

## The Prevalence of Concurrent Sexual Partnerships among Students in Institutions of Higher Education in Zimbabwe

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**ABSTRACT** This study set out to establish the level of sexual activity and prevalence of concurrent sexual partnerships among students in two Faculties at a University in Zimbabwe. The study also investigated the extent and motivation for age-discrepant sexual partnerships and the possible link between multiple concurrent sexual partnerships and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Four research questions were posed to establish the level of sexual activity among university students, prevalence of concurrent relationships, motivation for and involvement in intergenerational sexual partnerships, and students' knowledge of the possible link between concurrent sexual behaviour and the spread of HIV/AIDS. A convenience sample of 145 student respondents (85 females and 60 males) was used in this study. A ten-item self-administered questionnaire and focus group discussion were used to collect the necessary data. The study found high levels of sexual activity (more for male than for female students) and high prevalence of concurrent sexual behaviour. The study also found that female students participated in concurrent sexual partnerships to benefit from the resources of their male partners while males were largely motivated around the sex motive. In spite of the high levels of knowledge about HIV/AIDS, high levels of concurrent sexual relationships were prevalent among students who participated in this study. This study confirmed results reported in the literature and has implications for the spread of HIV/AIDS.

### INTRODUCTION

Research shows that multiple sexual relationships have been investigated extensively the world over (Oliver and Hyde 1993; Prins et al. 1993; Laumann et al. 1994; Wright and Reise 1997; Morris 2002; Lindblad 2003). The prevalence of concurrent sexual partnership has been found to be high among both married and unmarried persons (Ellis and Symons 1990; Gold and Gold 1991; Bailey et al. 1994; Feldman and Cauffman 2000; Houston 2005) and the multiple partnerships have increased in spite of the equally high prevalence of HIV and AIDS (Vaughan and Vaughan 1998; Green 2003).

Studies of sexual attitudes and orientations of young adults in universities and colleges have of late also consistently shown more positive

attitudes towards premarital sex than 20 to 30 years ago (Johnston and Bachman 1991; Moore and Stief 1991; Sax et al. 1995; Adimora et al. 2002; Fielder and Carey 2010). This seems to be the case in normally conservative societies such as those where Islam is the major religion (Lacson et al. 1997). These shifts in attitude to premarital sex seem to suggest that a young person will be more likely than not to be in a sexual relationship with more than one person.

Multiple relationships are common but rates vary throughout many parts of the world and among societies and sexes (Feldman and Cauffman 2000; Adimora et al. 2002; O'Sullivan et al. 2006). A comparative study of sexual behaviour conducted by the World Health Organisation in the 1990s found that in some societies, proneness to multiple sexual partners was more prevalent than in others. For instance, men in Thailand and Brazil were more likely to report five or more casual sexual partners in the previous year as opposed to the men in Tanzania, Kenya, Lesotho and Zambia who reported much fewer (Chetty 2000; Marcus 2001). Very few of the women in the countries mentioned above reported five or more partners

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per year (Friedland et al. 1991; Kaya and Kau 1994). This finding that men tended to have more serial and concurrent sexual partners than females makes it worthwhile to investigate whether the same situation obtains among the young adults in universities and colleges.

Multiple sexual relationships take one of two forms or a mixture of both. The first is what has been called sequential or serial monogamy, attributed to Western cultures (Kretzschmar and Morris 1997; Halperin et al. 2006; Halperin and Epstein 2007). In their study, Halperin and Epstein (2007) state that sequential or serial monogamy is the tendency to have one relatively long-term (a few months or longer) partner after another or the 'one-off' casual and commercial sexual encounters that occur in many parts of the world. With respect to the incidence of HIV, this serial monogamy traps the virus within a single relationship for months or years and the spread of HIV is consequently slowed down (Halperin et al. 2006).

