

Young women at greatest risk of HIV infection

There is alarming new evidence of the unrelenting spread of HIV among adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa – including from studies in KwaZulu-Natal

Ayesha Kharsany



ANALYSIS

GLOBALLY, more than 1.6 billion people are in the age group 12 to 24 years, the largest generation of adolescents and young people ever.

However, almost 42% of new HIV infections occur in this age group, nearly 80% of these live in sub-Saharan Africa – and more than 70% of these infections occur in adolescent girls and young women.

Not only do these adolescent girls and young women have higher rates of HIV, they also acquire infection five to seven years earlier than their male peers.

Worldwide there are some declining trends in HIV infections in the 15 to 24-year age group, with behaviour changes such as waiting longer to become sexually active, having fewer multiple-sex partners and an increased use of condoms in multiple partnerships.

However, in South Africa the declines in the number of HIV-positive young women are too slow and too little, with similarly low levels of behaviour change.

For example the results from the National South African Household HIV Survey conducted in 2012 showed 11.4% of young women compared to 2.9% of boys in the 15 to 24-year age group were HIV positive, while in the 2008 survey, 13.9% of young women compared to 3.6% of young boys were HIV-positive. These differences are minor.

Despite high levels of knowledge on HIV prevention and transmission, adolescent girls and young women are a key population who remain highly vulnerable to HIV. A key gateway to HIV prevention and treatment is knowledge of HIV status and this remains low in South Africa.

This disconnect is related to the low-risk perception. It perpetuates vulnerability to HIV within challenging environments of high levels of household poverty and unemployment that are complexly linked to embedded gender inequalities, gender-based violence, harmful gender norms, patriarchy and premature attrition from schools, that limit young women and girls from reaching their full potential.

The persistently high gender imbalance of HIV among young people has led to an increase in research to better understand the disparate burden and associated risks facing adolescent girls and young women. Increasing attention has been paid to the role that age-disparate heterosexual relationships may play in this gender imbalance.

Several studies across a variety



Britain's Prince Harry meets HIV youth activists at the 2016 International Aids Conference at the Durban International Conference Centre, in July. Studies suggest that age-disparate heterosexual relationships may play a role in the prevalence of HIV among teenage girls and young women.

of settings have shown that larger age differences among sex partners are associated with lower condom use and higher rates of sexually-transmitted infections among adolescent girls and young women.

Data from the third National HIV Communication Survey conducted in 2012 suggest that women aged 16 to 24 years in age-disparate partnerships were more likely to report unprotected sex, amplifying transmission risk.

In contrast, another study from the same region, however, found that age-disparate partnerships did not predict HIV acquisition among young women in KwaZulu-Natal.

The study from the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Caprisa) provides new evidence and sheds light on why young women in South Africa are at high risk of HIV infection.

A study undertaken in 2014 and 2015 involved nearly 10 000 randomly sampled people in two districts in KwaZulu-Natal. The overall HIV prevalence among 15 to 49-year-olds

in these districts was 36% and as high as 66% among women in their 30s. The difference in HIV prevalence among men and women was greatest in the young age groups, reinforcing that women in this community on average acquire HIV at a younger age than men.

The genetic sequences of the viruses from the HIV blood samples were analysed and this information was used to map the sexual partnerships among the people living with HIV, to better understand

the relentless spread of HIV in this community. A total of 90 clusters of probable male-female transmission were identified, and within those clusters were 123 women and 103 men.

Among the women aged under 25, their sexual partners were on average 8.7 years older, with 62% of these men aged 25 to 40.

Among the women aged 25 to 40 years, their sexual partners were on average just one year older.

Among the men aged 25 to 40 linked to a woman under 25, 39%

were linked simultaneously to a woman aged 25 to 40.

The most probable direction of transmission among these individuals was inferred by the levels of HIV prevalence within this community. HIV transmission was most likely to occur from high to low prevalence.

Together, these data suggest that any men aged 25 to 40 living with HIV may have acquired HIV from a woman aged 25 to 40, and that most of the women under 25 living with HIV may have acquired HIV from a man aged 25 to 40.

Over time, as the younger women grow older, this cycle is expected to continue. Greater understanding of the sexual networks driving HIV transmission could help in the design of programmes to reduce HIV infection in adolescent girls and young women.

This study revealed that the "cycle of HIV transmission" heightening the vulnerability of adolescent girls and young women's to HIV is driven by high rates of new HIV infections from men, on average eight years older. Many of these men were also partners of similarly aged women who have HIV prevalence rates exceeding 60%.

Young women are uniquely vulnerable to infection, and understanding the cycle of HIV transmis-

sion for this key population is a public health imperative, despite South Africa's substantial progress in the large scale roll-out of HIV prevention and treatment programmes.

