

# **The Socio-Cultural Perspectives of MCP**

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## **Swaziland: An Overview**

According to the Demographic Health Survey done in 2007, the HIV prevalence rate of Swaziland is 26% for ages 15 – 49, and the prevalence rate for women attending antenatal clinics dropped slightly from 42% in 2004 to 39% in 2006. These estimates are said to be the highest in the world. Studies have shown that life expectancy has fallen from 60 years in 1997 to 31.3 years in 2004. Projections were that it would fall further down to 27 years by the year 2010. In a country with a population of about 1 million, the nation's very existence is threatened. There is a need to use every possible strategy, including culture, to turn the situation around as the socio-cultural factors impacting on the spread of HIV are diverse.

About 80% of the population lives in rural areas where conditions are harsh, and the result is that people migrate into the cities and industrial towns. The rural population depends on subsistence farming. Poverty in the country is rife. About 70% of the population lives on below \$1 per day. Unemployment is above 40%.

Swaziland is a country that is reputed to have been able to combine modern ways with tradition in its form of governance. It is patriarchal, with all the attendant challenges with regard to the status of women in society. The family is male dominated and is established through heterosexual marriage.

Swaziland is a single culture society with SiSwati as its indigenous language. There are a variety of socio-cultural factors that encourage risky sexual behavior. These include marital relations, the economy, gender inequality as well as beliefs and cultural practices.

## **Marriage**

### ***Forms of Marriage***

There are two forms of marriage recognized by the law in the country, namely, the civil marriage and the Swazi customary marriage. A couple may choose to use both forms. A man may not marry one wife in the one form and choose to marry another in the other form. If this happens, it becomes bigamy. Swazi men, however, will often choose to marry according to Swazi custom because it places no restriction on the number of wives they might decide to marry later. It is not uncommon for a man to marry his wife in civil rites and then decide to become a polygamist. In the majority of cases, the civil rite wife chooses not to challenge the husband legally for the sake of peace. Polygamy has been viewed as one of the major factors in the spread of HIV as the people involved cannot guarantee faithfulness. The biblical teaching against polygamy is lucidly clear. It emphasizes one husband and one wife who in marriage are no longer two but one flesh (Matthew 19:6).

### ***Procreation***

Culturally, the main purpose of marriage is procreation. A childless marriage is regarded as unfortunate, and the blame is always directed at the woman. To address the problem, the wife's family arranges for a younger sister to come to her home and bear children for her elder sister who is perceived to be barren (*inhlanti*). If, however, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that it is the man who is sterile, the senior members of the man's family arrange for the brother of the man to have sexual relations with his brother's wife in order to bear children for him. This practice is contrary to the Old Testament teaching, which only allows the living brother to bear children for his deceased brother if he dies childless (Deuteronomy 25:5).

Culture is tolerant towards a man who engages in extra-marital affairs in order to get children. It should be noted that the preferred child is a boy. When one only produces girls, the reaction is to keep on having children until the desired boy arrives. In fact, the desire for a boy child can result in a large family. Whichever the solution may be to having children, the woman is subjected to stress and low self esteem. The biblical teaching affirms both the wife and the husband when it emphasizes that children are a gift from God (Psalms 127:3). Further, there is more to marriage than just getting children. For example, in marriage there is support which both partners should enjoy from each other (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). Most importantly, marriage symbolizes the union which Jesus has with his Church (1 Corinthians 6:17-19, Ephesians 5: 23-27).

The Swaziland Human Development Report (SHDR) of 2008 indicates that while some of the practices described above originally had a good purpose, that purpose has eroded and men have tended to conveniently invoke culture to get sex from unwilling powerless women. The cultural gatekeepers have attempted to maintain and preserve some of the cultural practices described above even when they have been seen to have negative consequences in contemporary society.

### ***Wife Inheritance***

The other stressful condition in which a woman finds herself is when she loses her husband. The family arranges that she should be inherited by a male relative of the family (*kungena*). She has no choice on this matter. Further, there is no obligation for voluntary counseling and testing to establish the HIV status of each before they become husband and wife.

### ***Heroism Associated with Multiple Girl friends***

Swaziland is a patriarchal society. Therefore, a man who has more than one girlfriend is given a name that signifies that he is a hero (*inganwa*). On the other hand, a woman who has more than one boyfriend is described in derogative terms (*ingwadla*) - one who is loose or cheap.

### ***Casual Sex with a Sister-in-Law***

Culturally, it is normal for a man to have casual sex with the younger sister of his wife (*kulamuta*). This kind of relationship may lead to the young sister being married by the man. That this practice is considered adultery according to the bible (1 Corinthians 6:9) is alien. In Swazi culture, adultery occurs only when a man has an intimate relationship with a married woman.

### **Economic Factors**

### ***Migrant Labor and Dual Homes***

Lack of employment opportunities in the country cause some people to go out of the country to seek jobs, leaving their wives behind. Because of the extended period of absence from home, the men end up cohabiting with other partners where they work. Within the country itself, it is common practice for a man to leave his wife in his rural home and go to work in the urban areas. The practice of men cohabiting with another woman while working in the urban area is not uncommon.

### ***Sex Work***

Sex work in the country, especially in urban areas, is a common phenomenon. Young women come to urban areas seeking jobs and a better life. When these become elusive, in order to get food and accommodation, they cohabit with men, some of whom have left their wives behind in the rural homes. A study conducted by UNAIDS in 2007 shows that these women find sex work an attractive alternative. The study showed the following statistics about women involved in sex work:

- Not married, not living with sexual partner 76%
- Not married, but living with a sexual partner 9%
- Currently married, living with spouse 4%
- Currently married, not living with spouse or any other partner 4%
- Currently married, living with another sexual partner 9%

The reasons for buying sex as stated in the report include the fact that those involved in these extramarital relationships do not get what they want from their spouses. This challenges the Church to put in place good premarital and post marital counseling programmes. The report also covered male sex work. According to this report, male sex workers are driven to this service mostly by love of a certain life style. It is stated that they target the women who “can afford to take them to nice places and allow them to drive their nice cars.” These male sex workers are reported to be having sexual contacts with both male and female partners.