On the other hand, concurrent sexual relationships are those kinds of relationships that either overlap in time or where two or more partnerships continue over the same period or where one partnership begins before the other terminates (Onah et al. 2004; Ogbuji 2005; Sumnola 2005; Entou and Agwale 2007; Fielder and Carey 2010). This is different from having multiple partners over longer periods of time one after the other. For example, Entou and Agwale (2007) and Onah et al. (2004) found that undergraduate students still indulged in concurrent relationships and unprotected sex even though these undergraduates reported high levels of knowledge about HIV. Similarly, Fielder and Carey (2010) in a study of 118 first-semester female college students to estimate the prevalence of sexual hookups found that 51 % of these hookups were involved in oral, vaginal, or anal sex prior to college; 36 % during their first semester, and 60 % by the end of their first semester. The same study also found that hookups were more likely to involve friends (47 %) or acquaintances (23 %) rather than strangers (14 %); alcohol use (median = 3 drinks) preceded 64 % of hookups. Condoms were used during 69 % of vaginal sex hookups. These concurrent relationships have been found to be mediated and strengthened in university and college settings by such factors as lax supervision of students in those institutions and

sexual experimentation that is strongly influenced by drug and alcohol abuse (Kelly 2001; Otaala 2004). Concurrency was also reported to be strengthened by the acceptance of the notion of sex with love with the main partner and sex without love with the other partners.

Studies have found that women between the ages of 20 and 30 years in South Africa were involved in concurrent sexual relationships that had definite advantages in the form of money and material goods (Parker et al. 2007). An interesting emergent dimension in the attitudes of young women has been identified. The young women are developing the attitude that sex relations with someone who has a main relationship with another person is not of itself a disincentive for engaging in a sexual relationship with that person. This implies that the fact that a male partner is already in another sexual partnership does not in itself discourage the young female from engaging in sexual relations with that male partner (Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001; Epstein 2007). It appears that this attitude fuels the setting up and maintenance of massive concurrent relationships.

At a higher level of this attitude, the female no longer sees herself as merely the victim of mixed sexual relationships, that is, sex with older males or even young mates who have resources (Leclerc-Madlala 2004). The young female adult sees herself as a consumerist entrepreneur who gives sex in exchange for gifts and other 'modernist' items. This young female adult sees herself as an active agent and entrepreneur who deliberately exploits the partner(s) in the relationship. Silberschmidt and Rasch (2001) stated that indulgence in 'mixed' sex relationships (where the young women are likely to be part of large sex networks by older men) was not always the result of poverty. In their study, for example, Silberschmidt and Rasch (2001) found that Gauteng university women students exchanged sex for account payments and fashionable clothing, access to commodities that conferred a certain status and represented a sophisticated lifestyle. This finding was also supported by evidence from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Hunter 2005).

Poverty-driven sex exchanges among some of the young women in universities and their male partners cannot, of course, be underestimated. For example, Hallman (2004) found that there were great predisposing factors for poor

people in their exchange of sex for some necessities of life. The bargaining power of these young women for safe sex is highly compromised by their weak socio-economic status. However, the invoking of poverty as the only driver for sex exchanges seems to be simplistic. Selikov et al. (2002) and Hunter (2005) found that the existence of a combination of poverty with the current materialist/consumerist culture underpinned the wide prevalence of women's engagement in sexual relationships for conspicuous consumption.

The bargaining strength of the young female adult for safe sex remains highly compromised in the unequal exchange situation with older and more experienced male partners. The result, according to Martin and Alexander (2006), is a high rate of AIDS-related death among students in South Africa with the probability of tens of thousands of them being infected with the virus (but perhaps not yet ill). Martin and Alexander (2006) further report that the 2001 Medical Research Council Report considered that the overall prevalence for the group aged 15 to 29 (which included most of the university students in the present study) was at a rate of 18 % infection which was expected to rise to 20 % by 2010.