Several programmes such as Dreams (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe Women) Partnership, Global Fund, Adolescent Girls and Young Women's Programme, Girl Effect and SheConquers are comprehensive evidence-based programmes for adolescent girls and young women that aim to provide sexuality education, increase and retain girls in school, reduce teenage pregnancies and gender-based violence, increase economic opportunities for young people and most importantly, interrupt the cycle of transmission and decrease new HIV infections.

This study provides scientific evidence, using state-of-the-art research technologies, to guide targeted HIV prevention interventions to break the cycle of HIV transmission and impact the course for HIV in South Africa and potentially in other high burden settings.

● Professor Kharsany is a senior scientist for the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Caprisa)

We owe it to struggle stalwarts to build a decent society

THIS week I am in the US to talk about the state of our nation at an African Studies Association conference, arguably the biggest and oldest gathering of scholars with an interest in Africa. I also get the chance to speak at university campuses in Chicago and Washington, encouraging students to choose South Africa as a study-abroad destination.

Being in the US makes one reflect on the fact that South Africa continues to occupy a special place in the imagination of people around the world, despite the toxic nature of our politics.

Many people and many countries around the world stood by us during our dark days, and this week we remember the special and relentless role played by our hero, Fidel Castro. May his spirit live on.

People all over the world feel that our future is tied up with their own hopes for a better world. We have a real obligation to all those who struggled against apartheid, and to our children, to ensure that we build a decent society of which all of us can be proud.

Of course we are not the only part of the world to have serious problems. The US, for instance, is in deep crisis, especially in light of a Donald Trump presidency.

Perhaps racism, xenophobia and police violence top the list right now. The old manufacturing economy is gone. The whole city of Detroit has more or less been abandoned. It is only the cities connected to the new knowledge economy, like Seattle and San Francisco that are booming.

The de-industrialisation of the US has left much of the country looking far more Third World than some parts of South Africa. Millions are either out of work or have to work two or even three low-paying and insecure jobs just to survive.

For some, it seems that this new America, in which young white men can no longer look forward to the unionised factory jobs held by their fathers and grandfathers, has been poisoned by immigration. And much has already been written about how Trump has capitalised on working-class vulnerabilities.

But in fact the real cause of America's decline is emigration – the emigration of productive capital to the low-wage economies of the global South. This is a problem that we have also faced.

A large number of our biggest corporations have moved their listings, or their production, offshore. For as long as capital can move across borders freely while people cannot, undocumented migrants will be blamed for the decline of working-class life.

In South Africa, there is also a deep cynicism settling into our people. The patriotism that many of us felt during the struggle against apartheid, and in the early years

Imraan Buccus



IMRAAN'S INSIGHTS

of democracy, is rotting away as we are assaulted with scandal after scandal. For those with the right connections it is boom time. But for ordinary South Africans things are getting harder and harder. Just as in the US, xenophobia is one response to social disappointment.

But unlike in the US, there is a deep cynicism settling into our people. What America has done to African-Americans is unconscionable. What it has done to Iraq and Afghanistan and Palestine is unconscionable. What its bankers and other elites have done

to working-class Americans, black and white, is unconscionable. Yet millions of Americans continue to have faith in their country. Yes, despite Trump too. It is a real belief, perhaps naive sometimes, in the promise of the US.

The Guptas, Nkandla, Marikana, the National Prosecuting Authority, the endless crisis of our school system

and so on are steadily robbing us of this faith in our country. When someone does stand up to tell the truth about our leaders, he himself is so deeply flawed that it is impossible to see anything other than opportunism at work. Yet in the US it is clear that South Africa still means something to the people of the world. We are still the country of Biko, of Mandela, of possibility and of real social hope. Sometimes it is quite distressing to see one's self through the eyes of others.

But sometimes it can be refreshing. No doubt, in the eyes of the world, the xenophobic riots last year and the Marikana massacre of 2012 were moments of deep disappointment in the new South Africa.

The shocking quality of some of our highest leadership has radically compounded that disappointment. Nobody believes in our leaders any more. But from America to Palestine, there are many people that do believe in the South African people.

We do have serious problems to deal with. But cynicism and depression won't help us to resolve them. Perhaps it is time to renew the faith so many of us used to feel in ourselves and our country.

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“We have serious problems to deal with, but cynicism and depression won't help us resolve them – we need to renew faith”

“Inequalities, gender-based violence and attrition from schools limit young women reaching their potential”

Finding balance between freedom and discipline

Raymond Perrier



FAITH IN THE CITY

FAITH has this week taken up residence in an unlikely place in the heart of the city: not quite in the City Hall itself but right next door in the Playhouse, because for the next four weeks, the Opera Theatre will host *The Sound of Music*.

