

***“Women Get Infected but We Die.....!” Men and  
Masculinities in the era of HIV/AIDS in Botswana  
Notes and Reflections from the field***

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**Abstract:**

This paper examines men's construction of masculinities within the context of HIV/AIDS in Botswana, and how these might impact the country's efforts to control the spread of the epidemic. It presents results of qualitative research with groups of men, covering a range of topics, most of which are not only important to the way perceive themselves, but also could have significant ramifications their sexual and reproductive health, including efforts to control the spread of HIV/AIDS.

While most men are aware and generally supportive of Sexual and Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS programs, these programs have caused a certain level of consternation among men by challenging one of the fundamental aspects of masculinity rooted in control of women's sexuality. Some men view women's empowerment programs with suspicion, and blame government for striving to empower women, while neglecting them. To many men, their low socio-economic status resulting from unemployment or underemployed was associated with failure to live up to socially expected roles. With men's sense identity tied to their role as heads of households; breadwinners and being in control of the family, the failure to fulfill socially expected roles results not only in frustration; sense of diminished worth and increased propensity for violence, but it also makes men view women's empowerment and sexual and reproductive health programs which have a heavy female focus, with suspicion.

## **Introduction and background**

This paper examines men's construction of their masculinities within the context of HIV/AIDS in Botswana. Currently just under a fifth (17.1%) of the country's population is HIV positive (BAIS, 2004) while HIV prevalence among pregnant women increased from 18 percent among women aged 15-49 years in 1992, to 36 and 39 percent in 1999 and 2000 before declining slightly to 35 percent in 2002 (GoB, 2003).

The current HIV/AIDS epidemic in Botswana has resulted in a multitude of programs and services aimed at stemming the epidemic. However, despite the country's early and seemingly decisive response to an epidemic that is largely heterosexually driven, public reproductive health interventions have remained female focused, and initial efforts to involve men did not go beyond provision of information. The lack of culturally relevant materials on behavioral change (Ntseane, 2005) and the fact that HIV Information, Education and Communication strategies hardly address issues of gender inequality (Hope et al, 1999) highlight some of the serious gaps in the country's efforts to address the HIV epidemic.

In research, most studies have addressed men's sexual and reproductive health purely from a biomedical perspective, without addressing the socio-cultural context within which these outcomes are achieved. In a study of cultural dimensions of sexuality in Botswana Ntseane (2004) emphasizes the need for sexual and reproductive health programs, especially HIV prevention programs, to be informed by the cultural context in order for their content and methods to be appropriate. This will also allow incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems into the prevention strategies. Ntseane (2004) shows how sex is not just biological concepts, but complex social constructs that serve a varied number of functions (2004), some of which functions the participants may not always have control over.

Despite the obvious impact that heterosexual masculinities on the country's HIV epidemic, research has so far failed to engage the role of masculinities in HIV prevention and transmission. Such research is needed to inform sexual and reproductive health policy and programs, thus making them culturally sensitive and context specific. The failure of gender discourses in Botswana to incorporate males and masculinities, resulting in an almost exclusive focus on women Mookodi (2004)

In addition, the impact of structural variables such as unemployment and socio economic change on men's self identity and sexuality does not feature prominently in research on men's sexual and reproductive behavior. This is despite the fact that unemployment and underemployment have characterized the economies of most sub-Saharan countries for decades, leaving significant proportions of their respective populations trapped in poverty. While Botswana has experienced rapid economic growth in the past, such growth has not only slowed, but has been characterized by high rates of unemployment and significant levels of poverty. How men experience such a decline in socio-economic status in terms of their masculine identity should be of interest to sexual and reproductive health programs, especially those geared towards HIV prevention; treatment and care.

In her study on Men, Male Sexuality and HIV/AIDS, Silberschmidt (2004) explores the impact of socio-economic change on male identities, masculinities and sexuality in rural and urban East Africa. The research presents socio-economic change as one of the '*non stereotyped reasons*' why men seem to be driving the HIV epidemic. The research notes that declining socio-economic conditions have lead to a diminished sense of worth among men, giving way aggressive forms of masculinities.

Men in Botswana are assumed to enjoy a '*patriarchal dividend*' over women. Their status is relatively higher than that of women, and they tend to dominate women's decision making. The country's current HIV epidemic is heterosexually driven, through multiple sexual partnerships, mostly by men, which render women vulnerable to HIV infection through. Consequently, HIV/AIDS intervention programs have aggressively pushed for women's empowerment as one of the ways of stemming the epidemic. However, by empowering women to negotiate safe sex, and refuse to have sex with their partners on suspicion of heightened risk of infection due to multiple partnerships, HIV/AIDS programs have hit hard at one of the ideological underpinnings of masculinities – the control over women's sexuality. By discussing publicly what was hitherto negotiated in the private, largely patriarchal sphere of the home or household, HIV programs are likely to cause a certain level of consternation among some men about their masculinity and perceived sense of loss of power.

