

## **THE ROLE OF AIDS AWARENESS ON PARTNERSHIP FORMATION IN RURAL SOUTHWEST UGANDA**

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### **Abstract:**

We analyze qualitative and quantitative data collected from a rural population cohort in southwestern Uganda to investigate the role of HIV/AIDS awareness on changes in partnership formation in this highly affected community. Courtship norms and perceived changes due to AIDS are explored through qualitative focus group data collected from unmarried youth, married youth, and adults between 40 and 50 of both sexes. Using survey data from the 2002-2003 serosurvey of the cohort, we test the hypothesis that rising age at first marriage over the last 20 years is consistent with greater commitment and caution in partnership formation through longer duration and higher likelihood that relationships end in marriage. Multivariate hazard models are employed to test hypotheses, and findings are triangulated with the qualitative insights from focus groups to make a case for changing age at sex as a response to HIV/AIDS.

**Background:** Uganda was the first country in subSaharan Africa to document a significant temporal decline in both prevalence and incidence of HIV infection (Mbulaiteye et al, 2002). Sentinal surveillance data from most urban sites show HIV prevalence among antenatal attenders falling to between a half and a third of their peak values in 1992 (generally between 25 and 30 percent) by 2000 (STD/AIDS Control Programme, 2001). In a rural population cohort in southwestern Uganda, recorded HIV prevalence in the 15-49 year age group declined from 9.8 to 7.8 percent between 1989 and 1999 (Mbulaiteye et al., 2002). In both sentinel surveillance and population-based trends, decline in prevalence have been steepest among age groups under 25. For example, prevalence among women 20-24 in the rural population cohort cited above dropped from 19 to 11 percent over the 1990s. Statistically significant declines in HIV incidence were also recorded in the rural cohort from the first serosurvey in 1989. While there are those who question whether Uganda's success against HIV hasn't been exaggerated (Parkhurst 2002), even these skeptics concede that declines are real.

In the absence of antiretroviral therapies or radical change in medical practice that might hinder transmission, it is generally assumed that declines are driven by sexual behaviour change. Declining trends in incidence and the particularly strong declines in prevalence among the youngest age groups tend to rule out cohort effects of mortality. Confirmation of declining trends from population based data address concerns about the selectivity of those attending antenatal clinics. There is less consensus about the nature of behaviour change, however. Curiously, sexual behaviour data collected from the same population cohort have failed to show any significant downward trends in numbers of

sexual partner or numbers of 'casual' sexual encounters (Kamali et al., 2000). Significant increases in condom use are restricted to non-marital relationship and do not appear until later in the 1990s well after declines in incidence had begun. One of the only consistent pieces of evidence for behaviour change from population cohorts and repeated cross-sectional DHS surveys is an increase in reported age at first sex. To our knowledge, there has been no research that has attempted to link rising age at first sex to a conscious AIDS-avoidance strategy. Nevertheless, these findings along with ideological considerations appear to underlie the current US government emphasis on promoting abstinence rather than condom use as the key to fighting HIV/AIDS epidemics in Africa.

**Hypotheses:** We plan to explore the issues of AIDS awareness and its effects on partnership formation in a rural area of southwestern Uganda. Our hypothesis is that postponement of first sexual encounter reported over the 1990s is real and represents a societal response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This community was affected deeply, with virtually every family affected by one or more AIDS deaths in the 1980s and early 1990s. Early high levels of public awareness about how HIV is spread in this population made it possible for individuals to translate fear of AIDS into caution about entering sexual partnerships. The first part of the proposed analysis would be descriptive in nature and rely on qualitative data described in the methods section. Specifically, how is AIDS awareness consciously expressed, if at all, in the process of first partnership formation and transition to marriage, divorce or separation, and remarriage? In this paper, we will focus on initial partnership formation including both first sex and new relationships across the adult years. The nature of AIDS awareness and how it is expressed will be examined. The nature of courtship for different types of partnerships, notions of commitment in relationship, and how these may be influenced by AIDS awareness in this contemporary rural setting will be explored in-depth. While special attention will be paid to first sexual relationships, we expect, if AIDS awareness plays a role in partnership formation, that its effects are not restricted to first relationships but are felt across the age spectrum.

The second part of proposed analysis will employ statistical analysis of survey questions in the rural population cohort about first sexual relationships among adults between ages 20 and 45, thus covering a span of 25 years from the late 1970s or early 1980s before the advent of the AIDS epidemic to contemporary times. We will test specific hypotheses that growing AIDS awareness resulted in greater caution in entering sexual partnerships. Such caution would be reflected in later age at first sex, longer duration of first sexual relationship reflecting greater relationship commitment, and greater likelihood that first sexual relationships end in marriage rather than separation, net of background factors such as religion and education. Pretests of survey questions revealed a remarkably high level of detail in recall of first sexual relationships. To the extent that older respondents tend to forget or underreport relationships of shorter duration, recall biases will work against the hypothesis that first relationships are getting longer and more committed.

#### Data and methods:

We propose to analyze primary data from a current study entitled 'Courtship and condoms: the effect of AIDS awareness on partnership formation in rural southwest

Uganda'. The study is funded by the British Medical Research Council Programme on AIDS in Uganda. Qualitative analysis will be based on 12 preliminary focus groups conducted between August and October 2003. Group interviews were conducted separately for men and women among currently unmarried youths, married youths, and married adults between ages 40 and 50. All groups will be asked about partnership norms, expectations of men and women in initiating relationships, and concepts of commitment and relationship progression. The older adult group will be asked to comment on changes in partnership norms (arguably better reported than specific behaviours that are subject to more recall bias.) Textual data will be coded and analyzed using Nudist Nvivo software.

Quantitative data analysis will be based on a battery of questions included in the 2002-2003 annual serosurvey of the rural population cohort to test the hypothesis about partnership change in response to HIV/AIDS. Data collection is not complete, but generally the sample size varies between 6000 and 7000 respondents that represent roughly 70 percent of the true census population in any given year. Information on first sexual partnership include age at first sex, duration of first sexual union, whether or not a condom was used with the first partner (though not necessarily at first sex), and whether the first partnership ended in marriage. Data will be available for analysis by the end of November 2003. Multivariate hazard models will be employed to model duration of first sexual relationship and likelihood that first relationship culminates in marriage (defined by respondents to mean either traditional introduction ceremonies or formal religious marriage).

#### References:

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