

The Gender Perspective

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Defining the Problem

Having multiple concurrent partnerships is an age old problem, especially among married couples. This paper acknowledges that the problem is also common among young unmarried people but seeks to discuss the issue from the perspective of married couples. For a working definition and for the purposes of this paper, MCP is defined as having more than one sexual partner in either cultural or religious practice, or even in extra marital sexual affairs. The latter has come to be called *mpango wa kando*¹ in the Kenyan context.

In most cultures, a woman is blamed for the sexual marital unfaithfulness of her husband. If the husband is unfaithful it means that the wife has either not cooked well, has not satisfied the man sexually or has not adorned herself well enough for her husband to be attracted to her. This kind of cultural belief leaves the woman, whose man is having multiple concurrent partners, with self pity and self blame.

Recently, a woman narrated the following: “I was recently sharing with a woman church lay leader (one that I respect like my own mother) in a rural congregation that my husband and I were having a misunderstanding. Even before I had explained to her the nature of my problem, she pointed to my private parts and said, ‘It all starts there.’ She had concluded that the problems in my marriage were the result of my not satisfying my man. She added that all that a man needs for him to be tamed is to fill his belly and to satisfy him sexually.”

The above is repeated to women over and over again. Few people are willing to listen to a woman’s problems when it comes to marital unfaithfulness. This silence towards a woman’s issues is there irrespective of whether the man is providing for his family or satisfying the woman sexually. If a woman dares to try having extra marital relations, she receives a bag full of blames. After all, as Christians, we uphold the woman to be submissive to her husband by quoting Ephesians 5:22, which is part of marriage liturgy in some of our churches. In many

¹ The phrase *mpango wa kando* was coined and used by a popular media house in Kenya to instil behavior change in this age of the HIV pandemic. The media presenter begins by saying that research has shown that HIV mostly spreads among married couples. He then shows a picture of a married man persuading a woman, who is not his wife, to have sex with him. He ends the presentation with the following caution: “**Men, leave mpango wa kando, escape from HIV infection**”. In another advertisement, the presenter shows the picture of a married woman in a salon being attended to by a male hairstylist who touches her to imply that he can offer more than a hairdo. Again, the presenter cautions: “**Woman, leave mpango wa kando, escape from HIV infection**”. The TV presenter is not ignorant of the other modes of HIV transmission, instead, he is aware that in sub-Saharan Africa, the major mode of transmission is unprotected heterosexual union of two persons where one is HIV positive and the other is HIV negative.

situations, during World Council of Churches' capacity building trainings focusing on sexual and gender based violence as well as HIV transmission and the bible, women have pointed out that prevailing misinterpretations of Ephesians 5 create conditions for violence against women.

Certainly, MCP is encouraged by gender power imbalances between women and men, even in marriage, yet there is no ambiguity that women and men are created equal in the eyes of God (Genesis 1:27-28). The effect thereof is that the woman is degraded—her God-given dignity and self-worth is eroded—and she is thus seen and treated as powerless, a sex object, and a passive recipient of men's domination. And unfortunately, in many circumstances, men are treated like small gods! The result is that we have come to relish patriarchy as the only way human society can be organized.

As Christians and as Africans (we are deeply religious people), gender issues are about human relationships. Gender issues are as much theological as they are social and cultural. Therefore, addressing MCP is not simply a social or cultural matter. Instead, it is a deeply theological and ethical matter as much as the HIV pandemic is more than a medical or scientific challenge. As Nyambura Njoroge has observed elsewhere:

Essentially we are confronted by deep broken relationships and many social injustices at different levels and contexts. In effect, we are confronted by massive spiritual, ethical, pastoral and theological challenges, which have deep implications for the church of Christ. (Njoroge, 2009, p.3)

Defining Gender

What is Gender? How do religion and culture construct and sustain gender differences? How does this construct influence MCP?

MCP is a social construct just as gender is. In defining gender, several scholars have noted that gender is a social construct of men and women. Geeta Rao Gupta describes it as “a culture-specific construct.” Gupta further argues that there are significant differences in what women and men can or cannot do in one culture as compared to another. But it is fairly consistent across cultures. (Dube, 2004, p.86)

To say that gender is a cultural construct means that gender cannot be regarded as natural or divine. It has to do with the relationships of men and women. However, it is appropriate to mention that there are those who insist that gender also includes the biological sexual make-up of a female and a male, and subsequently claim that gender is natural and divine (see Igo, 2009).