Sex workers speak of the *lobela campaign*. This is “when a sex worker knows she is HIV positive, but has sex without a condom,” and is not bothered at all. The report goes on to state that “at the end of the day, the sex workers boast over the number of men they have infected with HIV.” Commenting on the nature of sex work, the report states that “sex workers engage in sex with a very high number of different partners”. The sex workers see this service as a “lucrative trade because the average remuneration is almost ten fold that of the average wage of unskilled workers.” The sex workers boast of providing services to people from all backgrounds including the Church, business, government, professions, armed forces, foreigners, tourists etc. The sex workers also boast of providing their services to “married men and some high profile clients.”

According to the Swaziland Human Development Report of 2008, the socio-economic circumstances in the country have clearly resulted in the general decline in morals regarding sex. The response to this challenge needs to go beyond the teachings of the Church and be directed to all leaders in society to lead by example. There is need for moral regeneration.

### ***Trans-generational Sex***

For economic reasons, girls and boys turn to much older persons to provide them with sexual favors. The Swaziland Human Development Report of 2008 indicates that girls associate themselves with older men (sugar daddies) to get money and other luxury items such as cell phones and clothes. The same is true of boys. They fall in love with women above their age to get money and be driven in nice cars. This might explain the high prevalence rate of HIV among young persons of 15-19, 20-24 and 25-29 which is 6%, 25%, and 39% respectively. The right question to ask in circumstances like these is: What will it benefit people to enjoy the luxury that comes their way and lose their lives (Mark 8:36)?

### **Gender Inequality and the Status of Women in Society**

Culturally, women have been placed at a greater risk of HIV infection due to social and economic disempowerment. Women have no power to make decisions about sexual preferences. It is difficult for women to negotiate condom use even when they realize that the man has multiple and concurrent partners. The Swaziland Human Development Report quotes the example of a woman who was assaulted by a lover for negotiating condom use after which she submitted to unprotected sex. Such behavior and attitude towards women occur daily.

The SHDR study reported the inability of women to negotiate safer sex in the following terms:

Economic dependence makes women submissive because if the men, as the head of families, refuse to use condoms, they have to submit to unprotected sex. In such situations women's ability to insist on condoms use becomes impossible because if they refuse sex or insist on condom use, they risk abuse, accusations of infidelity, being abandoned or forced to leave the home.

The study concluded that:

Because of the general economic dependence of women on their spouses, their powerlessness, poverty levels and continued passive nature in sexual relationships, women's ability to fend off their risks of HIV and AIDS is seriously compromised. Very few women can negotiate safer sex for fear of risking violence, mistrust and recrimination, abandonment or withdrawal of financial support.

All this happens because of the low status given to women. The social environment contributes to the vulnerability of women to HIV. The cultural, legal and economic environment of the country disempowers women in exercising their privileges over sexual and reproductive behavior, while customary laws tend to give more privileges to men in decision-making relating to marriage, sex and family matters. Married women, even in terms of the law, are legal minors. They cannot acquire land even in rural areas under a chief.

Recently there was a landmark court decision in which a woman human rights activist challenged the government for not allowing her to register a property in her name when the constitution permitted it. The court ruled in her favor. It should be noted that the constitution has a provision that states in Clause 28 (3) that women are granted "the right to choose whether to uphold any custom their conscience is opposed to." However, the relevant constitutional provision does not help the situation of women in Swazi society because the woman is left on her own to face the formidable and rigid gatekeepers of culture. However, in Genesis 1:26, the bible

makes no distinction between men and women. It says that all are created in the image and likeness of God and are endowed with dignity and honor.

Under the circumstances described above, it is no wonder that the prevalence rate of HIV infection among women is very high. In 2004, the HIV prevalence peaked to 42.6% among women who attended antenatal clinics.

### **Beliefs with Negative Consequences**

Today, it is common to read of infants, as young as a few months old, and old women, as old as 70 or 80 years old, having been raped. This is because there is a superstitious belief that if an HIV infected man has intercourse with an infant or a virgin or an old woman who no longer sleeps with a man, he will become cleansed of the HIV infection and be cured. This is another example of the violation and disregard of human dignity as well as disrespect for the female sex.

Another superstitious belief is that a traditional healer can cure HIV. Therefore, instead of an infected person going to the hospital for help, the person wastes valuable time consulting with traditional healers who rely on witchcraft. In most cases, by the time the person goes to the hospital, it is too late. In the meantime, the man will have infected a number of women because of refusal to know his status.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to paint a picture of the gravity of the spread of HIV infection from the point of view of marriage and family as well as the economic, political, social and cultural aspects. The dual nature of the legal system, economic disempowerment and culture place women at a disadvantage, making it difficult for them to defend their rights. Meanwhile, the rate at which the HIV and AIDS pandemic is spreading is frightening.

Some of the questions we need to ask ourselves might be:

- (a) What can be done to make the custodians and defenders of culture to move with the times with regard to the place of women in society?
- (b) How can the legislators shape the laws such that they conform to international standards in terms of the rights of women so as to empower them to be able to make appropriate choices and decisions about their own bodies?
- (c) What strategies of advocacy can the Church and civil society use to influence positive attitudes towards women? How can the Church and civil society advocate for the promulgation of laws that currently intentionally support and empower women?