Gendered HIV vulnerabilities among trans feminine adults in Uganda

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HIV among transgender women

- Estimated worldwide HIV prevalence 19%
- 49 times the odds of the general population
- Growing literature on social factors that contribute to HIV risk and vulnerability
HIV prevalence data lacking in Africa

from Baral et al. 2013, Worldwide Burden of HIV in Transgender Women, The Lancet Infectious Disease
Multiple pathways to HIV vulnerability

from Poteat et al. 2014, HIV risk and prevention interventions in transgender women sex workers, The Lancet
Uganda Context

• HIV Data (2013)
  • Adult prevalence (15-49 years) 7.4%
  • Rising since low of 6.4 percent in 2006
  • MSM prevalence 13% v. 4% general adult male
  • 1.6 million people living with HIV
    • 1.4 million adults
    • 63,000 deaths in 2013

• Legal and Policy Environment
  • Anti-homosexuality Act signed by president in Feb 2014 and annulled in August 2014
  • Transgender people not mentioned in national multi-sectoral HIV strategic plan

Uganda Context (2)

- Vibrant LGBTI community with multiple civil society organizations and several visible activists

- Transgender Equality Uganda founded in April 2011 by transgender woman

- Film series about the life and loves of a transgender woman aborted due to safety risks in 2014

The Crane Survey - Uganda

- PEPFAR funded collaboration between
  - U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
  - Makerere University School of Public Health
  - AIDS Control program of the Ministry of Health

- HIV bio-behavioral surveillance program since 2008
  - Focus on populations at high risk for HIV: MSM, FSWs, truck drivers, university students, drug users, refugees

- 2008-2009 RDS MSM study (n=295) found 18% identified as female

- In nested qualitative sub-study (n=16) of high risk participants, 5 describe “born to be women”

Trans women recruited for Crane

- **Timeline**
  - Qualitative interview guide developed in 2012
  - Recruitment of trans participants began in 2013
  - Data collection and transcription complete in 2014

- **Eligibility criteria**
  - 18 years or older, assigned male at birth, sex with male in previous 12 months, current feminine gender identity, currently residing in Kampala

- **Methods**
  - Purposive snowball sampling
  - Semi-structured in-depth interviews (n=44)
  - Topics: sexual behavior, alcohol and drug use, gender identity and expression, stigma, violence, access to services
  - Audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, translated to English
  - Topical content analysis by 3 coders in Atlas.ti and NVivo
Recurrent Themes

• Gender diversity
• Multilevel stigma
• Normative Violence
• Commercial and transactional sex
Gender diversity

They are not like gay people because they can change according to the environment but a transgender woman is someone who is totally wants to be what she feels like which the society doesn’t perceive.

Those are the people who today say I dress up like a woman and then tomorrow you find me dressed in a man’s suit. We are non-confined people. I belong to that group.

There are those who may not want to be referred to as transgender women yet they are. They may want to be recognized as males but when they behave like women. … And there are those ones who are not even transgender women but they are just cross dressers. In this way they are real men but want to dress like women and also get married to women. So transgender issues are very complex.
Circumscribed gender expression

In my village I cannot dress like a woman though I can be decent when I am comfortable the way I have dressed. So it depends on the environment. When I am on stage, I can dress like a woman. So I think respecting and conducting yourself in a way the society would expect you is good. This is because I can be a transgender woman and it doesn’t mean putting on like a woman or I can be transgender woman in the way I talk to people. I can be a transgender woman depending on the role I do in bed, and then they describe me. I can even express transgenderism in my house. I apply make-up if my man wants or if my man wants transparent night dresses I can wear them. So it depends on an environment because being a transgender woman and the society we come from how they can perceive this
Multilevel stigma

Are sometimes we may cause stigma by ourselves because there are some people who may want to attract public attention. You will dress just to provoke others. So there is stigma you create yourself and stigma that comes from the community because of their ignorance on whom you are.
Normative violence

. . That happens so many times, people beat us the whole village and you find your friends wear short pants, earrings so people react to such styles under the fear that you may influence their children and to avoid this they can chance away by beating you and you will have no place to go. . .
Sex: transactional and commercial

I have a steady partner and at the same time I also have commercial partners. But I have those partners who are frequent partners. They have my phone number and in case they want to have sex they call me.
Multiple pathways to HIV vulnerability

from Poteat et al. 2014, HIV risk and prevention interventions in transgender women sex workers, The Lancet
Conclusions

• In context of repressed gender expression and normative anti-transgender violence, attention from male sexual partners, including clients, may play a highly salient role in validating the gender identity and self-worth.

• Reliance on sexual partners for gender validation may be connected to taking a receptive sexual role and feeling disempowered to initiative condom use.

• These emerging themes warrant further exploration and suggest potential avenues for HIV prevention interventions for Ugandan transgender women that build on women’s empowerment and community empowerment.
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