Gender power relations and the HIV/AIDS crisis in Botswana: some food for thought

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Gender inequality has been identified as a central feature of HIV infection rates among women in Africa. In Botswana recent studies have suggested that strategies for information, education and communication (IEC) about HIV/AIDS should be targeted at the differential needs and experiences of gender and age. There is little evidence to show that current IEC strategies are specifically addressing inequality issues within those experiences. There is evidence that current rates of infection are not decreasing and behavioural change is slow. This paper offers a theoretical analysis of gender inequality in terms of power and discourse. It suggests that such a theoretical perspective of gender inequality within Botswana's cultural context may provide a framework that can strengthen IEC objectives to stimulate behavioural change.

Introduction

Exploration of attitudes towards HIV/AIDS, focusing on the culturally specific circumstances of Botswana has been the subject of increasing research in recent years. Sentinel surveys and other studies conducted amongst pregnant women and people registering with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) reveal that women are more vulnerable to infection and that gender inequality is a significant reason for higher infection rates among women (UNDP 2000). This paper offers a theoretical analysis of gender that might be used to explain the gender power dynamics in Botswana's highly complex family system. The theoretical analysis is applied to specific contexts in two recent publications (Strebel 1994 and Mookodi 2000) as an invitation to stimulate further discussion.

The paper begins with a brief overview of some of the gender-specific beliefs and practices in Botswana that are perceived as underlying some resistances to behavioural change in relation to HIV infections. This is followed by an exposition of feminist post-structuralism and its applicability to understanding gendered social relations in Botswana. Central to the paper's analysis is the argument that a deeper understanding of how power differentials are maintained within Botswana's culturally-based gendered social relations can provide a tool for challenging the inequalities that women experience in sexual relations.

Gender inequalities and HIV/AIDS in Botswana

The UNDP (2000: 4) states that gender inequality is the main cause of higher infection amongst women in Botswana. The reasons cited in relevant literature are premised around the concept that women are traditionally subject to male decision making in the home and this is perpetuated throughout all private or concensual relationships. Women's position of inequality is embedded in Family Law that denies women equal access to property or important financial transactions (Botswana Society 1993). Adultery is regarded as a female crime only, and as Mookodi (2000) states: 'There are defined power relations within consensual relationships and...women occupy subordinate positions in relation to their consensual partners' (p.12). These defined relationships mean that women have little or no say in matters such as sexual behaviour. They are not in a position to defend their position on safe sex and if their husband works away from home they are vulnerable to any infection he may have picked up from casual sex relations. Women's lack of control over matters in relation to sex can result in abuse, violence, or forced sex in or outside of consensual

relationships. It is common, for instance for men to forcibly or otherwise impregnate young teenage girls and women. This can mean that women are prone to infection from older men at a very early age (Stegling 2000).

The extent of women's engagement in the commercial sex trade is also attributed to their difficulties in gaining adequate alternative employment. But in this most vulnerable of professions they are still without the ability to insist on safe sex practices (Stegling 2000). The above circumstances mean that multiple sex contacts are common. In addition there is strong pressure on young women to demonstrate their reproductive abilities; expectations for several children within families are high and unprotected sex is the norm (Stegling 2000). Power relations between men and women and between generations are therefore a significant and complex issue that must be addressed in IEC strategies for behavioural change: 'The process of negotiation between men and women is often not about sex but about power' (Adeokun 1994: 33).

Against this background of normative behaviours are a number of traditional beliefs and taboos that perpetuate a gendered distribution of blame and responsibility towards undesirable outcomes of sexual relations. Some examples of such taboos are manifested in perceptions about female bodies. On the one hand it is understood that giving birth cleanses the womb and this understanding contributes greatly to the prevalence of teenage pregnancies. On the other hand blood and semen are seen as pollutants meeting in female bodies so that the spread of HIV is often attributed to women. Moreover the condom is seen as a white people's thing (Botswana National Council for UNESCO 1999: 79). These issues can be explained by identifying conceptions of gender as socially constructed and reproduced over time through relations of power and enacted out in behaviours, attitudes and beliefs that have become so internalized that they are now simply common sense. Resistance, in the name of culture, to attempts to overturn the status quo must be understood in this context.

Gender power and discourse

> Sexuality is socially constructed and historically located within a matrix of intersecting social, economic and cultural factors....Male sexuality and power need to come under the spotlight if the analysis is to reflect the complexity of issues involved and generate realistic and effective solutions (Strebel 1994: 36; 41).

