

## **Title: HIV/STI risk perceptions and protective actions among adults with concurrent sexual partnerships: a study of Mexican sexual biographies.**

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### **Background:**

There is evidence of the relevance that concurrent partners have on the spread of HIV/AIDS pandemic (Mah & Halperin, 2008; Potts et al., 2008; Epstein, 2007; Adimora et al., 2002; Morris & Kretzschmar, 2000). However, it is not clear yet if this risk is perceived by the persons experimenting those relationships, or by those who find out or suspect that their partner have had a sexual relationship with another person. Previous research recognizes the importance of the socio-cultural context in which concurrent sexual relationships occur, to be able to understand the STI risk (Tsui et al., 2008). A new approach to study the risk of HIV infection is the examination of the sexual biography and the circumstances in which sexual activity occurs. The material conditions of sexuality (place of sex, access to condom, etc.), the partner situation (partners seeking, ruptures, simultaneous homo-bi-hetero sexual relationships) and the accumulated sexual experience also influences HIV/AIDS prevention (Bozon, 2004; Simon & Gagnon, 1984). The identification of specific circumstances that increases the risk is essential to design prevention strategies culturally appropriate.

### **Objectives:**

The objective of this paper is to identify the perception of risk among heterosexual males and females that have had concurrent partners or that know that their partner have them, the normative and cultural reference that prevent or promote this perception and the actions and responses regard the risk perceived.

### **Methods:**

In 2006, we conducted a study of sexual biographies in five regions of Mexico to capture some of the cultural diversity (men, women, MSM; single, in union, separated; rural/urban). Persons interviewed were 16 to 56 years old, ages that allow to examine different length of sexual experiences. 80 in-depth interviews of the sexual life were collected. The design of the interviews guideline was a combination of two approaches: the first part used a free open question, and the second part followed a semi-structure method. The objectives of the main research project were a) To study sexuality and its related risks from a life course angle also known as the biography perspective; b) To analyze the sexual trajectory of people in different Mexican context; and c) To identify specific moments and circumstances that increase the risk in order to plan prevention strategies culturally appropriate and to develop new and better indicators to estimate different aspects of sexuality in Mexico.

For this paper, we will analyze 29 in-depth interviews, 16 women and 13 men heterosexual sexually active who reported concurrent sexual partners, either the interviewees have simultaneous partners or their partners had concurrent partners, or they suspected they have them. The analysis includes the socio-demographic characteristics, the life conditions, the stage of the life cycle in which the simultaneous partner is occurring, the characteristics of the couple, the social norms about sexual exclusivity and the gender actions and discourses, knowledge of HIV/STI and previous diagnoses, and the perception of risk and strategies followed.

The program Atlas.Ti 0.5 was used for the qualitative analysis.

## Results:

### *Types of concurrent partners*

Following the characterization of Gorbach et al. (2002) and Drumright et al. (2004) with respect concurrent partners, we identify for both men and women, different types of concurrent partners. First, we separated the interviews into two, those who reported no sexual concurrency and those who reported to have had or whose partners have had or suspected they have had simultaneous partners. In those cases that the interviewee has had concurrent partners, it was found that women mainly fall in the category of experimentation or reactive concurrency. In the case of men, a greater variation was found. The main types of concurrent partners for men were experimentation, compensation and co-parents concurrency. In Mexico, a new category is reported that is not mentioned in the literature: a person having two stable partners in parallel, in general, a formal partner of marriage and another partner in a second home also stable, in layman terms known as the “big house” and the “small house”.

In the case of Mexico, we found important the scenario of bisexuality and risk perception and protection were associated to sex of the concurrent partner. When women knew their partners had other partners that not always were of the opposite sex, i.e., their husbands had homosexual relationships outside their marriage, the risk perception and protection were higher.

As the literature has previously mentioned, concurrency by experimentation is most frequent during the youth period, while the reactive and by compensation concurrency partners are more frequent during the marriage period.

