



2

Issue
in Focus

Male Sexuality in the Context of Socio- Economic Change in Rural and Urban East Africa

By Margrethe
Silberschmidt, PhD,
Associate Professor, the
Institute of Public
Health, Department of
Women and Gender
Research in Medicine,
University of
Copenhagen



*A man changes his infant's diaper. Thanks to community education, men are now able to perform tasks once considered feminine.
Credit: © 2003 RUINET, Courtesy of Photoshare*

Introduction

The AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa has thrust sexuality, sexual practices and sexual behaviour into the spotlight as a major public health issue. However, although sexual and reproductive health behaviour in Sub-Saharan Africa is drawing increasing attention there is an inadequate understanding of the structures and processes influencing sexuality and sexual behaviour in general and male sexuality and male sexual behaviour in particular ¹

Research by this author in rural and urban East Africa suggests that HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns have missed the point by neglecting the above issues and concentrating their efforts on the promotion of ABC (Abstinence, Be faithful, Condom use), women's empowerment and women's ability to negotiate safe sex. The need for a much wider understanding of the dynamics of HIV/transmission, sexuality and sexual behaviour in a Sub Saharan context has become increasingly crucial as a direct consequence of the escalating HIV/AIDS epidemic [1].

Men Disempowered

Over the past three decades, it has been widely documented that socio-economic change and breakdown of traditional social institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa have left women in a disadvantaged and vulnerable situation

with increasing burdens and responsibilities [2]. In the development debate, though, and also in research, the situation of men and particularly the changes to which this situation has been subjected during the process of socio-economic development in the twentieth century has been seriously neglected - contrary to that of women.

Based on my research, this paper pursues the following arguments: Socio-economic change in rural and urban East Africa has increasingly disempowered men. This has resulted in men's lack of social value and self-esteem. With unemployment and incapable of fulfilling social roles and expectations, male identity and self-esteem have become increasingly linked to sexuality and sexual manifestations. Multi-partnered sexual relationships and sexually aggressive behaviour seem to have become essential to strengthen masculinity and self-esteem. Linked to this, this paper addresses the following issue: To what extent are men in East Africa who are faced with marginalisation, lack of social value and disempowerment at all motivated for responsible sexual behaviour and HIV/AIDS prevention?

Research

My research - mainly based on qualitative interviews with both men and women, case studies, life histories and focus group discussions - was



carried out, first, in rural and then in urban East Africa. Focus for the research was on changing gender roles and relations as well as sexual and reproductive health and behaviour by men and women.

Research in Kisii (Kenya) was carried out at different periods from the mid 1980's to the mid 1990s [3, 4, 5]. All interviewees belonged to the Gusii ethnic group in South-western Kenya. The vast majority had not completed primary education. The research in urban Tanzania took place during a one year field study (1996-97) in three low income squatter areas of Dar es Salaam: Mabibo, Tandale and Vingunguti/Buguruni. The majority of interviewees had a primary education.

Findings from Kisii.

Kisii is one of Kenya's most productive cash and food crop regions. HIV/AIDS infections are alarming with more women than men infected [6]. Unemployment is a serious problem, because land is not enough to secure survival. Before colonial rule men were warriors, cattle herders and took active part in political decisions. Cattle represented wealth and power, and constituted the major part of bride price. Through marriage a man controlled his wife's sexual and reproductive powers. Masculinity was closely linked to self-control and dignity.

Men as Breadwinners

Colonial rule introduced taxation, as men were recruited to construct railroads and urban centres and many women were left for years to manage the farms. After World War II, a shift towards production of industrial goods began. By the 1940's and 50's the household had become dependent on men's financial aid. Matching these changes, men got a new social and ideological role - that of a breadwinner. With time, the colonial power's introduction of migrant work initiated a shift from men's dominance and responsibility as head of household to a pattern of absent tax-paying men with responsibility towards

Multi-partnered sexual relationships and sexually aggressive behaviour seem to have become essential to strengthen masculinity and self-esteem.

the state rather than the household. The ideology of male breadwinner and household head survived, however.

New Values

Over the years new values were created - meshing with old ones. Men's difficulties in providing financial assistance to the household undermined their social roles and their social value. The disappearance of cattle camps had a negative effect on bride price payment. 'Unions' with no transfer of bride price increasingly substituted marriage. This made women's access to their means of production insecure. Therefore, women had to learn how to make ends meet - without any assistance from their husbands. And they did. Male control over women weakened.

In my interviews in Kisii, recurrent comments from the women were the following: 'a woman is better off without a husband'; 'if only he was dead'; 'men are so delicate; they break so easily'; 'our sons have nobody to take as a model'. Men interviewed would immediately emphasise their status as head of household and right to correct (= beat) an obstinate wife. However, typical comments by men (and also women) were that 'men drink to drown their problems - and they are many', 'men drink and are rude to women to forget that they cannot provide the family with blankets'.

