Experiences from the Field: Benue State Site: by Field workers and supervisors; edited by E. Heroy, N. Dike, and R. Olajide

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To me, REACH was a great opportunity to visit different communities for the first time in my life. The most pleasant experience I had during the research was talking to the people of these communities to understand their knowledge and attitudes of HIV/AIDS. Until recently, people in Benue State were reluctant to discuss HIV/AIDS but because of the ongoing awareness campaign put forth by the government, people have become conscious of this epidemic and therefore want to create a public discussion on HIV/AIDS. Above all, I have acquired personal skills in qualitative research, conducting interview surveys and how to use the Kish Grid in sampling procedures. REACH has also built my capacity in analyzing data.--Ugese Jonathan Iornenge

African women with HIV 'coerced into sterilisation'
from guardian.co.uk

Women in Africa are being sterilised without their consent after being told the procedure is a routine treatment for AIDS, a lawsuit will claim. Forty HIV-positive women in Namibia have been made infertile against their will, according to the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW). The group is preparing to sue the Namibian government over at least 15 cases. Campaigners also report coerced sterilisation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia and South Africa, where according to one report a 14-year-old girl was told she could have an abortion only on condition that she agreed to sacrifice her reproductive rights. The ICW has documented cases in Namibia where HIV-positive women minutes from giving birth were encouraged to sign consent forms to prevent them from having more children. Jennifer Gatsi-Mallet, its coordinator in the country, said: "They were in pain, they were told to sign, they didn’t know what it was. They thought that it was part of their HIV treatment...

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"None of them knew what sterilisation was, including those from urban areas, because it was never explained to them.

"After six weeks they went to the family planning centre for birth control pills and were told that it's not necessary: they're sterile. Most of them were very upset. When they went back to the hospital and asked, 'Why did you do this to us?' the answer was: 'You've got HIV'."

Gatsi-Mallet said that some women were now afraid to go to hospital in case they are sterilised, and infertile women were often rejected by their husbands and communities: "In African culture, if you are not able to have children, you are ostracised. It's worse than having HIV."

African women aged between 20 and 34 have a higher prevalence of HIV than any other social group; in South Africa one in three is infected. On average an HIV-positive mother has a one in four risk of transmitting the virus to her child. With the latest antiretroviral drugs, the probability can be cut to less than one in 50. But such medical interventions are underfunded and inaccessible to millions of women across the continent.

The ICW accuses the Namibian government of encouraging state doctors to sterilise HIV-positive women as a means of preventing the spread of the virus. Its request to see the government's official guidelines has been refused. It hopes to bring 15 or more cases to court later this year. A media report from Namibia last week highlighted the plight of Hilma Nendongo. A few weeks after giving birth, she was asked by a nurse: "Oh, did they tell you that you had been sterilised?"

Nendongo, 30, who is HIV-positive, suddenly remembered that hospital staff had told her to sign some papers as she entered the operating room for a caesarean section. "It was a very big shock," she told Canada's Globe and Mail newspaper. "I was very emotional ... I wanted a sister for my three boys, and now I can't have one."

In South Africa, cases are being referred to the Women's Legal Centre with a view to a possible action. Promise Mthembu, a researcher at Witwatersrand University, said coerced sterilisations were happening in "very large areas" of the country. Many patients were forced to undergo the operation as the only means of gaining access to medical services, Mthembu told the Mail & Guardian newspaper.

To access this article online, go to http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/22/africa-hiv-positive-women-sterilisation

KENYA—University students don’t always wrap up—study from plusnews.org

NAIROBI, 25 June 2009 - Kenya's university students - the brightest of their generation - do not consistently use condoms, a new study conducted in Maseno University, in western Kenya, has found.

The knowledge, attitudes and sexual practices study, published in the latest edition of the East African Medical Journal, found that just 15.8 percent of sexually active students said they used condoms every time they had sex, dwarfed by the 22.5 percent who reported never having used a condom. Around 77 percent said they had used protection at one time or other.

"It is notable that although students recognise the importance of condom use, a larger majority are still not using them consistently," the authors said. The survey sampled 500 undergraduates on the university campus.

David Aliwa, a second year student at the University of Nairobi, says he and his girlfriend only used condoms the first two weeks of their sexual relationship. They stopped because they felt they trusted each other not to sleep with other people.

"For me, having sex without a condom is a sign of trust that you have built between you and your lover," he told IRIN/PlusNews. "It is the only way you can prove that you can be trusted and that you trust too." "I want to assume I am the only one she is seeing," he added.

Complacency creeps in when couples become comfortable with each other, says Jennifer Liku, a research associate at the NGO...
"KENYA—University students don’t always wrap up—study" continued, from page 2

Family Health International (FHI) http://www.fhi.org, which is running an HIV/AIDS and reproductive health programme at the University of Nairobi in partnership with I Choose Life Africa http://ichooselife.or.ke, a peer education NGO.

"Just like it happens in the general population, students in relationships experience a false sense of trust and this makes them abandon condom use after a short period in the relationship," she said.

Living dangerously

Brigit Cheruiyot, 22, says her main concern at the University of Nairobi is not sexually transmitted infections, but ensuring that she does not fall pregnant. "We are lucky because there are emergency pills that can prevent pregnancy," she said. "Even if my boyfriend wants us to have sex without a condom, I am not bothered because I can run to the chemist and just pick some for myself."

The study at Maseno University also found that 17 percent of students reported having multiple sexual partners. Some of the reasons given included peer pressure, adventure, drug and substance abuse and increased involvement in transactional sex among students.

"I need somebody to hold my hand when we are on campus and I also need another ‘loaded’ [wealthy] one to provide for my material needs," said Cheruiyot, adding that she does not insist on condom use with either partner in order to ward off the suspicion that she is two-timing them. Aware of the health risks she has been running, Cheruiyot says she is too afraid to take an HIV test.

Need for education outside the curriculum

FHI and I Choose Life Africa are jointly running a programme to sensitis students on HIV/AIDS and reproductive health; according to Liku, educating students on the correct use of emergency contraception could improve condom use among students.

"There is a need to sensitise them to realise that emergency contraception cannot be used as a regular, long-term measure to avoid pregnancy," she said. "Addressing stigma around condom use and promoting it among students and the youth is necessary."

Mike Mutungi, the chief executive officer of I Choose Life Africa, says that condom dispensers on campus should be moved to less public areas in order to encourage more students to use them.

"There should also be an emphasis on promoting condoms both as a contraceptive and as a protection against HIV," he added. Kenya’s national AIDS strategy identifies the youth as a "most at-risk population". The latest United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS country progress report notes that the national condom strategy is being revised to give attention to distribution to youth in tertiary education institutions.

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