### *Perception of risk*

The risk of HIV/AIDS is perceived differently depending on the type of concurrent partner. Among concurrent partners of long duration which involves love feelings, there is some or null perception of risk. Women do have more concern when they know that their husbands have other partners. Women perceived specific risks of HIV if the other partners of the husbands were men. In general, the greatest concern was for HIV and not for STI. Men only perceive risk if they consider that their simultaneous partners have a “disorderly” life. When their concurrent partners are married women or young women with little experience, in general, they perceive no risk. During the interviews only when they were pointed out that when having married women as concurrent partners they were entering into larger sexual networks through the husbands of those women, men perceive the risk.

### *Social Norms*

The sexual exclusivity appears as the moral mandate derived from the conjugal duty present in the catholic ideology that is part of the Mexican society (generally mentioned with the term of fidelity). However, it is not explicit; it is an agreement of the members of the couple, i.e. an implicit rule of what is expected in a union/marriage. Some justifications are expressed by men for breaking the sexual exclusivity, such as restrictions on the sexual intercourse (for example, a pregnancy, temporal absence for related work motives, etc.).

*“[was he unfaithful?] Yes, because as I said, for work he has to be out of town. So he, yes, well, he cannot abstain” [Ursula, 34 years, separated, DF]*

*“What happens is that I feel that she knows that I have a relationship outside marriage and accepts it. ... I am a person very active sexually, but I have never dismiss my children or my wife, in the sense that on week-ends I dedicate to them completely, ....., but the situation is that in my marriage there could be weeks with no sexual activity, we do not have any closeness [of this type], we love each other very much, ... but in the sex we are very different.” [Omar, 40 year, married, Tijuana].*

These reasons are a permission of the not compliance with fidelity. This is reinforced by the social norm of masculinity that leads men to have more sexual partners than women.

“My mother in-law also was giving me advice: if men ask something different, to do it in another way (with regard to sex), we have to do it and have to feel it, because if not sometimes they find other women.” [Carmen, 27 years, married, Cuautla]

“Well this is how it goes, I as a man, before going to bed I have an erection every day, when I wake up I have another erection; this is always, and before I go to bed I always think in my partner and I have my partner next to me, no?, that is to say, how do I explain it, this is something that is very necessary for your sexuality, if you do not have it, well you go and look for it, no?” [Gerardo, 33 years, married, San Cristóbal de las Casas]

Not in all contexts of Mexico is allowed that women have simultaneous partners by compensation. In general, it is allowed for men but not for women. The case of the north region of Mexico (border with USA) is an exception, adult females justify having simultaneous partners because of lack of emotional and sexual connection within their stable partners, while young girls of this region declared having simultaneous partners while they are going steady with someone to experiment new sensations.

#### *Responses to the perceived risk*

Responses of protection toward the perceived risk includes test of diagnostic, stopping of sexual relations, use of condom or separation from the partner. Other persons choose to expose themselves to greater risks, after weighing other risks and which are considered more important (loosing the partner, loosing economic stability, etc.), and thus, the risk of infection is dismissed. For example, when facing an infidelity declared by the partner, some women decide to get pregnant as a stabilizing element of the marriage. These results in women promoting sexual intercourse without protection, when the evidence is clear respect the simultaneous multiple partners and the perception of STI/HIV risk derived by the simultaneity.

In Mexico, it is proven that different types of concurrent partners result in diverse risk perception. In general, among reactive concurrent partners no protection is used. If the concurrent partner is by experimentation there is a better estimation of the risk, and therefore, condom is used more. When the type of partner is occasional and perceived as “loose” there is more justification to use condoms.

#### **Conclusions:**

Sexual risks are present in the lives of men and women because of concurrent partners, but not always the situation is perceived as one of HIV/STI infection. When the risk is perceived, the responses maybe of protection or of self exposition of greater risk, depending on the social conditions of the individual, other risks perceived, etc. It is important to conduct sexual education campaigns for the adult population, where promotion of condom use is reinforced specially in situation of concurrent relationships.