Therefore, since gender is culturally constructed, it goes without saying that it can be culturally deconstructed, reconstructed and transformed (Dube, 2004, p. 86). Dube shows that in most African cultures, men are constructed as leaders, thinkers, public leaders, decision makers and property owners. On the other hand, women are constructed as domestic beings that belong to the home and the kitchen. Women are seen as mothers, wives, and dependants on the male property, be it belonging to the brother, husband or father. Women are constructed as silent, powerless, submissive, unintelligent, emotional, well-behaved, unquestioning, obedient, and faithful to one man and husband.

Culture has taught us that a good woman is the one who:

- Takes care of her home, has babies (when she cannot conceive, she is stigmatized, and her barrenness is a good reason for divorce and/or for the man to marry a second wife to bear children);
- Takes care of her family by cooking, cleaning, and looking after the babies;
- Hardly questions anything;
- Is sexually faithful to her husband.

We are taught that a good man is the one who is:

- Fearless
- Brave
- A property owner
- A leader
- Has more than one partner (in some cultures)

Hence, gender as culturally constructed creates the sense of power and powerlessness. It dictates how power is distributed between men and women. This contributes a lot to the causes of MCP. It should also be noted that in most African cultures, gender stereotypes are defined using imagery, songs, sayings, myths and proverbs. The following are just a few:

- Among the Agikuyu (a Bantu people) of Kenya, a man is referred to a cock, hence, he is believed or excused to possess the cock spirit in relation to sexual relations. A man is also described as a bull and he-goat. This all serves to sanction the multiple sexual partners he may have. In addition, the Agikuyu people's songs were composed and sung to praise men who were seen as attractors. A man who attracted many females was named "*Kiumbi*" (literally meaning the attractor). He was the one most girls liked to hang out with and even to dance with. Mostly such men ended up being polygamous or even having many partners outside of marriage.
- Musa Dube explains that in the Setswana culture:
 - Older women take the new bride and counsel her so painfully until she cries.
 - These are some of the things she would be told:
 1. You must endure marriage, it will be difficult;
 2. My child, a man is never asked where he went or slept;
 3. A man is a calabash that is passed around.

Culture expects and tolerates a man's sexual unfaithfulness." (Dube, 2004, p. 91)

In most African cultures, men are encouraged to maintain their manhood in old age. That is why sometimes, when their wives are past menopause, these wives find younger women for their husbands. In most cases, it is the older men who use their money to lure young girls. These young girls also have younger sexual partners among their peers, hence the occurrence of trans-generational heterosexual sex which is a major driver of HIV transmission among young people (15-24 years).

Empowering Gender Perspectives

Thus said, it is important for us to pause here and remind ourselves that even though patriarchy and these socially and culturally constructed gender roles are deeply entrenched even in

Christianity and the bible for that matter, they for sure restrict women's choices and erode their God-given dignity. However, they do not render women powerless as evidenced by the existence of women's movements and the ever-growing women's leadership in responding creatively and constructively to the HIV pandemic in Africa.

Despite all the limitations everywhere we turn, from our religious communities to the extended families, women have provided commendable leadership in confronting the HIV pandemic. One just needs to sample a number of support groups of HIV positive people and most personally affected in a community and one will find that majority of these groups are led by women. The fact that most of our religious institutions are male-dominated in leadership has not stopped women from asserting their God-given creativity in nurturing a social movement or vaccine to eradicate the HIV pandemic and to declare zero tolerance on sexual and gender based violence in our homes, churches, theological institutions and society at large. Certainly, the movement against these evil forces is very fragile and youthful, but there is no turning back.

More and more women are refusing to internalize gender roles that limit their ability to enjoy their womanhood and God-given gifts and talents. Women have spoken out, and others have written about what works and what does not work in HIV prevention, especially in marriages where women, because of gender constructed perspectives, are restricted from negotiating for safe sex. After all, women have also demonstrated that HIV prevention is more than sexual behavioural change. Rather, it involves addressing many social injustices, including gender and global economic injustices. Most importantly, women have also clearly demonstrated that gender perspectives are not just to do with women. Rather, they require both women and men to address the challenges facing them and together, look for solutions. However, given the preponderance in our churches, it does not surprise us that a community of African women theologians have provided leadership in addressing gender perspectives as they are constructed in our various cultures and churches/Christianities. They have also addressed how we can transform patriarchal structures and institutions in our time and how to nurture gender justice in the name of Christ Jesus —the Alpha and Omega of our lives.