Most theoretical analyses of gender share three core concepts: woman, experience and personal politics (Grant 1993). Western literature on gender is embedded in a range of feminist positions that have become increasingly blurred during the 1990s and influenced by a number of black writers (bel hooks 1991, 1994; Brah 1996; Mirza 1997 for instance). A brief exposition of some of the evolutionary phases of feminisms, is useful, however, to explain the contribution of a poststructuralist position to the present problem. For example both radical and socialist feminisms provide us with a concept of male domination over women. Whilst radical feminisms emphasise the unitary concept of womanhood as distinct from masculinity, socialist feminisms explore ways in which gender has been socially, rather than biologically constructed throughout history (Weedon 1987, Grant 1993). Socialist positions recognize the pluralist influence of race and class on gender relations and acknowledge there are different sources of oppression on and between women. They are linked, however, to Marxist perspectives on reproduction as a class based concept and have been criticized for not taking account of how patriarchy exists in the first place. The issue of power as a central feature of oppression is inadequately addressed within this perspective, it is argued. The post-structuralist position shifts the debate away from

pluralism and onto the relationship between language and power, with an emphasis on language as the site of struggle for meaning (Weedon 1987). This perspective facilitates a more political analysis of difference and how women are positioned—as women—throughout history. Feminisms therefore, share a common concern about masculine constructions of gender and their power relationship with women. Feminist post-structuralism combines these concerns with an analysis of the relationship between discourse, knowledge and power. The notion of 'discourse' includes the interactive application of language, beliefs and societal systems to everyday life. This provides a way of explaining different, gender specific, ways of behaving and knowing.

A particular feature of post-structuralism is the exploration of how history is produced and the 'how' of power; how the process of making history is portrayed and understood (historicity); how discourses interact within different power relations to produce shifting identities and meanings. In the process dominant discourses create notions of difference, and isolate certain groups as 'other than' the dominant group. As a result individuals are caught between acting as knowing 'subjects' and acting unconsciously as individuals who are socially conditioned (Jones 1997); while power relations authorize certain ways of knowing and privilege certain statements as truths (Foucault 1980, Preece 1999). Applied in the Botswana context these concepts can be seen in the way Family Law inscribes women as less than and other than men with regard to property ownership. The cultural practices that perceive men as decision makers and define women as perpetual children when it comes to ownership are reproduced over time. Both men and women are socially conditioned to believing and knowing that they hold certain positions in society. In spite of these reproduced messages, however, there are indications that identities and meanings shift throughout time. For instance, Mookodi (2000) has pointed out that patterns of wage employment and the creation of the male breadwinner ideology in Botswana were significantly influenced by colonization, labour migration and introduction of capitalist wage labour systems. But cultural norms and knowing subjects have now incorporated these patterns of male authority over women through economic structures that were hitherto not so defined.

From these observations we can see that power is not a static concept, though its discourses may be reproduced over time to give the appearance of a fixed status quo. Power can be reproductive and positive and it can be interactive. Power relations co-exist with other power relations. It is the combination of different axes of power that create the conditions for domination (Foucault 1980). So, for instance, legal structures may compete or collude with cultural practices and women may resist or collude with social expectations, while the education system may perpetuate or introduce new discourses. The interaction between these sources of power and discourse provides the possibility for new ideas, new behaviours or a continuation of existing ones. Individuals caught within these discourses may choose to follow certain courses of action, or may feel disempowered by pressure from competing and more dominant discourses. So the potentially unpredictable combination of power relations and discourse interactions (as the mechanisms for power) renders the possibility of resistance and the possibility of changing power relationships. Dominant agents of power (such as families and institutions) and their discourses are therefore constantly under threat—hence the intricate networks of social systems and discursive practices, such as rules and internalized rationalities, that are in place to sustain the status quo. Knowledge itself can become a medium of power that excludes resistance, difference or change, by virtue of its existing authority status.

The systems of discourses and relationships of power, therefore are multiple—they contribute to the creation and sustaining of culture, truth, reason, common sense assumptions, the construction and reconstruction of history, the identification of some and

the subjugation of others. The way discourses function explains how power is in operation at any one time and renders the possibility (albeit fragile) for intervention, resistance and change.

To summarise, post-structuralism claims that identities are multiple and fragmented. The subject (individual) is de-centred—both as an individual who is 'socially produced' and as someone who is 'multiply positioned' by different discourses (Jones 1997: 263). Knowledge is contextualised by a constantly changing set of experiences. The extent to which people define their own truth or how far they resist oppression of themselves, depends on how they relate to dominant power structures. The way in which certain dominant discourses manipulate or silence or camouflage certain forms of knowledge, or ways of seeing the world, are now well documented, particularly across different cultures (Kobayashi 1994, Murray Thomas 1994, Bhabha 1984). However, the extent to which individuals *within* cultures can explore and identify oppression or inequality is much more difficult because it is hard to challenge our own common sense assumptions and realities. One way of doing this, it might be argued, is to demonstrate the process of domination and historicity of discourses and their contribution to cultural change where the recipient has already identified their own oppression. Racism is more obvious to a black person, for example, than a white person. Marginalisation is understood more easily by minority cultures within a nation than by the dominant culture. Once the application of oppression is understood in one context, then it is easier to understand in additional contexts. In this way discourses are expanded and new power relations emerge as individuals undertake new forms of agency or resistance to the status quo. An example of this latter situation is identified by Mookodi (2000) in her description of the complexities of understanding the status of female household heads in Botswana.