The motivations for young men engaging in multiple concurrent relationships have also been investigated. Research shows that in some cultures there are social, cultural, and economic reasons why multiple concurrent partnerships exist (Pettifor et al. 1996; Parker et al. 2000; Hunter 2005). In many societies, having multiple partners is a powerful signifier of masculinity and a relatively wealthy person is expected to have more than one sexual partner (Hunter 2005). The involvement of young men with several women at the same time is also promoted by the sexual double standard that is operative in many societies. The sex double standard frowns down upon the involvement of women in multiple relationships while at the same time holds a favourable disposition with respect to men who have more than one female sexual partner (Parker et al. 2000; Pettifor et al. 1996).

Concurrent sexual relationships themselves have implications for HIV infection and prevention (Kretzschmar and Morris 1996, 1997; Epstein 2004, 2007). For example, Epstein (2004) found that concurrency links sexually active people up in giant networks, not only to one another but also to the partners of their partners

via a web of sexual relationships that can extend across vast geographical regions. If one member in the network contracts HIV, then everyone in the web may also be at very high risk for contracting HIV. Epstein (2007) claims that the AIDS epidemic in Southern Africa is uniquely severe. In this study, Epstein (2007) reports that about 50 % of new infections occur in this region and 70 % of the people living with AIDS in the world live in Southern Africa home to less than 3 % of the world's population.

The HIV prevalence rate in the province of Zimbabwe in which this study was conducted is 20 % which is only second to one other Zimbabwe Province which has a prevalence rate of 21%. For an age-group comparable to the one under study the prevalence rate is about 14 % which although substantially lower than it was a few years ago, is still unacceptably high (National AIDS Council 2009). There is, therefore, a need to investigate concurrency among these young people since it is known to be a factor that helps to drive the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

In a similar vein, Morris (2002) states that depending on the country, between 10 and 20% of women engage in long-term concurrent relationships. However, much higher concurrency rates of up to 98 % were in a sample in KwaZulu-Natal (18-62) which overlapped in age range with the present sample (22-24) (Chopra et al. 2009). Sawers and Stillwaggon (2010) seem to argue against the facts when they state that concurrency in Sub-Saharan Africa is no higher than it is in other parts of the world. They cite claims from Drumright (2004) that concurrency could be as high as between 32 and 54 % among adolescents in the United States. This practice of formal and/or informal polygamy puts everybody in the network at risk for HIV. Epstein (2007) dubs the high speed at which HIV is transmitted through this network the 'superhighway' for the transmission of the virus. This situation implies that in Southern Africa the epidemic is not only restricted to the high-risk groups such as prostitutes, migrants and so on but everyone is at risk all the way from teachers, doctors, market traders and even cabinet ministers.

Research shows that concurrency has been found to be most prevalent in the high-risk age cohort between 18 and 25 years which covers the group that was studied in this research (Kelly

2001; Martin and Alexander 2006). For example, Martin and Alexander (2006) found ample evidence in the literature that shows large numbers of students who are sexually active from the teenage years with a peak in the 20's which is the modal age range for university students. Kelly (2001) has described as a 'culture of death' the tendency that is extant in the universities whereby women are open to sugar daddy practices, sexual experimentation, prostitution on campus, unprotected casual sex, gender violence, multiple concurrent partnerships. Other studies have reported similar concerns (Kaya and Kau 1994; Chetty 2000; Marcus 2001). These tendencies are exacerbated by university students living away from home and hence away from the direct influence of older adults from the various families (Technikon Pretoria 2001; Martin and Alexander 2006).

It is all the more important to study concurrency to inform policy in different countries. It has been observed that wherever there has been reduction in prevalence and incidence of HIV in Sub-Sahara Africa, there has also been an accompanying reduction in partners per person (Sawers and Stillwaggon 2010). This has been found to be true of Uganda and of late in Kenya and Zimbabwe (Shelton et al. 2004; Stoneburner and Low-Beer 2004; Hallett et al. 2006). It is also important to study concurrency because where there has been increase in condom use without corresponding partner reduction, HIV infection rates have not fallen (Hearst and Chen 2004).

