

Exchange

ON HIV AND AIDS, SEXUALITY AND GENDER



Introduction

Cross-cultural learners share experiences

By Eliezer F. Wangulu

In April this year, Southern Africa HIV/AIDS Information Dissemination Service (SAfAIDS), the Dutch affiliate of the international Oxfam organisation (Oxfam Novib), the Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation (Hivos) and the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) organised a forum to share experiences on implementing interventions to address HIV and AIDS, sexuality, gender and education.



A plenary session at the conference.

The Cross-cultural Learning Conference from April 12 to 15 was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, and brought together regional, national and community groups from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America. The meeting sought to provide a platform for sharing good practices and examining the role of culture in gender violence and HIV and AIDS

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Editorial



Eliezer F. Wangulu
Managing Editor



Leigh Price, PhD
Guest Editor

Celebrate your cultures safely

Why is it that southern African people are so susceptible to HIV? Most would agree that the answer to this question lies, inter alia, in the nexus of culture, gender, education and HIV. It was against the background of this question and its plausible answers that a group of organisations convened a conference for practitioners from a wide spectrum of cultural settings across the global South to share experiences on implementing interventions to address HIV and AIDS, sexuality, gender and education.

The Cross-cultural Learning Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, drew participants from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America. The organisers' selection of the conference theme was informed by the fact that culture has an influence on any intervention and that interventions are undertaken within cultural settings.

There were several definitions of culture at the meeting. One that stood out in particular was the definition of culture as the behaviour of a group or society – the actions of You and Me. Culture has many facets; it is not static but dynamic. It makes us who we are, but there remains the potential within culture for us to make it, too. The arrow goes both ways. Culture determines us; but we also determine culture. You and I are, therefore, responsible for our own culture and with this comes the responsibility of constantly interrogating it to identify how certain aspects of it may be useful or harmful.

Another definition of culture given at the conference, originally devised by UNESCO, was: ways of living, working and playing. Since culture is the way we live, work and play, it will either predispose us to HIV infection or keep the virus at bay. In this edition, you will find well-articulated arguments and innovative recommendations on how to foster a gender-equitable society that creates ample room for you and me to live, work and play, within our cultures, but in a safe and responsible way.

We need to enjoy our cultures, without worrying about contracting HIV. We also need to remember that we cannot use culture as an excuse for denying others their rights. In a context of HIV, where the fear of it lies heavily on us, many may have forgotten how to have fun, or may think that they must leave behind their culture in order to remain HIV free. We hope that, among other things, you will find ideas in these articles that will help you to celebrate your culture safely, without infringing on the rights of others! ■

prevention and mitigation among participants working in training, home-based care, education, advocacy, lobbying and information production and dissemination, among others.

The participants, who included traditional leaders, researchers, community workers, programme implementers, government representatives, development agencies, policy makers, NGO representatives, media and donors, hoped that at the end of the meeting, they would be equipped with knowledge, skills and tools for sharing within their organisations in order to improve their work. The first two days of the conference were specifically on the HIV and culture confluence with specific focus on southern Africa. Experiences from SAfAIDS' Changing the River's Flow programme were shared. The last two days examined the intersection between HIV and AIDS, gender and education from a global perspective.

SAfAIDS felt that despite having worked towards gender equity in Africa for years, many programme implementers and policy makers still lacked in-depth understanding and appreciation of traditional and cultural practices and their link to HIV. "As a result, they use a 'blaming' approach which propagates a negative view of African cultures and has led to communities building up walls of resistance — effectively slowing down progress towards the achievement of women's rights and HIV prevention," the SAfAIDS Executive Director, Mrs Lois Chingandu said.

"We realised that there are better ways of working within the realm of cultures involving the custodians of these cultures. Capacity building of communities to support them to

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Lois Chingandu during an evening session at the conference.

Recommendations from the conference

The conference recommendations are summarised below:

1. Consider the meaning of language:

It is important to be sensitive to the meaning and ideologies conveyed through language. Programme implementers need to consider the use of vernacular language when developing materials and implementing programmes.

There is also a need to open discussions with communities on the interpretation and meaning of specific 'language' with respect to HIV and gender.

2. Civil society, governments and media have a shared responsibility in HIV communication:

Civil society and policy makers need to recognise the role that media plays in socio-cultural discourse related to HIV and gender and involve media in processes. They need to hold media accountable, and also invest in ensuring that media are well capacitated to understand issues.