Therefore, in our search for African solutions in the era of the HIV pandemic, as Christian women, we have acknowledged that both the bible and culture play central and fundamental roles in the way we behave, believe and are socialized. It is also important to point out that even the kind of Christianity we adhere to matters. Christianity in Africa has been shaped in a wide variety of ways and by different historical times which we cannot delve into due to space and time constraints. Suffice it to say, there is a lot of research needed in this area.

The Tamar Campaign

To address gender perspectives in Africa, we must critically scrutinize, interrogate and search deeper into the scriptures (and their diverse cultures despite the historical distance) and in our cultures the will of God for women and men today. In other words, we must discern what it means to be human (female and male), sexual and spiritual beings. To this end, there has been the Tamar Campaign in the last five years if not more. Somehow, the incestuous narrative story of Tamar and Ammon, two children of King David in 2 Samuel 13, has opened up ways of addressing gender perspectives in our modern contexts. The narrative has also helped us to identify theological and ethical aspects when we address gender power dynamics. Without

detailing how women and men throughout sub-Saharan Africa are using the Tamar narrative to address gender perspectives, a few things are in order:

- The text gives us the courage to voice gender injustices in the churches and in our Christian homes, because David was both a political and religious leader, and if the injustices happened in his household, what about our own? Self-scrutiny is the beginning of addressing and understanding gender perspectives.
- Tamar is like many women who are approached for sex and say a clear NO even when they are not believed. Despite Tamar dying a desolate woman in her brother's house, she has given many raped women the voice to tell their story and to find healing.
- Most often, it takes more than one person to violate another person's God-given dignity and humanity as happens in rape cases. Other people are involved in the cover-up and silence that surrounds both sexual and gender-based-violence. [Here we acknowledge that even men get raped (by women and men), even though many cases go unreported and are not as frequent as those perpetrated against women].
- The narrative has forced men to ask very critical questions: Why do men rape? Why don't we believe women when they say no to sex? Why do we silence those who are raped? As Christian male leaders, what must we do to practice zero tolerance to sexual and gender based violence?
- The text has given both women and men the opportunity to scrutinize and interrogate human relationships, femininity, masculinity, patriarchy and gender perspectives.

No doubt, this is not the only narrative in the scriptures that can help us understand gender perspectives in our various contexts, but it has been the most powerful so far because it explicitly names rape in the bible and helps to demonstrate culturally and socially constructed gender roles and perceptives. However, scrutinizing gender perspectives in a marriage setting can help explain why women name marital rape as one of the causes of HIV transmission and a violation of God-given dignity.

Widowhood

Another area women in particular have called for critical gender analysis and deconstruction and reconstruction of gender power dynamics is the status of widowhood. Using Kenya as an example, when a woman loses her husband by death, many Christians, including her pastor and her fellow women friends, exhort her "to stay with Jesus". In other words, she should be "married to Jesus" and bury her sexual needs. But the same people will work very hard to ensure that a widower remarries within a very short time, especially if he is a clergy. Another example is of an incident that happened in Nigeria during a workshop for women Christian leaders on gender and the HIV pandemic. When participants were asked to introduce themselves, one of the participants said she has two husbands - her husband and Jesus. Before she sat down, a woman rose up and insisted that Jesus is not her husband because Jesus is the husband of widows!

Headship

The last example we highlight is the whole business of headship in the home between husband and wife as expressed in the household codes found in the epistles, especially Ephesians 5. When we were growing up in the village, many of our Christian homes were adorned with Christian writings and bible passages. The most common was: "Christ is the head of this household, a

silent listener ...” For some of us, we were taught to respect and obey our parents, but from these words, we knew there was one head, who, even though not visible, was ever present. Therefore, when we later encountered church teachings that husbands are the head of the home, we were left confused. Unfortunately, this teaching (reinforced by some of our cultural beliefs and practices) has led to many dysfunctional Christian homes where women and girls are not valued and are treated as second-class members of the family. Is it indeed true what we hear in many weddings that the man is the head and the woman is the neck? Then who is Jesus between husband and wife? Can the two enjoy equal partnership complementing each other with their God-given gifts and skills? Do we know of equal partnerships in marriages? Simply put, there is urgent need to examine gender perspectives and human relationships in the African family in the light of the gospel, even as we try to understand the causes and effects of MCP.