**Goals of the Study:** This study sought to investigate the extent of concurrent sexual partnerships and its implications for HIV/AIDS among students in institutions of higher learning in two faculties at a university in Zimbabwe. The following research questions were used in this study: (a) What is the level of sexual activity of university students? (b) What is the extent of reported concurrent sexual partnerships among university students? (c) What is the extent and motivation for intergeneration sexual partnerships? (d) What implications for HIV/AIDS do the students perceive in relation to concurrent sexual partnerships?

## METHOD

**Participants and Setting:** One hundred and forty-five students (60 male, 85 female) from two

Faculties in a university in Zimbabwe participated in the study. All the participants were third and fourth year students expected to be very familiar with university social life. The choice of third and fourth year students was based on advice from university authorities that these students who were in the higher levels of their studies were more likely than those in the lower levels to engage in active sexual activities including multiple concurrent sexual partnerships.

This sample was made up of young men and women in the age range of 21 to 24 who were about to complete their first degrees in the Faculties of Education and Humanities and Social Sciences. The selection of the two Faculties was guided by the fact that although the Faculties were different, the students were comparable in a fundamental way. The students in the Faculty of Education were taught in their major and minor content subjects by teachers in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences while the Faculty of Education only taught those students Educational Foundations courses. Effectively, therefore, the students in this study were taught by roughly the same teachers.

The participants to this study were invited in their classes when the researchers went round to ask whether they would like to participate in a study that would inquire about their sexual practices and the relation of those practices to HIV/AIDS. The researchers sought the permission of the lecturers to allow a few minutes of their lecture time to be used for that purpose. The researchers then informed the students that those who were willing to participate would answer a self-administered questionnaire at a time that would be advised. The prospective participants were informed that there would be no incentives for participating in the study. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any moment.

**Instruments:** Two data collection methods were employed: a survey questionnaire and focus group discussions. The main instrument was a self-administered 10-item questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section solicited the bio-data of the each respondent and the second part sought data on level of sexual activity, prevalence of concurrent relationships, partnerships with much older and much younger mates and knowledge of the relationship between concurrent partnerships and HIV/AIDS.

**Questionnaire:** The researchers reached agreement on the purpose of the study, that is, to seek answers to questions about level of sexual activity, prevalence of multiple concurrent relationships, extent and motivation for age-discrepant sexual partnerships as well as knowledge of the possible connection between concurrent sexual behaviour and spread of HIV/AIDS. Researchers then agreed on the research questions that the participants had to answer. Questions for the questionnaire were then drafted in alignment with the research questions that were posed.

Researchers independently drafted as many questions as they could for each research questions. Researchers then came together, discussed and reached consensus on what questions should be included in the questionnaire making sure that the questions solicited all the information that was needed. Questions were also evaluated, in discussion, for clarity, utility and other attributes. The researchers agreed that the questionnaire was consensually valid (by agreement of people who had the correct level of expertise in the area). To make sure that the questionnaire would collect the data that was needed without presenting any difficulties to the respondents, the questionnaire was pilot tested with twenty students (ten males and ten females) from the Faculty of Management and Administration. Students in this Faculty were not available to participate in the main study. There were no major modifications to the questionnaire as a result of the pilot testing. The use of the questionnaire was influenced by the large number of respondents to be surveyed. In that respect, it was deemed the instrument of choice where participants in the study could be brought into one venue at each research site to take the survey at one time and was very economical in the use of time (Munn and Drever 1999).

**Focus Group Discussions:** Focus group discussions were used so that the study would be more revealing if the voices of some of the participants were heard on some of the key issues that surround the topical issues of concurrent sexual relationships among young men and women. Membership of the focus group discussion group was entirely voluntary and was made up of 10 male and 10 female student volunteers, respectively. The other purpose of the focus group was to probe or obtain in-depth information about the findings from the survey. Par-

ticipants were already aware that completion of the questionnaire would be followed by a focus group discussion for selected members of the participant group.

