that knowledge has not translated to safer sexual practices and prevention in South Africa (Makhoahle & Bagali, 2012).

Recent South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence and Behaviour Survey showed that youth had the highest HIV prevalence (Shisana et al., 2014). The HIV prevalence among 20–24 years age group was estimated at 22.1% with women disproportionately affected (Republic of South Africa, 2012). In addition, studies in South African universities revealed that females aged 20–24 were at more risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases compared to males (Akintola et al., 2012; Mutinta & Goven- der, 2012). The higher prevalence and risk of HIV infection among females compared to males may be attributed to the more HIV/AIDS preventive knowledge of the later (Marianne et al., 2013).

On the contrary, studies have indicated that female students were more knowledgeable because they participate more in HIV/AIDS programmes than males (Ebeniro, 2010; Maliki, 2010). The knowledge, attitudes, belief and practice study (KABP) in 21 South African higher educational institutions between 2008 and 2009 revealed that female students were more likely to have more knowledge on HIV/AIDS than their male counterparts. Similarly, higher knowledge of HIV/AIDS among female compared to male students have been reported in Ghana (Asante, 2013) and Nigeria (Maliki, 2010; Mbakwem-Aniebo et al., 2012).

Irrespective of differentials in HIV/AIDS knowledge by gender, university environment provides students with unlimited opportunities for sexual exploration (Reddy & Frantz, 2011, HEAIDS, 2010). Several studies have shown that young South Africans continue to engage in risky behaviour as they perceive themselves to be at low risk of HIV infection (Maswanya et al., 1999; Petitfor et al., 2009; Macintyre et al., 2004). This suggests that knowledge and attitude which would culminate to HIV preventative measures remain inadequate among university students (Akintola et al., 2012; Petiffor et al., 2005, Tagoe & Aggor, 2009; Oppong & Oti-Boadi, 2013).

Given that university students are sexually active, engaging in risky sexual behaviour, the North-West University responded to the Government’s call to mitigate the spread of the pandemic through the university’s core functions of teaching/learning and research. North-West University has continued implementation of HIV/AIDS interventions such as prevention, treatment, care and support programme. However, the dividends of this programme have not been assessed. Thus, this study examined the gender differences in HIV/AIDS knowledge and beliefs among undergraduate students of Mafikeng Campus, North-West University. It provided an empirical assessment of the University’s HIV/AIDS prevention programmes. Understanding the pattern in HIV/AIDS knowledge and beliefs by gender and the mitigating impact of the current programme on HIV/AIDS among students would guide the thrust of future intervention strategy. In line with the objective of the programme, it was hypothesized that knowledge of HIV/AIDS prevention is significantly higher among female undergraduates compared to their male counterparts. Secondly, female undergraduates had more access to HIV/AIDS programmes than their male counterparts.

**STUDY METHODS**

**Study Setting**

The study was conducted among undergraduate students aged 16–24 years in North-West University, Mafikeng Campus. The Mafikeng Campus is the second-largest of the University’s three campuses and is