## **Objective**

This paper explores men's perceptions of themselves within the context of HIV in Botswana, and how these perceptions might contribute to men's behavior and the direction that the epidemic could take. It presents men's views and perceptions on their role in sexual and reproductive health, especially the prevention of HIV infection. The papers does this by exploring a range of topics which are not only important to the way men perceive themselves, but could also influence their sexual and reproductive health attitudes and practices, which could in turn have implications for the success of sexual and reproductive health programs, especially those aimed at curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS

### **Data Sources and Methods**

Data used in this paper were collected through focus group discussions with groups of men in selected localities in Botswana. These interviews were conducted as part of a study on Men, Masculinities and Sexual and Reproductive Health in Botswana, conducted in 2008.

A total of 20 focus group discussions, constituting of between six and ten men per group, were used to generate data that are presented in this paper. For as much as possible, the groups were constituted to be homogeneous for certain characteristics, such as age, education and socio-economic status.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data from men. The guide contained a number of topics relating to masculinities, including men's perception of what it means to be a man; gender roles; women's empowerment and equality; HIV/AIDS programs and services and health seeking.

### **Data Collection process**

All focus group discussions were facilitated by the author. All the interviews were recorded, after obtaining the consent of the group to record the interview. The recorded interviews were first transcribed *verbatim*, before being translated into English. To ensure that no valuable information is lost during the transcription, copies of the transcribed interviews were sampled and compared with their tape recorded versions. After the interviews were translated, a further quality check measure was

used, whereby copies of the translated interviews were sampled and compared with their un-translated versions.

Once the interviews were translated, they were studied to detect any emerging themes. The interviews were then sorted into excerpt files according to topics contained in the interview guide, as well as according to themes emergent from the data. The transcripts were read into ATLAS.ti, a text analysis software program, wherein they were further sorted and coded. The data are analyzed according to themes contained in the semi-structured guide as well as any new themes emergent from the data.

## **Results**

The results of the qualitative data analysis are presented below.

### **Perceptions of manhood**

Most men perceived manhood as an acquired state, rather than one that someone graduates into by virtue of attainment of a particular age. Being a man was tied to attainment of certain status, specifically being married or having a family and being able to adequately provide for their needs. To be a man was strongly associated with being able to deal with many challenges without flinching, not making a fuss about small things and being in control of your family.

*In my culture, to be a man you should have a child, a woman, a home and have authority. That's how you become a man, otherwise, if you don't achieve all these things, there is nothing that says you can be called a man, that socially, you have moved to the next stage [from boyhood to manhood].*

While this was the idealized form of masculinity, attaining manhood in the current time presents many challenges to men. Unemployment, poverty and lack of education were cited as major challenges that make it difficult for men to fulfill their social responsibilities. This inability to fulfill social expectations has not only left some men with a low sense of self worth, but has also made some of them act out their frustration in many ways, including being irresponsible sexually, through multiple sexual partnerships, and sometimes resorting to violence when confronted with challenges within relationships. In the words of one discussant:

*We fail to be 'real men' because of lack of education; we fail to get good jobs which makes it impossible to accomplish and maintain a decent life for our families*

Modernization has resulted in a shift from the rural, predominantly agrarian economy, to a modern economy. This shift has resulted in the marginalization of many men, especially rural men and men with limited education and resources. There was a pervasive sense among these men that it is much more difficult for them not only to attract relationships in which they are cherished, but even maintaining their current relationships.

*During olden times, people did not need formal education and knowledge of English was not a necessity to find a job. A man could go to work in the [South*

*African] mines, and he could buy cattle and leave them in the care of the wife, but how things have changed!*

However, despite the decline in the rural subsistence economy, their sense of manhood is still deeply tied to ownership of cattle and being able to take care of the family, even if it means toiling to make ends meet.

*Considering that I am not a well-off man, I have secured a ploughing field, I plant watermelons and beans, which I sell so that after four or five years I could have enough to get married.*

Another man echoed similar sentiments:

*Yes, I am a man, I have a woman at home; I have a field in which I grow sorghum and watermelons, the latter which I sell. This is what makes me a man.*

For some men, the ability to endure hardship without flinching or complaining, to be unexpressive, was seen as a major attribute of achieving manhood. In the view of many men, this was a fundamental difference in character between men and women. Keeping things to oneself and being unexpressive was an especially lauded aspect of manhood.

*It is important to be inexpressive, to have 'secrets' which you keep to yourself. If you are a man who is worth his salt, every business of yours should not be known to everyone, to the extent that you take some of them ['secrets'] to the grave with you when you die. We know that women can not keep secrets*

Thus, manhood is also about maximum differentiation from women. However, other men felt that the 'inexpressiveness' that many men laud as desirable creates many problems and challenges for men and denies them avenues to express their emotions, which in turn can affect their wellbeing and relationship with their families and intimate partners.

