

Prevalence and Covariates of Multiple Sexual Partnerships among Sexually Active Males in Lesotho

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Background

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest number of people living with HIV and AIDS virus in the world and multiple sexual partnerships has been blamed for the high rate of this pandemic in the region. Multiple sexual partnerships, defined as having more than one sexual partner in the last 12 months before date of interview, is a public health concern in many developing countries because of its effects on unplanned pregnancy and the risk of acquiring and spreading sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV and AIDS. The cost of the pandemic, in terms of both human lives, loss of skills in the economy and expenditure in the health sector is huge to both individuals and society alike. The effects of multiple sexual partnerships extend beyond transmission of STDs. For example, a study by Ramrakha et al., (2013) in New Zealand found that there is a strong association between number of sexual partners and an increase in later substance-dependence disorders.

Multiple sexual partnerships may involve both concurrent sexual partnerships where the relationships are overlapping and serial monogamy where sexual contact with the previous partner does not overlap with the current one. Although concurrent sexual partnership is thought to be the main risk factor for HIV and AIDS transmission (Fishel et al., 2012), a study in rural South Africa found no evidence to support that. Instead, it suggested that the reduction of multiple sexual partnerships, irrespective of whether those partnerships overlap in time, is critical for the reduction of HIV prevalence rate (Tanser et al., 2011).

While multiple sexual partnerships exist in many other countries in the developing world, especially sub-Saharan Africa, Lesotho provides a unique background to understand the prevalence of this phenomenon. The country is enclosed within the borders of South Africa and to a larger extent is economically dependent on the latter. A substantial number of Lesotho men are employed in South African mines and are constantly away from their homes during the year as a result. The increased migration rate is one of the risk-factors for multiple

sexual partnerships (Parker et al., 2007) hence multiple sexual partnerships are relatively high in Lesotho compared to other countries in Southern Africa (Tan, 2009). Also, a study by National AIDS Commission of Lesotho (2009) found that half of men who were study respondents in that country reported multiple sexual partners in the past year compared to one-third of the female participants. Such a high rate of multiple sexual partnerships is likely to increase the already high rate of HIV infection in the long run. However, socio-economic and demographic factors influencing the prevalence of this phenomenon are not clear, especially among men. The purpose of this study was therefore, to determine predictors of multiple sexual partnerships among sexually active men in Lesotho.

The analysis in the study was guided by three questions: What is the prevalence of having multiple partners among Lesotho men? What are the main socio-economic factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships among sexually active men in Lesotho?

Literature review points to a number of individual, cultural and community level factors that influence multiple sexual partnerships among different groups of people in different countries. Although individual issues that might influence multiple sexual partnerships may differ from one community to the other, it is generally accepted that men are bound to have multiple sexual relationships than women in most societies (National AIDS Commission Lesotho, 2009; Chirwa & Chizimbi, 2009). The reason for this is because men who have more than one sexual partner tend to gain respect from their peers in society, and also become attractive to other women (Chirwa & Chizimbi, 2009) and therefore increases the pool of sexual partners available to the individual. In a different study men who had multiple sexual partnerships were motivated by the need to have a different sexual experience or had a natural desire for multiple sexual partners (Garcia et al., 2014)

Thornton (2009) argued that sexual liaising in the Southern African region forms part of greater social networks which cuts across geographical areas, age, race and class. These social networks enable different people to have access to goods and services that one would not have otherwise accessed had it not been because of these networks. Another study conducted in various Southern African countries concurred with the sentiments raised by Thornton. It argues that multiple sexual partnerships often are motivated by material benefits that other partners (mostly women) derive from such relationships. In particular, multiple partnerships are mostly practiced by men who are able to provide money and material benefits to those they are in relationship with. Poor women and younger girls are often at the

receiving end of these relationships (Cox et al., 2014; National AIDS Commission Lesotho, 2009; Jana et al, 2008). Furthermore, a study in Lesotho found that men with higher levels of education were more likely to have engaged in multiple partnerships (National AIDS Commission Lesotho, 2009). This is possibly because people with higher levels of education are also likely to earn better income than the average person in the community and therefore able to provide material benefits to their sexual partners.

Another studies revealed that most men who engaged in multiple sexual partners were young, unmarried with relatively higher level of education (National AIDS Commission Lesotho, 2009; Adimora et al., 2007; Santelli et al., 1998). Perhaps this finding suggests that young men who are not married are likely to experience with different partners before they finally settle down in a relationship. Furthermore, Corno & de Walque (2012) found that the association between working in the mines and being HIV positive was stronger in Lesotho than other countries under study, and women whose partners were miners were more likely to be infected by the virus than otherwise. This perhaps suggests that migrancy is one of the risk-factors associated with HIV and AIDS and support a finding by Parker (2007) that indicated that concurrent sexual partnerships normally occurred and is sustained in settings where people are mobile.