African Solutions

As much as the HIV pandemic is a global health crisis, there are things Africans must do to provide African solutions. In our view, one of the first solutions must be to create safe havens where women and men (age segregation is necessary) interrogate and discuss human sexuality, gender power dynamics and healthy human relationships in the context of our cultures, our scriptures and our Christianities. Secondly, we need theologies that promote human dignity, justice, peace and fullness of life. In Africa, the HIV pandemic has been a magnifying mirror. We have seen the hidden “cobwebs”, especially in the ways we live out our sexuality and our spirituality which are not life-affirming and life-giving. Thirdly, as we reach out to the larger society for gender justice, we need havens where repentance, forgiveness and healing can take place as we declare zero tolerance on sexual and gender based violence as well as MCP in the families, churches and theological institutions.

Causes of MCP

1. Transactional Sex and Commercial Sex

Women tend to use sex to fulfil desires; to afford a desired lifestyle. This demonstrates the vulnerable economic status of women. On the other hand, men tend to offer ‘rewards’ or expected ‘gifts’ to achieve pleasure. In the case of commercial sex, men purchase sex as a commodity. This shows how economic status influences relationships. In cases of transactional sex, sex is a means to an end and the person does not really count.

2. Trans-generational Sex

The women may feel that older men are more experienced and they know how to give pleasure. The fact that they offer gifts is an added advantage as it helps the women to attain the desired lifestyle. Such women may have sex with their peers just for fun. On the other hand, the men view the younger generation of women as clean, that is, without infections. They see them as less complicated, more appealing, more desirable and less likely to assert their will. Men and women engage in such relationships in pursuit of pleasure and risk their own health and life especially in this era of HIV and AIDS.

3. Cross-gender Sex

Women and men who engage in same sex relationships do so to disguise their sexual orientation from an intolerant society. This heightens the risk of acquiring a sexually transmitted infection or HIV when the partners perform anal or oral sex, or when they share sex toys.

4. Socialization

It is society that defines gender and gender roles. We have been socialized to believe that men are ideally polygamous by nature, and that real men should or must have multiple partners. Images of the bull and the cock have been used to describe this negative masculine behaviour. On the contrary, we are socialized to believe that a woman must be faithful to her husband and she cannot and must not have more than one partner. If she does, she is considered to be cheap and promiscuous.

The society has made us to believe in male superiority, authority and invincibility and in female inferiority, submission / subjugation and fragility. Women are seen to have no say on when, with whom and the number of times to have sex. They are only perceived as recipients of the male sperm and providers of sexual pleasure. They are not expected to 'enjoy' or 'know' how to engage in sex; prowess in sexual technique suggests promiscuity. On the other hand, men decide when, with whom and the number of times to have sex. They are seen as the masters of the game. These perceptions serve to perpetuate gender stereotypes as well as retrogressive behavior. They exhibit cultural hypocrisy and contradiction. We can therefore surmise that the socialization process is fraud, inadequate, irrelevant and contradictory.

5. Culture

All human beings are within a given culture that sets the norms and regulates behavior and the code of conduct. Culture has constructed gender in a way that gives MCP a place in most African cultures. To illustrate the point, most Kenyan communities traditionally practised polygamy where the man was seen as wealthy and powerful if he had many wives. Among the Agikuyu, it was men with many wives who were elevated to positions of leadership. Many reasons that led to polygamy besides the obvious reason of prestige include a barren wife or a wife who only produced girls. Today, many men tend to have mistresses as opposed to many legal spouses.

Few communities practised polyandry. However, in communities where this was not practised, there were instances when a woman was allowed to have more than one partner. For example, if the man was impotent, the wife could sleep with a friend or next of kin to produce children for the man. Another example is that of communities that practised wife sharing. This is where people of the same age group would share their women, for instance, among the Maasai, a man would plant a spear outside the hut of his age mate to warn him that he was having an affair with his wife.

6. Conservative Perceptions and Expressions

Conservative perceptions and expressions of socially, culturally and religiously prescribed gender roles, relations and behavior are causes of MCP. Promiscuous behavior prohibited for women by virtue of being female causes them to become victims of cultural hypocrisy and contradiction, because by the same breath, promiscuous behavior and practice are permissible for men by virtue of being male. It goes without saying that for a man to engage in promiscuous behavior, he must be involved with a woman equally promiscuous.