*There is a lot of confusion about what being a man is all about, and in the end people adopt whatever ideas they see being floated around. Being inexpressive does not serve us well because it denies us the chance to access advice from relatives and friends which would prevent us from doing something adverse and out of proportion with the problem you are experiencing, such as taking your own life.*

According to one key informant, *this is why you may find that someone [a man], who was all cheerful in the morning, commits suicide by hanging himself in the afternoon, sometimes without even divulging the problem.*



## **HIV/AIDS**

While most men appreciated the seriousness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and while many acknowledge that the epidemic is being fueled by certain practices of which many men partake, they nevertheless are aware that men were not taking full advantage of HIV prevention and treatment services. Some men attributed this reluctance to the fact that they were left out of the sexual and reproductive health discourse from the start.

According to one key informant:

*The number one issue is that men were left out from the start. Within a family, you can not want to address family issues by focusing only on girls to the exclusion of boys. This is what happened to men. Men were left out, as if we have forgotten that it's the same men who impregnate women; who provides for her needs and can therefore decide not to listen to her. When 'Beijing' came around, women took it for the end of the world, forgetting that they will find the same situation, the same uninformed men they left at home. So the man just says to her 'go back to Beijing!!'*

There was a popular view among some men, especially older men, that women were eager to use HIV/AIDS services because their bodies were too fragile and become easily ravaged by HIV compared to men's bodies. Those who expressed this view therefore saw women's participation in sexual and reproductive health as a sign of women's weakness, and that women could not survive if they did not. The following quote gave expression to this misperception:

*I want to tell you the truth. It does not matter whether the woman is on ARVs or not, she will die first irrespective of whether she became HIV positive at the same time with you or after*

However, some men within the group were quick to challenge this assertion about HIV being more virulent among women than men, or about men's bodies being able to resist HIV compared to women's bodies. In a break with the normal practice of focus groups to discuss only the 'public voice' on a subject, without going into personal experiences, one man offered his personal experience with HIV as an example to make his point and refute the misconception:

*My wife has been HIV positive for over 10 years, and she is still going strong. What you are saying is not true [Almost quarreling]*

Some men, while acknowledging that HIV is primary driven through heterosexual sexual intercourse felt that the amount of blame that is usually apportioned to men

was disproportionate, and portray all men as reckless, ambivalent or uninterested in controlling the spread of HIV. They felt that while the HIV prevalence was higher among women, men were also affected directly through infection and indirectly through the fact that these women are also their [men's] own sisters, children, mothers and partners. This sense of shouldering a disproportionate amount of the blame sometimes makes certain men act their perceived role, albeit negative, because in the eyes of many, that is how they are anyway. Others were content to return the blame they feel is unjustly apportioned to them:

*Women are the ones fueling the spread of HIV, because of economic reasons; they have sex for money and other material things. It's not men's fault that women follow them to bars to drink, dressed in miniskirts and other suggestive clothing.*

*Women dress like that for a purpose, and that is to entice men. You step out on the street right now; or on public transport, you will see what I mean. I remember one woman who was dressed so suggestively, commenting to her friend that she spent a whole day dressed like that and failed to attract a single man. She was saying the men are either fools; blind or cowards for failing to notice and approach her. So you see that that choice of dress is for a purpose, and that is to lure men to her. They understand our weakness, and even more, they understand their power over men!*

HIV testing is one area where the commitment of men to knowing their HIV status has come under scrutiny. It was evident that to most men, the thought of undergoing an HIV test, and being told that they are HIV positive was quite unsettling. Men's apparent reluctance to undergo HIV testing was summarized by one key informant thus:

*The thing is that men generally, avoid and do not like talking about HIV or AIDS. Even if a man proposes love to you; mentioning it [HIV test] provokes a tense reaction from him. You can have a relationship with a man, but you spoil the relationship by suggesting that you go and be tested for HIV. If anything you are likely to end up breaking up. Instead of agreeing to test ... I mean you may even offer that you visit different testing centers if he has a problem testing at the same center with you; at his own time when he is ready, it doesn't work. Mentioning HIV testing is enough to break the relationship.*

To many men, being HIV positive was an affront to their masculine identity of being strong and independent. Carrying the mental picture of an HIV positive person and the progression from HIV to AIDS and having to depend on other people for care were serious challenges to men's sense of their masculinity. So serious was this 'fear of

knowing' that some men felt that they would rather not know their status. A key informant noted:

*I think men don't want to know their status. Somehow they would like to be assured that if they tested, they would test negative, unfortunately there is no such assurance. They seem reluctant to deal with the fact that they will have to make adjustments to their lives if they are positive. I think men should have a change of attitudes and learn that you test because you want to know. If you are negative, great, you still have to make adjustments to make sure you stay that way. If you are positive, you should know that there is help and support out there. You still have to make those adjustments to ensure that you do not become re-infected or infect others. But they seem to be scared!*

A discussant offered a narrative about how his friend developed cold feet when he was supposed to test for HIV.

