

A cross-cultural perspective of HIV, gender and education

By Oloriak Sawade

A key question that participants at the April cross-cultural learning conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, grappled with was: What is the link between education, gender, HIV and culture? One simple answer was that it is behaviour that links together all these issues.

Several definitions of culture emerged. For example, culture was defined as "the behaviour of a group or society – the actions of You and Me". These behaviours can have either positive or negative influence when it comes to HIV and AIDS prevention. It was clear that many cultures encourage practices that marginalise women. An example given was gender inequality, which is rooted in culture. Gender inequality is an important factor in the feminisation of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. It is, therefore, imperative that both men and women regardless of age, religion, ethnic background or socio-economic status, are empowered to foster equality between the sexes.

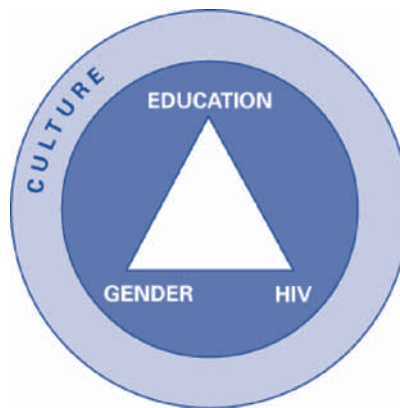
Education is an important tool for teaching gender justice. For example, through a gender just curriculum, students can learn to identify negative gender stereotypes, like only girls should do household chores. Or another example is teaching teachers how to treat both boys and girls in class with the same respect. Education as a tool for preventing HIV can only be effective if practitioners study and understand cultural practices and how they either perpetuate or help prevent the spread of HIV. Practitioners in the areas of gender, HIV and education are realising that when planning and implementing projects,

one needs to recognise all of these issues. We need to be sensitive to the cultural setting in which a project will be implemented.

This article, therefore, seeks to examine some best practices and challenges of linking education, gender and HIV within different cultural settings. Figure 1, below, illustrates the interconnectedness of education, gender and HIV, all of which are influenced by, and influence, culture.

Best practices/successes

The following are some examples of methods that have resulted in successful projects around education, HIV and gender in a cross-cultural perspective.



Edutainment: Educating through entertainment has been used successfully to educate communities on HIV and gender in a way that is culturally-appropriate. Through entertainment, strong messaging can be depersonalised and made easier to digest. Examples of tools for edutainment are theatre, storytelling, soap operas, dramas, sport and play, social media, music, cartoons, poetry, dance and humour.

Being contextually-specific and culturally-relevant is a key component of successful edutainment campaigns. For example, using scenarios in a play or television soap opera that the target group can relate to; using cartoons that look like and speak the language of the target group; using local humour; and using local musicians/pop stars are some of the approaches found to be useful. An example of a successful edutainment project is the Ashreat Al Amal radio project in the Sudan, run by the Population Media Centre of Shelburne. Ashreat Al Amal was a 144-episode entertainment-education radio soap opera, broadcast each week on Radio Omdurman, a station whose signal covers the entire city of Khartoum and its environs. The characters in the series were developed from a Sudanese perspective and stories were set in Sudan (<http://www.populationmedia.org/where/sudan/results>).

Surveys were done to determine the cultural relevance of the radio programme's educational messages that included a more empowered status for women; getting rid of harmful practices such as female circumcision; safe motherhood

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Homem com H
Escuta. Aceita. Cuida.

HORA

A atitude faz a diferença.

Translation: "A Real man. He accepts. He listens. He cares. The attitude makes the difference."

preparation among teachers. With teachers and parents alike, there is also still a significant reluctance to discuss sex and related topics with youth because of the misconception that information itself might stimulate sexual activity. The most recent epidemiological studies by the Brazilian government, however, reinforce the urgency of the situation: in the last 10 years, some of the fastest increasing infection rates have been among young women aged 13 to 19 years and young gays up to 24 years old (Ministry of Health, 2007). These statistics point to the importance of sex education that reaches adolescents and youth before they become sexually active that also addresses gender identities, sexual orientation, and their underlying power dynamics. Providing comprehensive sex education for the youngest Brazilians is essential to preserving the successes of Brazil's prevention response to date. The river's flow must be changed now to ensure that future generations of Brazilians are HIV-free. ■

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and childhood; how to avoid HIV infection; and staying away from drugs and alcohol.

Reinforce messaging

To achieve success, projects offering education in gender and HIV should adopt different approaches. For example, learning about gender and HIV in school is not enough. Practitioners should go beyond formal learning and target medical services, families, media, and peer groups, for example. Young people can be ambassadors of information through peer education, which is a powerful way of imparting knowledge.

Youth are usually more at ease talking with each other on issues of relationships and sex. However, it is important to ensure that messaging around gender and HIV is accurate and age-appropriate. Programmers should monitor and evaluate the accuracy of the knowledge of youth and the information they are receiving in the target areas.

The same applies to the media – they play a crucial role in disseminating messages, but it is vital that the information they transmit is correct. If, for example, the media reinforce negative stereotypes or falsehoods around HIV, then they become part of the problem, not the solution. It is important for practitioners to collaborate with the media to ensure that correct messages are disseminated.