New Social Roles

The intensification of their roles and responsibilities made women

increasingly aware of their important positions in the household. Thus, over the past several decades, Kisii has experienced an ongoing process of fundamental socio-economic transformation with escalating gender antagonism and domestic violence. Men's position as heads of household is challenged, and some women see men just as 'figureheads' of household. However, land is still owned by men, and most men consider themselves farmers [5].

Findings from Dar es Salaam

About thirty percent of the sexually active population is HIV positive [6]. In the 1980's large numbers of workers lost their jobs, and thus, only a small fraction is employed in the formal sector. Salaries, though, are far from enough to support a family. Thus, the informal sector has become overcrowded with myriads of market vendors - men and women. Like in Kisii, the ideology of men as breadwinners is forcefully alive. Stereotyped notions shared by both genders are that 'a man should be the head of his family'; 'he should provide a house (and land), pay school fees and clothes for wife and children'. Such a man has social value and respect.

However, a majority of men suffer the same fate as those in Kisii: they cannot fulfill expectations and withdraw from household responsibilities. Even if many men use enormous amounts of energy and ingenuity to get an income, it is well known that it can only feed a family for a few days.

Consequently, men cannot fulfill their breadwinning role, and men's status as head of household is seriously challenged. However, when asked about their 'status' in the household it was obvious to all 53 men interviewed that they were the 'born' head of households. That was a 'God given' fact. Just like 'women are like children and should be guided by men'. 'Men are the lions, and women are the sheep'. While most men, therefore,

According to men in Kisii 'a man needs at least three wives: one to bear his children, one to work and one for pleasure'.



had a negative attitude towards women's activities most men and women interviewed agreed families cannot survive unless women contribute income.

Male Sexual Behaviour

Recurrent observations by men as well as women interviewed were that 'a real man needs to demonstrate that he can handle more than one partner' – especially when a man needs to strengthen his self-esteem. According to men in Kisii 'a man needs at least three wives: one to bear his children, one to work and one for pleasure'. However, most men had not even been able to provide a bride price for their present 'wife'².

Hurt Pride

According to my male and female informants 'when husbands are crushed down economically they suffer from feelings of inferiority'; 'a man's ego is hurt'. As a result, 'men lose their vigour and women take over'. And 'when a man has lost control over his household and is humiliated by his wife his pride is hurt'. In this situation, there was general agreement among men interviewed that in order to 'build up our pride' and 'boost our ego', we men need to 'relax' and to be 'comforted'. Relaxation and comfort are provided by 'extra-marital' partners.

'Outside Partners'

Men as well as women also agreed that it is impossible for a man to stick to one partner, only. Men have a constant need for sex – contrary to women. 'Outside partners' can be more or less casual partners, more permanent partners or 'nyamba ndogos' (small houses) as they were referred to in Dar es Salaam. These latter partners are seen as serious threats by 'wives', as husbands tend to leave whatever little income they may have to the nyamba ndogos and not to their own household.

Safer Sex

Even if condoms are now more widely

referred to and also used, in particular in the urban contexts, interviews also clearly demonstrate that when a man has had intercourse with a new partner a few times, that person is no longer a stranger, and condom use is stopped. It is a well-known fact that it is extremely difficult – not to say almost impossible – for women (married women in particular) to negotiate safer sex measures – even if women in many cases have the upper hand in the household. Women interviewed would all agree that to ask the husband to use a condom – when they know that he has been with other partners – would be to disclose their disrespect too openly. It was well-known that many nyamba ndogos gave comfort to more than one man because the financial assistance from one man was not enough to support her household. However, as relations with these 'outside' partners were considered permanent, condom use was not an issue.

Low Risk Assessment

Risk assessment in terms of contracting a STD or HIV infection is low among the men interviewed. A general attitude by men interviewed – who admitted having several partners at the same time, and who were well aware of the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS – was 'why should it hit me?' Other reasons given were that 'condoms hurt a man's ego'; 'semen is valuable and should not be thrown away'.

Data from my current research

To what extent are men willing to let go of 'hegemonic' masculinities? To what extent are disempowered men in East Africa motivated for responsible sexual behaviour...?

underline a surprising discrepancy between 'say' and 'do'. Men in Dar es Salaam and particularly in Kampala are well aware of the HIV/AIDS threat and how to avoid it. Nevertheless, risk is seriously neglected and priority is given to pleasure and performance. Condoms, men complain, spoil the pleasure not only of men but also of women (and women agree). Moreover, condoms reduce performance and constrain a man's number of 'goals'. The number of goals that a man can score especially with an extramarital partner is very significant in order to show his strength – and reputation.