*Its true men drag their feet, or maybe they are scared. My friend told me that he accompanied his partner to a local VCT centre to undergo HIV testing. They reached the clinic and received counseling. During the counseling he became suspicious, just unsettled. And then it was time to take the test, and what unsettled him even more was that he was going to be the first to have his blood sample taken. The last thing he told them was that he needed a cigarette; and that was it. He went back to the car, refused to go back and waited until the woman was done!!*

This narrative seemed to strike a cord with many men in the group. Their reaction gave the impression that while they did not know the particular story being narrated, they themselves or their acquaintances have faced a similar situation before and reacted in a similar manner. One discussant observed the following about men's lack of leadership when it comes to HIV/AIDS:

*We pretend and want everyone to believe that we are braver than women; at the end of the day it proves that in as far as HIV/AIDS and knowing your status is concerned, women are far more braver than men. A man can want to go to test, and he may walk all the way to center but fail to make that last step. A woman can summon all her courage and do it. It's opposite to what we expect or have come to believe.*

Other men related the reluctance to undergo HIV testing with men's tendency to maintain multiple sexual partnerships. They argued that men's are reluctant to undergo HIV testing because they are aware that they have been engaging in sexual behavior that significantly increases their chances of being HIV positive.

*When you think of testing, you start thinking of all the things you did that put you at risk of infection, and this makes you think twice.*

However other men perceived this '*fear of knowing*', differently. They saw it not as '*fear*' but as it's opposite - '*bravery*'. . They argued that not being overly too concerned about their health, even HIV/AIDS, was a sign of '*bravery*'. However, one elderly man observed the following about men's reluctance take advantage of available sexual and reproductive health services, especially those relating to HIV prevention and treatment.

*We know there is a big problem with HIV. We hear on the radio that women are disproportionately affected. But they also take full advantage of the [HIV/AIDS] services and are therefore able to live meaningful lives, even with HIV. We also get infected, but due to our reluctance, by the time we seek help it's too late, we die. In the end, **'women get infected [and they live].. but we die!'***

## **Equality**

A majority of men were appreciative of the need to empower women in order to improve their social status and protect their rights. They noted that the drive for women's empowerment and equality with men has yielded positive results by positively affirming women's position in society, and that without such efforts, women's situation would be far worse.

However, a significant proportion of discussants were critical of the way women's empowerment and equality is being pursued. Many felt that while women's empowerment is a just course, the way it is being pursued unfairly disadvantages men, and portrays men as the 'enemy' or 'problems' rather than as a 'part of the solution' in the drive for women's empowerment.

*I think equality is good, so that both partners can share responsibilities and have mutual respect, especially in the current situation where you may find that the woman is the breadwinner in the family. It is good for such a woman to come back from work and find that you have also done some household chores, especially if you are not working*

As a result, some men were a bit ambivalent about the desirability of women's empowerment:

*Equality is a catch 22 situation ...If there is equality there is a lot of disrespectfulness, yet the oppression of women would be the norm if it wasn't there.*

Some of the discussants were outright negative.

*I see this 50:50 [equality] issue not doing any good to the families because there always has to be someone in charge for progress to be achieved*

Many men felt that while women's empowerment and equality were noble ideals, such ideals are only attainable and practical in the work place, but not at home. This is because in the workplace, women's empowerment and equality are not 'disruptive' of the social order found within families and households. Many men were adamant that equality can not be attainable at home, or at best, if it is, then it will cause chaos within the household. They felt that the presence of a man, as head of the household; decision maker and provider for the family's needs results in stability. So equality

within the household was equated to men's loss of control and diminished influence within the household. Women were seen as incapable to think rationally.

*Equality is applicable only at work not at home. For instance, to qualify for work should not have gender-bias; a woman can drive heavy-duty vehicles just as much as a man can. But at home equality does not apply. Control at home becomes difficult; a man should be on top.*

*Problems! It has caused problems such that a man can no longer control a woman or family. When you say anything to her she tells you about it; that you are both equal.*

Emang Basadi is a Non-Governmental Organization that has pioneered women's rights, empowerment and equality in Botswana. While some men appreciated the objective of this organization, overall it was viewed negatively mainly for the way it has gone about trying to achieve its mandate. To most men, Emang Basadi has evolved into nothing but a group of *'troublesome and naughty women'* who are pursuing a vendetta against men.

*...they got derailed by modernization; after knowing how to drive a car, she starts to think that a man is a fool. "Emang Basadi" is all about oppression of men by women,*

They indicated that rather than vying for reconciliation when there is a domestic dispute; Emang Basadi tends to opt for solutions that favor women, and in the end result in family breakdown and dissolution. While the original ideal of women's empowerment was welcome, discussants felt that by adopting an intervention model that is based on western values, the organization was alienating men, and causing harm, not only to men, but to women, children and families.