Applying the theory to the Botswana context

Mookodi deconstructs the dominant discourse of census and household surveys in their definition of the Botswana household. She notes that surveys reveal that 'almost half of all households in the country are headed by women' (p.2). Yet, she states, these configurations of household render invisible the reality of household organization and gender relations within households. A Botswana household is multifaceted and not necessarily defined according to geographical boundaries. Men may not be living directly in the household to which they are contributing; women may not necessarily be making important financial or other decisions within households that they head because of social and cultural norms which define women as incapable of making such decisions and expect them to defer to other men in the extended family. Therefore, her own survey revealed that women would culturally interpret 'head of the household', *tlhogo ya lolwapa,* to mean that there existed a man who was ultimately in charge of the extended family infrastructure. The words by themselves were decontextualised in national surveys, however. They would be understood to mean the person living as the main wage earner, in a physical building's immediate geographical boundaries, was the head of the household. This would mask the complexities of decision making within gendered social relations of the extended family. The social reality of family power relations would therefore override this narrower definition of head. The implications for this misrepresentation of reality would be that the gender power issues associated with family status are not addressed in public policy. The public notion that women are increasingly heads of households would present a different kind of truth from the one lived out privately by women.

In spite of this reality Mookodi does identify another dynamic amongst single Batswana women. This makes the link between their economic status and increase in autonomy. Both Adeokun (1994) and Mookodi (2000) note that women have achieved relatively more

power and autonomy in proportion to their economic and educational status. In this respect the power relationship between men and women can be perceived as changing over time, albeit imperceptibly:

> In the context of change, a large proportion of single mothers maintain independent households on their own, and are the key providers and decision-makers within these domestic domains with little or no support from extended family and fathers of children (Mookodi 2000: 7).

The historicised rationale, of women's traditional inability to make decisions, then, is already being counterbalanced by a new form of agency amongst women. Some single mothers are positioning themselves differently because their economic status has given them the space to manipulate a different balance of power between the old and new discourses associated with gender.

Similar arguments can be applied to the way gender is addressed in AIDS awareness literature and its efforts to persuade women to take the initiative in preventing the spread of AIDS. A brief analysis of Strebel's account of the incongruities in HIV prevention measures illustrates both the difficulties and potential for analyzing current information, education and communication (IEC) discourses in a way that exposes gender bias.

Applying the theory to an HIV/AIDS awareness context

The issue of decision-making is central to the problem of gender power within the HIV/AIDS crisis. Strebel (1994) points out the contradictory nature of dominant discourses which on the one hand define men as decision makers but on the other hand blame women for the spread of HIV/AIDS. She suggests, for instance, that current AIDS IEC advice to use condoms is predicated on a male dominated concept of sex and a relationship where women are required to accommodate, rather than influence, particular sexual behaviours. She states that the IEC message:

> Upholds the prevailing notion of a male sex drive for which men are not responsible, but which women are expected to curb...women are paradoxically required to exert control and make choices in a domain over which they have notoriously little control and few options (p.36).

In other words HIV prevention strategies are being defined in ways that protect male forms of sexual relations while enabling women to take the blame for not protecting themselves sufficiently from the outcome. Strebel points out that the power dynamics could be changed if the discourse itself changed to promote and legitimize alternative sexual practices. She proposes that IEC awareness strategies need to isolate the issue of male sexuality and power as a collective problem in order to highlight the complexity of gender relations. Only then can realistic and effective solutions to the spread of infection be found.

Conclusion

These brief examples offer some insight into the way dominant discourses create a gendered image of society. In this society male reason is legitimised to construe one picture of reality. Within that publicly acclaimed profile women live a different reality. Their voices and arguments are silenced—rationalized out—so that strategies for women's empowerment are suppressed. It is only when the dominant rationalities themselves are deconstructed in the light of other forms of reason, and then reconstructed, that we can present new arguments to solve intractable problems.

An HIV/AIDS IEC strategy which seeks to undermine existing discourses that sustain themselves in the name of culture and normality, would, of course, require clearly defined analyses with the opportunity to present alternative rationalities. But the evidence of

economically sustainable households amongst Botswana's single mothers suggests that resistance and change is possible.

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