Life skills in classrooms

Instilling ‘gender-just’ ideals and promoting accurate information on HIV and AIDS calls for life skills curricula within formal education. UNICEF defines life skills as a large group of psycho-social and interpersonal skills which can help people make informed decisions, communicate effectively, and develop coping and self-management skills that may help them lead a healthy and productive life.” Integrating life skills into formal education is important.

However, a lesson learned is that life skills lessons should be examination subjects. Many practitioners have reported that teachers ignore teaching life skills if it is not an examinable subject.

Targeting youth

Involving in and out-of-school youth groups has proven to be a suitable way of targeting young people with messages on gender, HIV prevention and awareness.

Youth clubs can use role plays, games and sports to develop interesting ways of equipping the youth with correct information on HIV. Mobile phones and information technologies (IT) can also be used to target the youth with messages on HIV and has the advantage that it can also target out-of-school youth.

One example is a Nigerian project, Learning about Living, by One World UK and Butterfly Works, where youth can text in messages on sex and HIV and get answers texted back by trained health professionals. Uju Oforata, Project Director, Mobile4Good, OneWorld UK,

says, using tools that fascinate young people, such as mobile phones, has proven to be effective in increasing their access to sexual and reproductive health information. She adds: “This empowers them to make informed decisions about their sexual health, thereby improving health outcomes.” Mobile phones and other ICT tools preserve youth anonymity and allow them to get accurate information on their own terms in an environment they are comfortable with, when they need it, she says.

The youth should also play key roles in designing and implementing projects that target them. They can play a crucial part in ensuring relevance and appropriateness when a programme is being developed yet, they are usually left out. The youth should be part of both decision-making and design of youth programmes.

Involving stakeholders

Projects should involve the government, religious and community leaders (including custodians of culture) from project initiation to the final evaluation stages. This approach leads to success because all stakeholders are brought on board. Practitioners have discovered that when they have tried to work with communities without community leaders’ backing or with the government, up-scaling the projects has not been easy.

Challenges faced

Gender, HIV and culture always pose challenges. The following section highlights some of the challenges that practitioners grapple with.

Stakeholder resistance

Some communities refuse to discuss education, gender or/and HIV. An example at the conference

was of a Ugandan community living on the country’s border with Kenya that would threaten people with death if they dared tell them to send their daughters to school. Other communities refuse to discuss HIV because it is too closely linked to sex, which is considered too taboo to be discussed in mixed groups, while some religious groups forbid members to discuss education, HIV and gender.

Poverty/child labour

For millions of parents worldwide, education is still unachievable. Children are needed for labour in and outside home. Also, many children head households, taking care of younger siblings. This is a difficult challenge for governments and civil society. For the latter, it has meant a more holistic approach when striving to achieve education for all in communities. For example, adopting income-generation projects or/and providing the children with food when they attend school, helps their families and at the same time, offers them an opportunity to receive an education.

Access to facilities and resources

It is a big challenge when fostering empowerment, educating people on treatment and prevention of HIV and promoting human rights, when health and education services are not available. It is important to work towards enabling communities to understand their rights and to demand services from governments.

Access to quality health and education services is hinged on better resource allocation. Monitoring programmes that enable communities to understand and demand transparency and accountability in government budgets have been successful. Many civil society organisations find it difficult to obtain regular funding for



A group session during the conference

marginalised communities. Such groups are usually also very expensive to target, due to such issues as poor roads and limited services in their areas.

Harmful cultural practices

A major lesson from the conference was that if we want to change harmful cultural practices, we should not adopt a top-down approach. There needs to be discussion within communities and the recognition and identification of cultural practices that violate human rights or/and result in the spread of HIV. It is through individual and community dialogue that change can happen. However, initiation of this dialogue can be a slow process and is also a challenge to evaluate and monitor.

Moving forward

It was obvious from discussions at the conference that no matter what continent or culture you came from, there were similar challenges when working in education, gender, and HIV. In many cases, a woman from India would be nodding her head (concurring) while listening to a man relate experiences from Uganda.

Bangladesh, Brazil, Burkina Faso, India, Malawi, Namibia, Netherlands, Niger, Nigeria, Palestine, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe were represented during the last two days of the conference.

A vital lesson, which should not be news, was the value of being contextually and culturally-specific. Each project needs to be premised upon an understanding of the local culture and community needs.

Equally important was the need to work with religious, community and government leaders



Nigerian students using the mobile service

in project development and implementation. It is also vital to involve members of the target group, such as youth, in the development of projects.

Culture has many facets and is ever evolving. You and I are responsible for our own culture and with this comes the responsibility to constantly question if and how certain aspects of our culture are good or harmful. It is from such an understanding that we can come up with successful projects that will work towards empowering men and women and ensure that communities keep HIV infection at bay. ■



Girls in Bauchi, Nigeria using a cell phone

Lessons learned

- Life skills lessons should be examination subjects. Many practitioners have reported that teachers ignore teaching life skills if it is not an examinable subject.
- Each project needs to be premised upon an understanding of the local culture and community needs.
- There needs to be discussion within communities and the recognition and identification of cultural practices that violate human rights or/and result in the spread of HIV.

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