Data and methods

This study used a data from a nationally representative Lesotho Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) collected in 2009. A sample of 2845 sexually active men who were 15-44 years was used in the analysis. This data was weighted before use to ensure representativeness across the country. In the study, participants were asked to state the number of sexual relationships they had in 12 months prior to the interview. Men were coded as having multiple sexual partnerships if they reported having more than one sexual relationship in that period. The study used binary logistic regression to determine the relative risk of experiencing multiple sexual partnerships in the past year while controlling for other different demographic and other socio-economic variables. The data was analysed using STATA 11 computer software.

Measurement of variables

Multiple sexual partnerships were defined as having two or more sexual partners in the past twelve months before the study. Literature review identified a number of variables that are

related to multiple sexual partnerships which include demographic, sexual history, economic factors and attitudes towards multiple sexual partnerships. Demographic factors in the study included age groups categorized as 15–19, 20–24, 30–34, 35–39, and 40 and above; respondent's educational attainment was categorized as: no education, primary, secondary and tertiary level of education while marital status categorized as never married, currently married or 'other'. Place of residence as "large city" "smaller city", "town" and "countryside". Respondent's sexual history was measured by the age of first coitus 16, 16-17, 18-19, 20 and above, and "don't know". In addition, variables related to economic power were "employment in the past year" while attitude was measured using responses from questions such as: husband has the right to have sex with other women. Additional variables included the number of times the individual was away in the past 12 months.

Results

The results in Table 1 indicated that majority of the respondents were in age group 20-24 (20%) followed by those in age 15-19 with 17.1% while those in age 35-39 and 40 and above contributed 10% and 23.17% respectively. Also, significant majority of the respondents (60%) were staying in the larger city followed by town (21%) while countryside contributed only 7.2%. Virtually half of the respondents (48.6%) were married while the never-married contributed 44.8% and 6.6% came from "other" which consisted of the divorced, and widowed. The results showed that sexual initiation starts earlier in Lesotho with more than 30% having initiated sex at ages below 16. On the other hand, 22% and 16% initiated sex at ages 16-17 and 18-19 respectively and a quarter were in ages above 19. The results further showed that in total, more than half (55%) of the respondents had been away from home in the past year. While 32% had moved 1-4 times, 11.6% and 11.25% had moved 5-9 and 10 or more respectively. Nearly half (49%) had primary educational level while 30.2 had attained secondary level of education. A considerable number (42%) were members of Roman Catholic Church while 20% were members of Lesotho Evangelical and the rest belonged to other churches and close to 5% did not belong to any religious group.

Table1: Distribution of respondents by different variables

Variable	Frequency	%
Partnerships		
<2	2416	84.91
2 or more	429	15.09
Age groups		
15-19	497	17.47
20-24	579	20.35
25-29	438	15.4
30-34	1514	13.49
35-39	288	10.12
40+	659	23.17
Place of residence		
Large city	1714	60.23
Smaller city	316	11.11
Town	2030	21.44
Countryside	205	7.22
Marital status		
Never married	1274	44.79
Married	1274	48.63
Other	187	6.58
Age of sexual debut		
<16		30.48
16-17	867	22.5
18-19	640	16.8
20+	478	25.46
Don't know	724	4.76
	135	
No. of moves in the past year		
0		45.01
1-4	1281	32.14
5-9	914	11.61
10+	330	11.25
	320	
Educational attainment		
No educ.		14.16
Primary	403	49.09
Secondary	1397	30.25
Tertiary	861	6.51
	185	
Religion/denominations		
Roman Catholic	1200	42.17
Lesotho Evangelical	581	20.42
Anglican	255	8.97
Pentecostal	549	19.3
Other Christians	79	2.77
None	139	4.89
Other	42	1.48
Worked in the past 12 months		
No	855	30.06
Yes – past 12 months	207	7.26
Yes - Currently working	1783	62.67

Right to have sex with other women	1918	6.74
No	846	29.75
Yes	81	2.84
Depends		
Total	2845	100

Results of logistic regression

Multiple sexual partnerships in the year prior to interview were reported by 15% of study respondents. Logistic regression results indicated that among the demographic variables, those in age group 20-24 and 25-29 were 80% ($p < 0.005$) and 66% ($p < 0.01$) respectively more likely to have had two or more partners while other age groups were not statistically significant. The results further indicated that there was no significant relationship between place of residence and multiple sexual partnerships.

