

Gendered perceptions of HIV risk among young women and men in a high-HIV-prevalence setting

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Description:

It has become evident that sexual health and HIV-risk behaviours cannot be addressed effectively without paying adequate attention to constructions of gender and sexuality. While the body of literature examining these themes is growing and becoming more nuanced, there is still a significant gap in our understanding of the relationship between gendered sexual identities and vulnerabilities to disease. In particular, few studies have explored how youths themselves perceive this relationship, and how these perceptions may differ among males and females. The purpose of this study was to investigate the differing 'gendered' perceptions of HIV risk among young women and men in a high-HIV-prevalence community in South Africa. Five focus groups were conducted with youths involved with a local school-based HIV-prevention programme in a resource-deprived, peri-urban community in KwaZulu-Natal Province. The data were recorded, transcribed, translated and thematically coded. The authors used a critical social science approach to inform our collaborative analysis. The findings reveal diverse understandings of the relationship between gender and HIV risk. The majority of the participants felt that females are more vulnerable to HIV as a result of gender inequalities; a minority felt that males are more vulnerable because of limited perceived control over their sex drive. Others felt that both sexes are equally vulnerable because 'the virus doesn't have a friend.' The theme of 'responsibility for spreading HIV emerged inductively from the data and also involved multiple understandings of gendered responsibility. Explicitly engaging with youths in targeted discussions on gendered HIV-related vulnerability and responsibility can offer an opportunity to challenge stereotypes and gender inequities, as well as inform interventions.

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