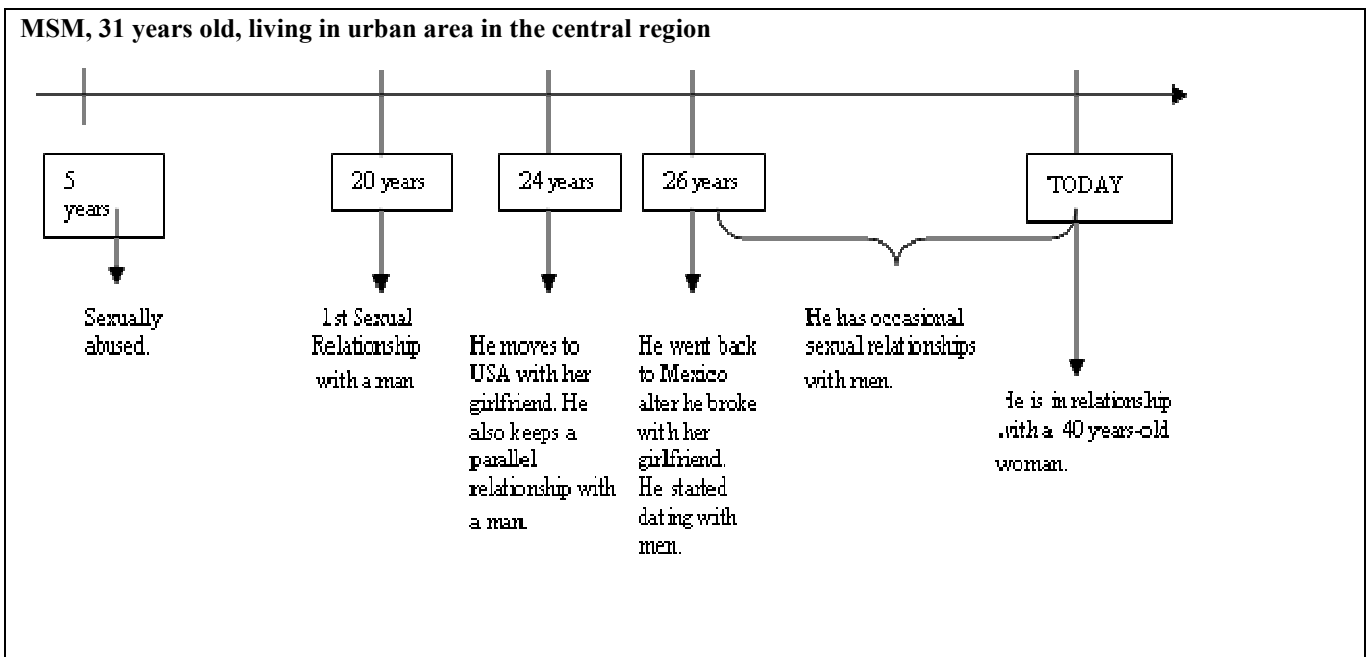
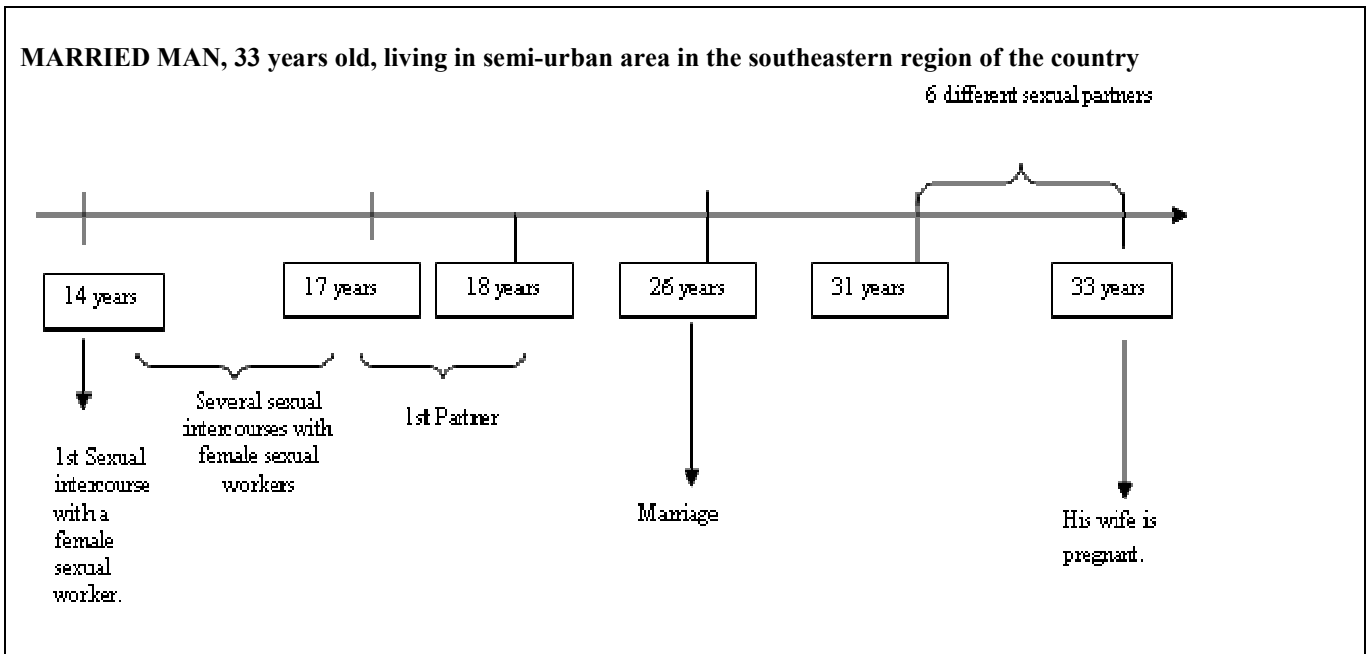
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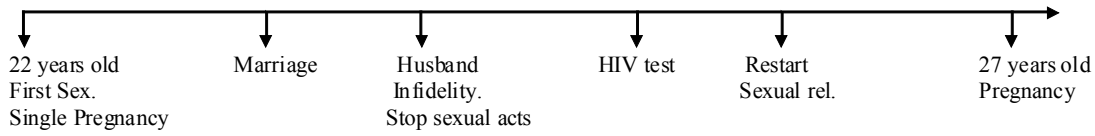
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ANNEX

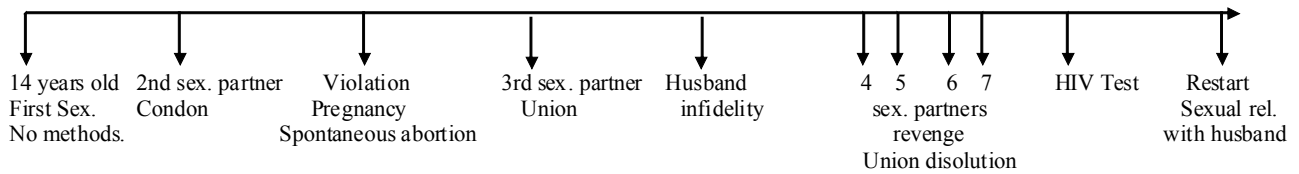
Examples of sexual trajectories with simultaneous partners (own or from the partner)



**MARRIED WOMAN, 27 years old, living in urban area in the central region**



**SINGLE WOMAN, 19 years old, living in metropolitan area (country capital)**



**DIVORCED WOMAN, 44 years old, living in metropolitan area (country capital)**