It emerged during the interviews that many men have a misperception of what women's empowerment and equality was all about. To most men, equality refers not only to equal access to opportunities and resources between men and women, but it also meant that both men and women should do similar tasks, no matter how strenuous. To these men, if a woman fails to perform a physically demanding task to the same level as a man would, this was a sign that equality was just an ideal that was not attainable. The following statement sums up such perceptions

*Truly today, though equality has been declared, a woman cannot go to fetch the cattle as far as a man would. She would even tell you that the borehole needs repair since she cannot do anything about it, nor would she even be able to milk cows. She is dependent on you as a man, even though we are said to be equal. Women now oppress us ....., they are not even prevented from robbing us.*

*No! There is nothing like. Equality can only be attributed to the Herero women who can milk cows, look after them and do all other things. If the whole country was like that, that is when we could have attained equality; not like what is happening among Bakgalagadi and the Bakwena tribes where their women instead of getting involved in such activities would instead even go to discos*

*There is no way women can be equal with men! Starting from long-back, women could not go for battles/war. Even today the very same food the woman prepares at home is bought by money earned by a man including many possessions within the house.*

On the other hand, there was also a view that while there are many laws now that protects the rights of women, men are being left in the lurch. Men cited what they termed unequal treatment by law enforcement officers, indicating that women get far more lenient treatment from law enforcement officers than men, even if they have committed similar crimes. Men complained about the overzealousness of some law enforcement agents when dealing with disputes between men and women, especially between intimate partners. These include the tendency to arrest and detain men before establishing the root cause of the dispute, while the same treatment was not extended to women. Men generally felt that they are not listened to when they are in a dispute with their partners. Some men gave accounts of police and other law enforcement officers ridiculing a man for lodging a case against a woman, and questioning his manhood for doing something like that. In their view, this leaves men in such a situation, with a sense that they have no where to turn for justice, and may end up venting their frustration on their partners and relatives.

To many men, the issue of being made to pay child maintenance through maintenance courts did not augur well with them. To them, this was yet another sign of a tacit conspiracy by government, against them.

*For instance, if I father a child with a woman, we are supposed to work together to take care of the child. However, the law oppresses men with the issue of maintenance. The same woman with whom I have a child will report me to law and claim child maintenance. I will be asked to pay every month even when I am*

*not working. If I fail to pay she goes back to authorities and I will be in big trouble.*

One discussant, who reported having had a serious problem with his partner, was particularly irate when he said:

*You try as a man to mould a woman; showing her the right way; giving her money, making her beautiful. However, this issue of equality would disturb her from completely embracing your advice- thinking that she can be a woman through "that equality of hers".*

Most men indicated that equality was also about sharing household chores. While most men were not against sharing household chores with their partners, especially if the relationship is cordial and mutually respectful, most men would rather do certain chores and not others, while others would do certain chores indoors, where neighbours and presumably other men would not see them perform those chores. One indicated that he can do any chore, even changing diapers, for as long his partner does not talk about it in public.

*There are some things which can spoil relationship between partners which can then cause the man to stop performing some of those activities. For instance, if a woman boasts to another woman that her partner does such activities, that may not go well with the man hence he can be discouraged to continue doing them.*

It was important for men to keep a certain image with their peers.

*If you are a free-person you can talk about it (washing nappies). Some men, if they have to talk about it, may choose to speak about like it's a joke, if not they [colleagues] will think 'o kgaetse'? [Stupid] They will think you are mad. (Laughter) Since men mostly socialize in bars, they will tease you in front of others and take you for a fool.*



## **Multiple sexual partnerships**

Multiple concurrent sexual partnerships are believed to be fueling the spread of the HIV epidemic. While traditionally, multiple sexual partnerships were seen as normal male behavior, the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has resulted in a reconsideration of such long held beliefs and norms.

There is a Setswana saying that literally translated goes: ‘*a man is like a carving tool if need be, he can be borrowed or lent out*’ [Monna ke petlwana, oa adimanwa]. Another one goes thus ‘*a man is like an elephant; he cannot eat from one tree or bush*’ [Tlou ga eke e ja setlhare sele nosi fela] Such sayings and similar ones were cited by some men to justify why traditionally multiple sexual partnerships were not shunned. Ntseane (2004) notes the multiple functions of sex in many Setswana societies. If a woman could not bear children, or could not bear a son, it was reason enough for a man to take another wife, or maintain a ‘*concubine*’ who can bear him children. Polygamous marriages, which were relatively common then, were a sign of a man’s power and wealth to cater for more than one family. Only relatively wealthy men could take more than one wife because it was perceived as a shame for a man to take two or more wives and then struggle to take care of their families.

*R2: When I grew up, I found that it was very much true that a man is like a tool, and can be lent to others. A man could have his family / home and that didn’t prevent him from having another family, one that is unofficial or secret. Not that it will be much of a secret because it will be common knowledge that he has two homes and he supports both of them. ... and life was good then, because the man will typically run both households. If he slaughters a goat for one household, he does the same for the other. At times it will be his secret. He will go to the cattle post, slaughter the two goats, and drop the one of them to his secret household before preceding home with the other another one.*

Some men’s felt that it was natural for men to have multiple sexual partnerships because they have a larger ‘appetite’ for sex than women.