Early in the study, three young women and three young men had been identified who were particularly keen to be part of the study. Each of the three was requested to bring to the focus group discussion three other colleagues so that there would be a total of twelve members in the female focus group. The three young men were also given the same request. Each of the recruiters was given a limited number to recruit so that no one recruiter would bring in too many of his/her acquaintances to the focus group. It was feared that there would be a predominance of the same ideas if one recruiter was permitted to bring in too many of the discussants for the focus group discussion (Heckathorn 1997). These recruiters were informed it would take at least a week for the focus group discussion to be set up since it was necessary to obtain a rough analysis of the data from the questionnaires before the focus group could be conducted. This was necessary as some of the issues for the focus group would come from responses given on the self-administered questionnaire.

It was necessary to prepare a focus group guide for the moderator. It was deemed inappropriate for the principal researcher to be personally present at the focus group discussion considering that it dealt with matters very close to the private life of the students and the principal investigator's authority relationship with the students. It was believed that that relationship would interfere with free expression of ideas by the student-discussants.

One of the co-investigators (a young female) was trained to be moderator for the two focus group discussions one for the females and the other for the males. She was presented with draft questions for the focus group discussion. These questions were crafted around the research questions of the study, to seek any amplification to what the respondents had stated in their questionnaire responses. These questions were in connection with:

1. level of sexual activity
2. participation in concurrent sexual partnerships
3. extent of and motivation for engagement in sexual relationships with older partners
4. the relationship between multiple con-

current sexual partnerships and the spread of HIV/AIDS

On an appointed day, the ground rules for the focus group discussion were given to the prospective discussants before the focus group discussion started. It was not deemed necessary to seek new informed consent for the focus group separately from the consent that had been obtained for participating in the whole study.

**Procedure:** The participants were informed that this study sought to investigate the perceived extent of concurrent sexual partnerships and their implications for HIV/AIDS to students in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwean universities. The researchers obtained permission to conduct the study from the University and host Faculties in which the study was conducted by the researchers. Students were then approached in their classes and briefed on the purpose of the study and to solicit their cooperation in that study. Prospective respondents showed considerable interest in the topic that was being probed. Although 156 questionnaires were administered to respondents, only 145 were returned giving a response rate of 93 %. Focus group discussions covered the link between concurrent sexual partnerships and their implications for HIV/AIDS to students in institutions of Higher Learning in Zimbabwe.

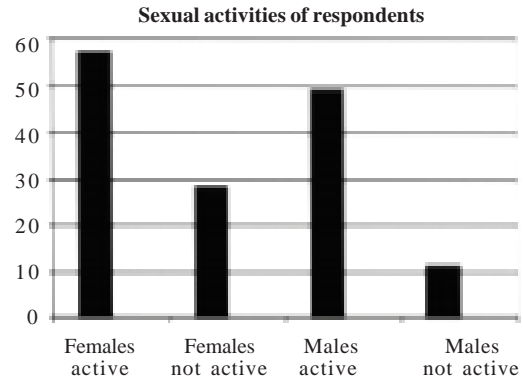
**Data Analysis:** Data collected using the questionnaire was analysed using bar graphs, pie-chart, tables and percentages. The advantage of using such method is for easy understanding of the information by other researchers. Themes and sub-themes were used to analyse data collected using focus group discussions.

**RESULTS**

This investigation set out to establish the prevalence rate of concurrent sexual partnerships among university students. The study also aimed to assess the attitude of university students towards concurrent sexual partnerships and explore the students' perception of the relationship between concurrent sexual partnerships and HIV/AIDS.

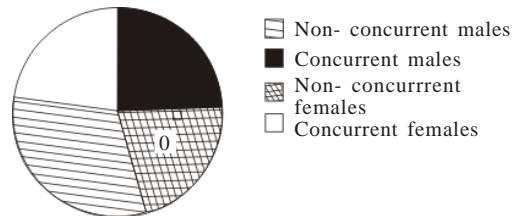
Figure 1 shows the numbers of young men and women in university who were sexually active and those that were not sexually active. Relatively, more males (n=60, 82 %) than females (n=85, 67 %) were sexually active.