Authority Threatened

Although, the main axis of patriarchal power is still the overall subordination of women and dominance of men – my research from both Kisii and Dar es Salaam clearly indicate that the deteriorating material conditions have seriously undermined the normative order of patriarchy in both Kisii and Dar es Salaam. While men are in power structurally and in theory, men have become increasingly marginalised and disempowered in practice. While men do have a relative freedom, compared to women, particularly in sexual matters, lack of access to income earning opportunities has made men's role as heads of household and breadwinners a precarious one. Being reduced to 'figureheads' of households, men's authority has come under threat and so has their identity and sense of self-esteem.

Masculinities and Sexuality

While, on the one hand, masculinity – almost world-wide – has increasingly become constructed from men's wage-earning powers, on the other – and more fundamentally – notions of masculinity are also closely associated to male virility, sexuality and sexual performance [7, 8, 9]. Men (and also women) in both Kisii and Dar es Salaam would certainly agree.

Women interviewed would all agree that to ask the husband to use a condom – when they know that he has been with other partners – would be to disclose their disrespect too openly.



The same observations are made in many other parts of the world [10].

However, as has also been widely observed, whereas for men there is a strong correspondence between masculinity, sexual activity and status, this is the inverse for the female system [7, 8, 11]. In fact, research findings from both Kisii and Dar es Salaam clearly indicate that while *sexual potency* gives social potency, value and self-esteem to men, *sexual modesty* gives social value to women - but certainly not to men [5, 12].

Men in Kisii as well as Dar es Salaam are clearly aware of their precarious position. While they might perhaps admit this to the researcher during in depth discussions - as was often the case - this was certainly not what they were prepared to admit or even discuss with their wives/partners. For men it was important to insist on their privileges, their position as head of household and to demonstrate their control over women. Many did so by using violence.

Consequently, with masculinity and the phallus being at stake, and with men benefiting from inherited definitions of femininity and masculinity the questions raised at the beginning of this article become relevant: To what extent are men willing to let go of 'hegemonic' masculinities? To what extent are disempowered men in East Africa motivated for responsible sexual behaviour and HIV/AIDS prevention?

Conclusions

In order to understand men, masculinity and sexuality in rural and urban East Africa it has been necessary to locate men and women within the complex and changing social, political and economic systems. Men in my research studies are perfectly aware that they are in a process of losing control over women. In this situation, and faced with increasing demands for women's empowerment and rights, including their sexual and reproductive rights,

most men do not welcome the traditional safe sex messages, including 'sticking to one partner'. Therefore, strategies to empower women and improve their deteriorating sexual and reproductive health are only meaningful if they are balanced against efforts to deal with men's increasingly frustrating situation. This, I have argued, is a major development issue that has so far remained unnoticed both on the development agenda and also in the existing efforts to 'involve men'.

Notes

1. Before the ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development) in Cairo, September 1994, men, their role as (responsible) partners and also their own sexual and reproductive health needs had not received much attention - in spite of men's prominent sexual and reproductive role. The final ICPD document (1994), as well as documents from follow-on meetings (Cairo + 5) clearly recognise the need to address and involve men, in order to improve women's reproductive health. Operational attempts, though, to reach men are very few, and have not yet been given high priority by local governments, donor agencies, NGO's, or by researchers.
2. In the 1970s, 33 percent of the households in Kisii were still polygamous (Population and Development in Kenya, 1980). Survey findings in 1986 by this author indicate that less than 10 percent lived in polygamous unions.

References

1. UNAIDS (2001). Regional statistics end of 2001.
2. Boserup, E. (1980). African women in production and household. In Presvelou, Cloi and Saskia Spijkers-Zwart (eds.). *The Household, Women and Agricultural Development*. Wageningen: H.

Weenman & B. V. Zonen.

3. Silberschmidt, M. (1991) *Rethinking Men and Gender Relations. An Investigation of Men, Their Changing Roles Within the Household, and the Implications for Gender Relations in Kisii District, Kenya*. CDR Research Report. No.16. Copenhagen.
4. Silberschmidt, M. (1992). Have men become the weaker sex? Changing life situations in Kisii District, Kenya. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30 (2) 237-253.
5. Silberschmidt, M. (1999). *Women Forget That Men Are the Masters*. Nordic Africa Institute. Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell International.
6. UNAIDS Update (2002).
7. Cornell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press
8. Bourdieu, P. (1998). *La Domination Masculine*. Paris: Editions Seuil.
9. Morell, R., ed. (2001). *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. University of Natal Press & Zed Press.
10. Lindisfarne, N. (1994). Variant masculinities, variant virginites. Rethinking honour and shame. In *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*, ed. A. Cornwall and N. Lindisfarne, pp. 82-96. London: Routledge.
11. Ortner, S. B. and Whitehead, H. (1989). Introduction: Accounting for sexual meanings. In *Sexual Meanings. The cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. S.B. Ortner and H. Whitehead, pp. 1-27. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
12. Silberschmidt, M. (2001). Dispowerment of men in rural and urban East Africa: Implications for male identity and sexual behaviour. *World Development* 29 (2), 657-671.