3. Aim to 'SAVE': There is a need to promote SAVE as a strategy for HIV prevention - more holistic and

responsive to the socio-cultural context in which people live to 'close the tap' on new infections. SAVE stands for:

S: Safer practices (A+B+C+PMTCT+ safe blood +safe injections, safe circumcision etc).

A: Access to treatment (including sexually-transmitted infections, opportunistic infections, antiretroviral therapy and to nutrition).

V: Voluntary, routine and stigma-free HIV counselling and testing.

E: Empowerment of children, youth, women, men, families, communities and nations living with or vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. SAVE was coined by the International Network of Religious Leaders Living and Personally Affected by HIV and AIDS (INERELA+).

4. Respect value of culture in HIV and gender programmes by ensuring respect for the capacity of communities to address negative cultural practices; encourage

positive/protective cultural practices and discourage cultural practices which drive HIV transmission and/or promote gender inequality.

5. Education must be offered by various stakeholders and through various approaches such as schools, medical services, family, media and peers to reinforce the message of gender, education and HIV. Young people should be involved in imparting this education but they must be empowered to be able to impart accurate information in an effective way.

6. While working on gender, involvement of boys is critical. It is important to emphasise benefits of equality for boys and girls because the goal is not to change/reverse gender norms, but to promote critical awareness about power dynamics often embedded in gender norms.

The carnivalesque factor in southern African HIV pandemic

By Leigh Price



A busy session at the conference.

We tend to link different cultures with different parts of the world. However, different cultures may develop in the same society, in overlapping geographical space. Some of the most interesting cultures are those found among marginal groups, such as within youth and people with different sexual orientations. I have termed these cultures carnivalesque and I argue that they have important similarities with southern African cultures. Considering them together provides insights that could improve our ability to respond to the HIV crisis.

The definition of 'carnavalesque' is: marked by an often mocking or satirical challenge to authority and the traditional social hierarchy (Merriam-Webster online, 18 May 2010).

The word was first used by Bhaktin and Kristeva (in Bove, 2006) to refer to theatrical challenges to the status quo. In this article, the definition of 'carnavalesque' has been broadened to include a much wider variety of challenges than the theatrical. An aspect of 'carnavalesque' that evokes colourful and lively behaviours, which are simultaneously celebratory or pleasurable and challenging of the status quo has been retained¹. For example, gay culture, even in its popular name, captures the essence of the carnivalesque.

Much of African culture, but more specifically, southern African culture, could also be considered carnivalesque because it is often depicted as colourful, unique and if not always actively revolutionary, then at least indifferent to authority and rules to varying degrees.

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understand how culture is linked to gender inequality, HIV and focusing only on how to address the negative aspect of cultures while promoting the positive ones," Mrs Chingandu added.

Oxfam Novib supported the conference through the Innovation Fund that initiates and supports original projects, which address education, gender and HIV awareness. The fund, which has supported almost 100 projects worldwide, is concerned that girls and women have relatively limited access to quality essential services such as education and health.

This leads to high rates of HIV-infection, illiteracy and discrimination among them. KIT supported the conference via the Exchange magazine, which is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Sharing conference outcomes

A number of information products shall be developed from the conference to facilitate wider sharing of the event's outcomes. KIT is dedicating the June 2010 (this) edition of *Exchange on HIV and AIDS, Sexuality and Gender* quarterly magazine and its Portuguese version, *Intercambio*, to the conference outcomes.

Also, a conference report compiled by SAfAIDS will be widely shared among partners, participants and stakeholders.

A book capturing key issues emerging from the conference will be jointly published in English and French by SAfAIDS, Oxfam Novib, Hivos and the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), while a documentary on the conference shall also be produced and shared.

Those interested in the conference proceedings should contact Ms Maserame Mojapele, SAfAIDS Programme Manager at: Maserame@safaid.net.

Eliezer F. Wangulu

Managing Editor

Exchange on HIV and AIDS, Sexuality and Gender

Correspondence

KIT Information & Library Services
 Royal Tropical Institute
 Mauritskade 63 [1092 AD]
 P.O. Box 95001, 1090 HA Amsterdam
 The Netherlands
 Tel: 31 (0)20 5688428
 E-mail: e.wangulu@kit.nl
www.kit.nl