Figure 2 shows concurrent sexual partnerships



**Fig. 1. Prevalence of sexual activity among university students**

among students in this study. Taken together, almost half (49 %) of the respondents were involved in concurrent sexual relationships.



**Fig. 2. Experience of concurrent sexual relationships among university students**

In this study, responses exceeded the number of respondents (female n=85; male n=60) because each respondent was requested to give two reasons for being in a concurrent sexual relationship. Table 1 above shows that females were drawn to concurrent relationships by the wealth and generosity of their partners and to obtain sexual satisfaction. Male students were on the other hand mostly (70%) attracted by beauty and the desire to acquire sexual experience. Taken together the smallest numbers were made up of those university students that attempted to enter concurrent relationships to have long-term relationships.

Table 2 shows that female university students (over two-thirds) were attracted to much older sexual partners for the resources which those older persons had at their disposal. The rest of the interests of the young women (32 %) had to do with how the older partners were much more sensitive to the needs and feelings of the young women. The interests of young men seemed to

**Table 1: Reasons for involvement in concurrent sexual partnerships (n = 145)**

<i>Females</i>			<i>Males</i>		
<i>Reason for being in concurrent sexual partnership</i>	<i>No. of nominations</i>	<i>Percentage of nominations</i>	<i>Reason for being in concurrent sexual partnership</i>	<i>No. of nominations</i>	<i>Percentage of nominations</i>
Wealth and generosity	48	40	Sexiness and beauty	50	50
Sexual satisfaction	25	21	Sexual experimentation	20	20
Intelligence and maturity	19	16	Peer pressure and influence of alcohol	10	10
Love/infatuation	12	10	Maturity and common mind sets	10	10
New and exciting relationships	5	4	Attitude/behaviour	8	8
Long-term relationship	5	4	Long-term relationship	2	2
Handsome/sexy	5	4			
<b>Total</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2: Reasons for intimate partnerships with much older people**

<i>Females</i>			<i>Males</i>		
<i>Reasons for involvement in sexual relationship with much older partners</i>	<i>No. of nominations</i>	<i>% of nominations</i>	<i>Reason for involvement in sexual relationship with much older partners</i>	<i>No. of nominations</i>	<i>% of nominations</i>
Wealth/gifts/ luxury	68	68	Financial stability	30	34
More caring and loving	12	12	Sexual experience	27	31
Mature/attention/understanding	12	12	Maturity of partner	20	23
Sensitive to intimate needs	8	8	Prestige	10	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>87</b>	<b>100</b>

be distributed in low profile over resources of the older female partners (30 %), sexual experimentation (27 %), and relationship with a mature person and least for the prestige

Table 3 shows that considerably more males (63 %) (those students that indicated that relationships with much younger mates were 'quite common' and 'very common') than females (47 %) were in affairs with much younger partners. A very small minority (0.08 %) of males reported that intimate sexual relationships between males and 'much younger people' were rare while almost one third of the female sample reported that

intimate sexual relationships between young university women and 'much younger people' were rare.

### **Link between Concurrent Sexual Partnerships with HIV/AIDS**

All respondents agreed that there was a positive link between HIV and concurrent relationships. The following were some of the major reasons that were given: 'People who are in concurrent relationships tend to be the same people who are prone to risky sexual behaviours such

**Table 3: Sexual relationships with much younger people (n = 145)**

	<i>Rare</i>	<i>Not common</i>	<i>Quite common</i>	<i>Very common</i>	<i>Total</i>
University female students	25	20	24	16	85
University male students	5	17	15	23	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>145</b>

as having sex without condoms'. Some participants indicated that more sexual partners result in the spread of HIV/AIDS. On the other hand, others stated that by the nature of concurrent relationships, partners are not mutually faithful and there is a great risk of spreading of HIV.

Some interesting statements from the focus group discussions had to do with the possibility of one partner infecting one or more people in the web of concurrent relationships and those infected in turn infecting other partners in the circle until very many people were infected. A related set of statements was to do with sexual partners in concurrent relationships normally not knowing their HIV status and hence the high chances of spreading the virus when they slept around.