*This is how men are, they are not doing it for kicks; it is their nature, they have a higher appetite for sex. To them the grass is always greener on the other side; they need to try other ‘dishes’.*

Other men attributed men’s multiple sexual partnerships to ‘lack of [sexual] satisfaction’ within their relationships. While the lack of satisfaction may drive the man to have sex with multiple partners, this arrangement comes back to haunt the

man because he might not be able to perform sexually at home. In their view, this can result in the woman also having multiple sexual partners, something that hits the man's ego very hard.

*The lack of satisfaction can contribute to this problem of men having multiple sexual relationships. However if a man has multiple sexual partners, he will have sex with them and then fail to perform at home. He will have had a 'starters' with the other partner, and assume that at home he can just do a 'continuation'; he might not have much left to satisfy his wife when he gets home. She might start looking elsewhere.*

Some men challenged the assertion that multiple sexual partnerships are caused by lack of sexual satisfaction, but rather that it's a result of a certain belief system that justifies this behavior

*Men still cherish having many partners. One man can chastise another one, accusing him of being a fool; that he is 'afraid' of girls / women, just because he either has no girlfriend, or has had only one for a long time.*

*Yes, its culture, and it's not always due to lack of satisfaction at home or anything like that. It is what they believe .... They believe that a man can not have only one partner. They say its culture, and that its nature and that no one can change it.*

While multiples sexual partnerships seem to be relatively accepted norm for men, among women, such behavior is despised. As one female key informant observed:

*There is a view among men [and people generally when they want to justify men's behavior] that 'a man cannot be finished' by having more than one partner; that a woman who has multiple partners loses a certain value, that doing that 'finishes' something in her, that she becomes 'uninteresting' in bed. (monna gaa fele; seja monna ga se mo fetse),*

*A man can have four girls [sexual partners]; and me as a woman, maybe I have two partners, the man, with four partners can still call me names and despise me for having more than one partner. So he feels like he is more entitled to that more than me; that it makes him a 'man' to do that, but for me, it makes me something less than a woman.*

*For women, such behavior is seriously looked down upon. You may even attract many unpleasant names. A woman who has many partners is despised and looked down upon.*

The assertion that men need sex more than women, or that they are less capable of controlling their sexual urges than women was challenged by some key informants. They indicated that there is no scientific proof behind the assertions, and rather noted that men are just too quick, too willing to give in to their sexual urges and then come

up with excuses for their behavior. The key informant noted thus:

*Men have just told themselves that they need sex more than women, it's a mental thing, and it's not really true or based on any scientific reasoning, they just give in to their urges. Women can control themselves because women take better care of themselves ('basadi itlhokomela') and exercise greater self control*

*I do not believe that men necessarily need sex more than women. Maybe there is some truth to the assertion that they are not able to control their urges, but I do not believe they need sex more than women. Even if you try to match a man's demand for sex by making sure you give it to him every time he demands it; that does not guarantee that he won't have other partners. He will still leave you and go looking for other women*

One man differed with the group, indicating that he preferred to be faithful.

*I think men are exaggerating their inability to be faithful; they are quick to give in to their urges. If they feel very horny, they should learn to masturbate to relieve themselves, and stay out of trouble that way. There is nothing wrong with being faithful, it is enjoyable and fun. I prefer to have one partner, and if I have to have another one, I'd rather do that after breaking up with my current partner.*

He went on to elaborate the many ways in which having multiple sexual partners can have negative consequences on the relationship:

*You know, one thing that I do not want; that I fear in life is to be caught ('tota mo botshelong jame, gake battle kgang ele nosi fela, ke kgang ya go tsshwarwa. Kgang ya go tshwarwa, ga kee batle tota mo botshelong jame, ga kee batle!'). Just imagine the drama and the fracas of two women fighting over you and neighbors watching, it's a drawback. After that you have to start all over again, either in a new relationship, or struggle to rebuild the trust again.... And for what? Once trust is lost, it is much harder to gain it back.*

He noted the need for individual men to introspect and do what they think is in their best interest rather than going with popular opinion and trying to live up to stereotypes

*Men can be monogamous. Reasons have been advanced in this discussion about why men have multiple partners. So as a man you need to introspect; know what you want and build yourself, understand who you are .....*

While men in the group could enunciate many ways in which having multiple sexual partners can be a drawback in their lives and relationships, they seem to find it a bit unusual for a man to come out so clearly and challenge these common beliefs. Most men in the group either murmured among themselves, as if in disapproval of what is being said. One discussant interjected:

*(Interrupting the speaker) man, it's tough, I try, it's difficult to do that (group laughs).*

To which the speaker responded

*But you can do it, you just have to serious and focused about it.. It's difficult maybe, but it's possible. You are in control of your desires. I sometimes see a nice looking woman, nicely dressed, I might find myself fantasizing and lusting for her, but I always remind myself that I cannot do more than look and fantasize, because I already have a partner. ['Pelo potsane, ea golegwa']*

The other man still found it hard to believe that being faithful can be easy, least of all enjoyable.