Compared to men who were never married, being married significantly ($p < 0.005$) reduced the odds ratio by 89%. Also, the results found that sexual history was a significant predictor of multiple sexual partnerships. Postponing sexual debut to ages 17-18 reduced the odds ratio by 43% ($p < 0.05$) and the variable was further reduced to 52% when the act was postponed to ages above 19 ($p < 0.005$).

As expected, educational attainment was positively and significantly associated with the dependent variable; having secondary and tertiary levels of education increased the odds ratio 86% ($p < 0.05$) and almost three-times more ($p < 0.005$) respectively. On the other hand, belonging to a particular religious group was only marginally associated with the dependent variable. Respondents who were members of Anglican denomination had an increased likelihood of experiencing the event of interest by 64% ($p < 0.05$).

Likewise, respondents who were in employment in the year before the interview were more than two times more likely to have had multiple partnerships in the previous year ($p < 0.005$) while those who were currently working were 55% more likely to have done so ($p < 0.01$). The results further indicated that being away from home five times or more in the last 12 months increased the odds of having engaged in sexual relationship with more than one partners, however, the results were significant only for 1-4 moves and 10 and more ($p < 0.05$).

Believing that husband has the right to have sex with other women increased the likelihood of having had multiple partnership in the past year by 57% ($p < 0.005$).

Table 2: Odds ratio for having two or more partners in the past 12 months

Variable	Odds ratio	Std.error	95% ci
Age groups			
15-19	1.00	-	-
20-24	1.80***	0.34	1.23 - 2.60
25-29	1.66**	0.36	1.09 – 2.53
30-34	1.80	0.32	0.69 – 2.02
35-39	0.58	0.21	0.29 – 1.17
40+	0.84	0.29	0.42 - 1.66
Place of residence			
Large city	1.00	-	-
Smaller city	0.74	0.20	0.44 – 1.24
Town	1.07	0.20	0.74 – 1.51
Countryside	0.70	0.13	0.48 – 1.01
Marital status			
Never married	1.00	-	-
Married	0.11***	0.02	0.07 – 0.17
Other	0.88	0.24	0.52 – 1.51
Age of sexual debut			
<16	1.00	-	-
16-17	0.86	0.15	0.61 - 1.21
18-19	0.67*	0.12	0.46 – 0.95
20+	0.48***	0.12	0.29 – 0.77
Don't know	0.56	0.21	0.27 – 1.17
Educational attainment			
No education	1.00	-	-
Primary.	1.59	0.44	0.92 – 2.74
Secondary	1.86*	0.53	1.06 – 3.25
Tertiary	2.95***	1.09	0.42 – 6.12
Religion/denominations			
Roman Catholic	1.00	-	-
Lesotho Evangelical	0.78	0.14	0.55 – 1.10
Anglican	1.64*	0.39	1.01 - 2.62
Pentecostal	0.93	0.18	0.63 – 1.37
Other Christians	1.86	0.71	0.88 – 3.94
None	1.72	0.49	0.98 – 3.02
Other	0.09***	0.07	0.02 – 0.38
Worked in past 12 months			
No	1.00	-	-
Yes – past 12 months	2.24***	0.53	1.40 – 3.58
Yes - Currently working	1.55**	0.25	1.13 – 2.12
No. of moves in the past year			
0	1.00	-	-
1-4	1.41*	0.23	1.01 – 1.95
5-9	1.52	0.37	0.95 – 2.45
10+	1.66*	0.40	1.03 – 2.67
Right to have sex with other women			
No	1.00	-	-
Yes	1.57***	0.23	1.19 – 2.08

Discussion and conclusion

This study found that 15% of the sexually active men in the study had two or more sexual partners in the year before the study was conducted. Young and unmarried men had an

increased propensity to engage in multiple partnerships and therefore, were at higher risk of being infected with STDs, including HIV/AIDS. The possible reason is that young people like to experiment with different sexual partners before they decide to settle and marry the chosen partner. The study also indicated that men, who were better-off in economic sense as indicated by higher educational attainment and working in the past year, were at a higher risk of multiple sexual partnerships. This perhaps vindicate assertions by Thornton (2009) that multiple sexual relationships forms part of the social capital in which participants derive some benefits from these sexual networks. It is assumed that men who are economically wealthy are in a better position to entice different women, especially those who are poor, to engage in sex with them. Conversely, in a poor environment like Lesotho like anywhere else, multiple sexual partnerships is a survival strategy where women are attracted to men who can provide them with material resources for survival.

The study recommended programs that suit men be designed to reduce multiple sexual partnerships. These programs should also address economic inequality between men and women to discourage women's dependence on men. Also, awareness campaigns which cater specifically for young unmarried should be designed in Lesotho.

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