Another set of statements referred to HIV positive people in concurrent sexual partnerships as deliberately bent on spreading the virus to as many of their partners as possible. Some responses also noted that 'long-term partners tend to practice unsafe sex due to the endurance of their relationships, hence increasing the chances of contracting HIV and spreading it'.

## DISCUSSION

### More Sexual Activity among Men than among Women

Although sexual activity among the respondents was quite high, males were, however, clearly more active than females. This finding is supported by many findings in the literature where men are expected indeed to be more active sexually than women (Hunter 2005) and where more activity for men is seen favourably while the same is frowned upon for women (Pettifor et al. 1996; Parker et al. 2000). There is also a high rate of concurrent sexual partnerships among the respondents and the same sort of logic applies for young men as cited in the literature above. For young women, there is also increasing permissiveness to premarital sex for the age group 20–30 years even in formerly very conservative societies (Adimora et al. 2002). However, this permissiveness has always been found to be more for men than for women (Johnson and Bachman 1991; Sax et al. 1995). The present study findings are similar to the findings by Johnson and Bachman (1991), and Fielder and Carey (2010), among many others.

### Young Men in Concurrency around the Sex Motive

Young men, like their older counterparts seem to be attracted to young women for the beauty and attractiveness. They seem more interested in gaining sexual experience through experimentation with different females. This finding is similar to previous findings (for example, Feldman and Cauffman 2000; Lindblad 2003) who found that men in general and even in marriage cheated their principal dyad partners around the sex motive which they used as an expression of social power and for recreation.

### Women Catching Up With Men in Concurrent Sexual Relationships

The close-to-half female respondents that were also in concurrent relationships suggest that young women in universities and colleges are no longer falling too far behind their male counterparts in their involvement in concurrent sexual relationships. This finding seems to derive from the permissive attitude to premarital sex that has been mentioned above in this study. For example, findings by Leclerc-Madlala (2001), Epstein (2007), and Silberschmidt and Rasch (2001) show that young women are no longer discouraged from having sexual relations with a man because that that man has a sexual relationship with another woman. This seems to be the attitude that is playing a role in driving young women into concurrent sexual partnerships in this study.

### Young Women and the Consumerist Culture

That young women were largely driven into concurrent sexual relationships largely for the wealth and generosity of their male partners was to be expected from previous findings in this area. This finding is supported by Silberschmidt and Rasch's (2001) study which found that Gauteng university women students exchanged sex for account payment and fashionable clothing among several other services. Similarly, other studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Hunter 2005) also found similar results as those at the university in Gauteng. The above findings have led researchers such as Leclerc-Madlala (2004) to dispute the common assertion



of poverty as the principal driver for young women indulging in concurrent and mixed/inter-generational sexual partnerships. In his study, Leclerc-Madlala (2004) found that the young female saw herself as a consumerist entrepreneur who gave sex transactionally in exchange for desired goods, favours and other services.

### **The Place of Poverty in Concurrent Relationships**

The place of poverty in sexual habits of young women in universities cannot be ruled out. In his study, Hallman (2004) found that there were great predisposing factors for poor females who have no bargaining power because of their low socio-economic status and their need to eke out the bare necessities of life. Thus, poverty and the materialist culture together led women's engagement in concurrent sexual relationships for conspicuous consumption (Hallman 2004). It is possible that this combination also drove young women in this study into concurrent sexual partnerships.

The preoccupation of the males with sex in their relationships is well documented. That males in this study were concerned more with looks and partners' potential to satisfy the male sexually has been found in many studies (for example Bailey et al. 1994; Wright and Reise 1997; Houston 2005). An additional and interesting finding here that may have to do with the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe is the consideration by young men to have concurrent sexual partnerships with older females for the financial security that those women may offer them. It seems, then, that the consumerist entrepreneurial culture (Silberschmidt and Rasch 2000) is no longer just restricted to the young women but is also now shared by the men.