I am surely not the only one to associate Julie Andrews singing on her mountaintop with the festive season. The 1965 film – brought stunningly to life this season by Lynelle Kennedy and the KZN Philharmonic – was a staple of the Christmas TV schedule in my childhood.

But I also have another more unlikely memory linked to *The Sound of Music*: a refugee camp in northern Uganda. When I was living and working there, one of the few sources of entertainment was our “mobile cinema” – a video projector, a large white sheet and a generator on the back of a Hilux truck. And of all the films we showed, the most loved was *The Sound of Music*.

It actually connected with the Southern Sudanese refugees very well: they were devoutly Roman Catholic, they loved breaking into song, and they knew what it was like to be exiles! They were also



Durban's Playhouse Opera Theatre will stage the classic *The Sound of Music*, which has wide-reaching appeal.

people of unquenchable faith and I think that they also saw that in *The Sound of Music*. And that is why I say that this theatre production has brought faith into the city.

I don't mean this at the obvious level of being a stage show which involves nuns and Latin hymns (though the quality of the singing in

this production is “heavenly”).

Rather, the hidden themes of this musical are for me all about faith – in oneself, in fellow human beings and in God – and also about the need to work hard at faith.

To the young Maria, finding faith initially seems so simple – she just has to join the nuns and all will be

sorted. But then she discovers herself pulled between the discipline of convent life and the freedom of singing in the mountains. She feels that both are ways to praise and serve God, but they seem at loggerheads with each other.

Then she is sent as governess to a family of seven children. And here

the father, a naval captain, is pulled between his love for his children and his belief that they need discipline.

Maria shows him that faith in his children (and in his own qualities as a father) can help him square the circle between those two. In turn, Maria learns from the Mother Abbess (a stunning performance by Arline Jaftha) that faith in herself and in God's plan for her means that she can “climb every mountain”.

Most religions have a reputation for being full of rules and regulations – whether about the time of prayers, the types of food or the manner of dress. Some find this religious discipline suffocating and (like Maria) seek the freedom to “sing” wherever, whenever and however they want.

But we then discover that good discipline can actually make us more free and more human; utter freedom, without any rules, can often lead to chaos and self-destruction. Finding the right balance between freedom and discipline is important for the prospering of human beings, of families, of organisations and of cities.

The wonderful diversity of Durban provides examples of both ends of the spectrum. On the one hand we have the gated communities and security-controlled malls in which we try to discipline everything: the people, the pets, the plants, even the weather!

On the other, we have informal

settlements and ad hoc markets in which, it seems, there is a freedom verging on anarchy. A healthy city – like a healthy religion or a healthy family – needs to find a way of balancing these two extremes.

And music itself is a great metaphor for this. Music that is pure regulation is precise but dull and uninspiring; music that is uncontrolled freedom can sound cacophonous.

Balance

The best music strikes a balance between the two: you learn the rules so you can then work with them creatively. As Maria teaches the children: “When you know the notes to sing, you can sing most anything!”

The fear of an unregulated city – of becoming Kinshasa or Calcutta – drives many to seek sanctuary behind walls and fences and glass sliding doors. But, as the Reverend Mother points out to Maria, you can't hide from the world inside the walls of a convent, because the world will come and find you.

The Reverend Mother has faith that Maria can not only survive but thrive outside the walls. Maria discovers that for herself, and she then liberates others (in this case the Captain and his family) to find that they do not need to hide behind walls and disciplines.

The ultimate story of *The Sound of Music* (and of music itself) is that when we find the right balance be-

tween freedom and discipline we are well placed to avoid being pulled to any extreme. In the musical, the Nazis symbolise the threat of a bullying discipline, one that puts adherence to rules ahead of all else and thus deprives us of human freedom. Maria and her new family have the courage to resist them, and to face personal sacrifice, because their lives are a harmonious balance.

Those of us who are involved in religions need to provide some degree of discipline; but we also need to have enough faith in people that we are not tempted to bully people with rules that will dehumanise ourselves and others. As Jesus puts it when describing his own Jewish traditions: “God made the Sabbath for humans; He did not make humans for the Sabbath.”

Those of us involved in the city – whether passing or enforcing by-laws or seeking to address problems on the ground – need also to see how rules can be used not to bully people but to liberate them, because ultimately we have faith that they have the potential to become more human.

● Perrier is the director of the Denis Hurley Centre which this week launches the Social Meal Project – a festive initiative to raise money to feed the homeless but also to help diners in restaurants to see the homeless as more human.