*I am telling you man, it's sooo hard!! (Whole group laughs).*

## **Violence**

The use of violence within intimate relationships and in society in general was explored. Recently, Botswana has experienced a spate of ‘murder-suicides’ where one intimate partner, in most cases men, would kill his partner and later commit suicide. Men were asked if there are any circumstances under which the use of physical violence can be justified, either in intimate relationships, or in relations with family members or members of the public. Most men came out very clearly about the undesirability of violence in any form.

*I think there is never a time when use of violence can be justified in a relationship. Unfortunately men have a propensity towards used of violence; they seem to enjoy it and are easy to resort to use of force. I don't think forcing yourself onto anyone, even wife, is ever justified. It's a crime*

*Violence is not good: we are all people and have to be civil to one another. Its especially bad if such behavior is directed against women, in relationships or at home; it is definitely not a way to show that you are a real man. If you are a man, you know that there are other ways of resolving problems; you can solve issues by talking. You also have the option to consult with elders to help you deal with the problem.*

While violence was viewed as undesirable, men noted that at times, one is forced to use a bit of violence, either to assert their authority or to protect their reputation, property or relationship.

*I agree with my colleagues that violence is unnecessary, but at times, there are people who only seem to respond to violence or threat of violence ('go na le batho baba utlwang ka serobi'). That kind of person, you just rough him / her a bit and you'll see a great response and realize that he / she has gotten the point.*

Some men felt justified to act violently as a means to protect their family or relationship, such as when their partner is having an extra-marital affair that threatens the union. Violence in this case was viewed as ‘corrective’. In the words of one discussant, the alternative is to walk away from the relationship, disrupting the family and at times causing suffering to children.

*At times, violence is the only way to deal with a naughty partner that is if she is cheating on you, because the alternative will be to leave the relationships.*

*I want to be straight with you. No matter what else we may say here, in most cases, in real life, (without trying to hide or window dress anything for you) if you discover that your partner is cheating, you charge her ('oa mo kgomogela'). It will only hit you later, maybe with a bit of regret, that you might feel that maybe if*

*you had not acted violently, maybe sat her down to find out why she is doing that (cheating on you).*

While most men abhorred violence, they nevertheless felt that in most cases men are 'cornered' into acting violently. They felt that due to unemployment and poverty, men felt marginalized within relationships, and because they are considered to be socially relatively more privileged than women, they don't get fair treatment from law enforcement. Most men determined their value in a relationship by their ability to provide for their partners' needs, especially materials needs. So most men would feel insecure in a relationship where their partner was also earning, or worse still, would consider it both an indictment and an affront to their sense of manhood and masculinity if she was earning more than he was. Men felt that their sphere of control was diminished not only by the fact that they struggle to provide for their partners' needs, but also the fact that sometimes the partner is also earning and therefore does not really the man [as a provider]. In the end, the man might become overly negative in the relationship and be prone to outburst of anger and sometimes violence. A key informant noted:

*Men are still stuck to the old notion of head of household and provider in relationships. They resist the fact the more women are now independent, and can earn their keep. Because they are earning, they may not need a man to do as a provider of material things, rather they need him for companionship, love and romance in a mutually respectful and balanced relationship.*

Most men felt that because of their perceived social position which is assumed to be higher than that of women, they do not get any sympathetic hearing from relevant authorities when they report some domestic issues and disturbance. Some men indicated law enforcement officers are known to laugh at and ridicule men who report their partner, especially if the dispute centers on their partners' violence behavior. Even socially, reporting a woman to the police or other authorities is interpreted as a sign of weakness. This leaves some men frustrated and this lends itself to violent behavior

*At home it can cause problems in this manner; when I come back from the police and they did not listen to me, I can kill someone [ke kgona go feleletsa...], that's why nowadays there are so many killings. After being neglected, I would have already given-up about seeking justice any more. So when I find her at home....I would kill her and then see what I can do with my life [suggesting suicide] ['ke ya go bolaya motho ke bo ke bona gore ke tswa jang'].*

## **Condoms & Sexual Risk Behavior**

The unfolding HIV epidemic in Botswana and the resulting education and prevention campaigns seems to have moderated men's view of condoms and sexual risk taking behavior generally. Most men indicated that indeed condoms have a very important role in sexual and reproductive health, including preventing the transmission of HIV and that it was everyone's responsibility to ensure that they were protected. Some men however noted that misconceptions about condoms are common:

*There is nothing wrong with condoms, I think they are good and necessary; the only problem with condoms is knowledge of use. People also have serious misconceptions about the condom. For example there is a popular belief that one can suffer kidney damage as a result of using condoms for a long time.*

*The female condom is good because it empowers women; it gives them an option when it comes to negotiating sex. The only problem is that even among women it is not popular. A lot of women refuse to use it, maybe because a lot of them do not have adequate knowledge of how to use it. Some complain that they are noisy and not easy to use. So they end up relying on the male condom. As males, of course we are the least knowledgeable about it.*

Some men spoke critically of condoms, indicating that condoms contain 'oils' [lubricants] which inhibit men's sexual performance. One man indicated that he once did an experiment after talking to his colleagues about the condom. He says he put condom into some water and that he could visibly see 'worms' [referring probably to the lubricants floating around in water]. To him, this was proof positive of the undesirability of condoms.