7. Polygamy

This refers to when men have more than one spouse, including mistresses and/or concubines. Women are expected to have little say on the issue of polygamy. Culture has taught women that

they are to be taken care of, hence they seek for a man to play this role and provide for them. Gender stereotypes show that it is only women who can be mistresses. Meanwhile, both culture and some religions permit and sanction this practice for men where men, for instance, can continue to enjoy sex with other partners when the spouse is nursing a newborn. Also, since men are expected to be sexually active to the grave, they are culturally permitted (in most African cultures) to look for more sexually active, exciting, and attractive women to substitute for the “uninterested or uninteresting wife”. Again, gender stereotyping has it that men cannot be mistresses. This practice has heightened the risk of transmitting sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, particularly within a family.

8. *Religion*

Religion sets the divine parameters of our being and our moral standards. In the Old Testament, provisions in the Law of Moses, even through the Decalogue, forbid adultery. However, we have examples of MCP where great men of God were involved, although the bible is very clear from creation that God’s intention was one man, one woman. Such men are Abraham, Jacob and David to mention but a few. In the New Testament, the subject is not very much discussed.

9. *Economic Mobility and Education*

These two factors have led to a paradigm shift as women have become more learned and more economically empowered.

Effects of MCP

1. *Prevalence of Sexually Transmitted Infections*

Women are often asymptomatic, that is, they do not reveal symptoms immediately upon infection with HIV. The implications of the infections are far reaching and often result in a damaged reproductive system, HIV infection, cervical cancer, infertility and sterility. To top it all up, women end up bearing the blame. Unfortunately, both men and women are exposed to poor disease management.

2. *Unwanted Pregnancies and Unwanted Children*

A woman bears the responsibility of caring for the fetus and/or baby. In some communities, women bear shame and social ostracism if they are unwed and pregnant. Men are often unwilling to shoulder the responsibility of caring for unwanted children. In most cases, the man remains unknown unless proof of parenthood is presented. The implications are that some women perform risky back street abortions that put their reproductive health in jeopardy.

3. *Unstable Marital and Non-marital Relationships*

Women are often blamed for a breakdown in a relationship. On the other hand, men are sympathized with as the victims of women’s failures. The implication is that the family fabric, and the subsequent social fabric, is weakened.

4. *Physical and Emotional Abuses*

Physical and emotional abuses include sexual violence and date rape. In these types of abuses, women are usually on the receiving end. In some cases, women have been socialized to accept physical and sexual violence from their male counterparts as a normal part of being a woman. Men are often the perpetrators of both physical and sexual violence against the women. Early in their socialization, these men were made to believe that physical and sexual violence is the way to exercise their manhood and to control the woman. Recently, we have seen both men and

women become militant in gender activism to reject these forms of violence as part of daily normal life.

5. *Perpetuation of Gender Stereotypes*

This is with particular reference to relationships. Women have been socialized to believe that “men are philanderers by nature.” On the other hand, men who have abused women end up believing that they are conquerors. The implication here is that there is no end to gender conflict.

6. *Prevention and Non-use of Protection*

When women are unable to negotiate the use of condoms, the result is infection and conception. When insisting on the use of condoms, women feel that they risk physical violence for ‘suggesting’ unfaithfulness on the part of the man. On the other hand, men may claim that skin-to-skin sex is more pleasurable, more manly and that it is the real sex. For men, especially those that have not been empowered, when women request them to use condoms, it raises suspicion and therefore the men resist it to deny any promiscuity. In cases where they have multiple concurrent partners, men prefer to have both homemakers (usually the legitimate wife who remains at home and looks after the children) and lovers for pleasure and fun on the side. For them, getting infected is a badge of honor; it is an unavoidable ‘occupational’ hazard. The implication is the rising prevalence of STIs and HIV, unwanted pregnancies and abortions.

Discussion Points

1. Share experiences of how you were socialized (raised in the family, village, school, church, etc.) and how that has shaped what you know and believe about gender perspectives. Name particular passages in the bible that you recall as crucial regarding this topic.
2. Identify examples where women and men relate to one another with respect, fairness, equality and justice.
3. What is the one thing you will do after this consultation to nurture and/or teach healthy sexual relationships between married couples where both are fulfilled and enjoy fullness of life?