There was still a sense of fatalism among men, concerning the consistent use of condoms as well as their sexual pleasure seeking. Discussants indicated that some men would do anything to avoid using condoms, under the claim that condoms reduce sexual stimulation and pleasure. In one rural area, depressed economic conditions and very limited opportunities for meaningful employment were cited as the reason for women's over dependence on men's earning. In this area, a form of sexual partnering, almost akin to commercial sex work was prevalent, whereby women sometimes maintained multiple sexual partners solely for the purpose of economic support from more than one source. In this location, men were said to pressure women into not using condoms, arguing that 'when I give you my money, do I give it to you wrapped in

*plastic?*' To which the answer is, obviously, no! 'Well, then you have to give me what I want [*unwrapped service*] the way I want it - meaning unprotected sex.

Some men were ambivalent about the risk to their health resulting from inconsistent condom use. One man indicated that HIV risk is akin to a car accident, that '*you can drive at the required speed limit, obey all traffic regulations and even wear a seatbelt, but that does not prevent you from being involved in an accident*'.

In addition to the attitude of almost ambivalence to risk, men have this perception that they have little control over their body's urges when it comes to sex. Men were asked what they thought most men would do if they discover that they do not have condoms just as they were getting ready to have sexual intercourse. Most men indicated that they will be expected not to go ahead with unprotected sex if a condom was not available. But they doubted if or their colleagues would be able to restrain themselves if they discovered that they did not have a condom right at the moment when they were ready to have sexual intercourse.

*It will not be true or accurate or realistic to believe that many men in that situation will stop and not have sex because they can not find a condom. We know that condoms are freely available and people are picking them up.... but... (Interrupted)*

*Most men would go ahead and have sex; they will have gone too far to turn back. If you hunt lions, you are most likely to be killed by lions ('motsumi wa ditau o bolawa ke ditau'). (Group laughs); so since men seem to be on the prowl for sex; that is what will kill them in end!*

Another one summed up the fatalism this way '*the way I see it, God will have abandoned me if I get infected*'. One discussant summed this ambivalence to risk as a classic case of '*living by the sword, and dying by the sword*'

While men were not always eager about condoms, especially once the relationship has been going on for some time, they tend to be suspicious when their partner insists on condom use every time. The partner would be suspected of having an affair [i.e. *someone with who she 'enjoys' unprotected sex*] or that she is no longer interested in the relationship, while those who carry condoms are likely to be viewed as '*ready to have sex*' or promiscuous. A key informant observed:



*Even before the female condom, there was a move to encourage women to always have (male) condoms in their possession. But if a man saw you with a condom, he forms a bad impression about it. It's as if you are loose and are always ready for sex. It doesn't matter whether the man is your neighbor, your partner; friend or if he is still proposing love to you. The reaction is the same, if they get to know that you carry condoms, the impression they have is that you are loose and always ready for sex.*

Another key informant noted the tendency for the condom to drop off once the relationship, even with multiple sexual partners, has been going on for sometime.

*Men who have multiple sexual partnerships do not necessarily use condoms, especially when that (secret) relationship has been going on for sometime, they stop using condoms. I am saying this because there are many cases of men, who are either married or have stable relationships, who also impregnate another woman. This to me suggests that they tend to stop using condoms the longer the relationship progresses. And the worst part is that he is likely not to be using a condom with his wife or stable partner.*

*Men do not necessarily use condoms every time even though they might have multiple partners. When he wants to have sex, he does not consider how many other people he has had sex with that day. He will just go ahead and have sex.*

## **Discussion**

This paper has explored men's perception relating to their manhood and other factors that might influence their sexual and reproductive health, including HIV/AIDS. Men's primary perception of themselves, as strong, independent heads of households who wield control over their families presents many problems. Faced with declining socio-economic conditions, unemployment and poverty, many men experience a diminished sense of self worth derived from the fact that they are finding it increasingly difficult to fulfill their social expectations. This diminished sense of self worth has been linked to risky and aggressive and behavior, lack of self control and excessive indulgence in alcohol (Stillion, 1995). Silberschmidt (2004] underscores importance understanding the impact of changing socio-economic conditions on the construction of masculinities and male sexuality as a key ingredient to programs aimed at male involvement in sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention. The results of this research suggest that socio-economic conditions are indeed relevant to men's sense of identity and their sexual and reproductive health attitudes and practices.

The fact that most sexual and reproductive programs have an almost exclusive female focus has not only sponsored male's lack of involvement in these programs, but has also created a certain level of unease about these programs. Men are not sure what their roles are, or what to make of their perceived loss of power, especially where these programs challenge some of the fundamental spheres of men's authority. As a consequence, men tend to view women's empowerment and equality with suspicion, almost as if these are designed to usurp men's power. Within relationships, such feelings of diminished worth and suspicion leads to frustration, increased propensity towards violence and sexual aggressive and risky practices.

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