That peer influence and alcohol are mentioned together as drivers of concurrent sexual relationships is predicted from the findings of influential researchers in Southern Africa. For example, Kelly (2001) and Otaala (2004) found that concurrent sexual relationships at university campuses were mediated and strengthened by several factors which included lax supervision of students in universities and sexual experimentation that was strongly influenced by drugs and alcohol. Evidence for peer pressure among young men to have sex with several female partners is considerable and the

present sample seems to be no exception (Vaughan and Vaughan 1998; Green 2003). The findings in this study show that a larger percentage of the male respondents were into relationships with younger persons and only a very small percentage had sexual relationships with older persons. The reverse is true for female respondents because most of them had sexual relationships with older persons. In his study, Kelly (2001) described this as 'a culture of death', the tendency that is extant in the universities whereby women are open to sugar daddy practices.

### **Link between Concurrent Sexual Relationships with HIV/AIDS**

The link between HIV/AIDS and concurrent sexual partnerships has been found in many previous studies. Similar findings are reported by Green (2003), Vaughan and Vaughan (1998), and Wright (1994) who observed that involvement in unfaithful behaviour had escalated in spite of the scare and scourge of the HIV/AIDS pandemic that conceivably should have made partners more mutually faithful. This situation seems to be true as well for young men and women in universities who in spite of their knowledge levels on HIV still maintain remarkably high levels of concurrent sexual partnerships. Similar findings were reported by Entou and Agwale (2007) and Onah et al. (2004) who found that undergraduate students indulged in concurrent relationships and unprotected sex even though these undergraduates reported high levels of knowledge about HIV. In their study, Martin and Alexander (2006) found that there is a high rate of AIDS-related deaths among students in South Africa with the probability of tens of thousands of them being-infected with the virus. These findings concur with some of the study findings where respondents stated that more sexual partners would result in the spread of HIV/AIDS. Similarly, Fielder and Carey (2010) in a study of 118 first-semester female college students to estimate the prevalence of sexual hookups found that these hookups were involved in oral, vaginal, or anal sex prior to college; during their first semester, and by the end of their first semester. The same study also found that hookups were more likely to involve friends or acquaintances rather than strangers; and alcohol use preceded hookups.

### Young men 'Marrying Downwards' and Young Women 'Marrying Upwards'

That young men preferred younger partners was to be expected from similar research that seems to suggest that all male animals prefer younger to older mates (Buss and Shackelford 1997; Mapfumo et al. 2007). This finding concurs with the findings by Mapfumo et al. (2007) who found that older males had concurrent sexual relationships with young females in a university in Zimbabwe. This perhaps is understandable because males have the desire to be in control in intimate relationships (Mapfumo et al. 2007).

### LIMITATIONS

This study on the prevalence of sexual relationships among university students was carried out using a sample from two Faculties in the same university in Zimbabwe. As such, the findings of this study cannot be generalized over the whole population of university students in Zimbabwe. The findings merely shade light on the prevalence of concurrent sexual relationships in a university in Zimbabwe. Hence, a larger study is necessary in order to determine the dynamics of the prevalence of concurrent sexual relationships among university students in Zimbabwe.

### CONCLUSION

This study was set up to assess the level of sexual activity and the prevalence of concurrent sexual relationships in a university. The study found that there was a high level of sexual activity among young men and women in the university but more so among men than among women. There was also high prevalence of concurrent relationships both at same age and with older and higher sexual partners. In spite of the high levels of knowledge about HIV/AIDS, high levels of concurrent sexual relationships were prevalent among students used in this study. This study confirmed results reported in the literature and has implications for the spread of HIV/AIDS.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings here make it possible to recommend that:

- There is need for university students to control the high levels of concurrent sexual relationships. This will assist to minimize the spread of HIV/AIDS and STIs among students at this age.
- There is need to reduce the level of inter-generational sexual relationships that could lead to the exploitation of young female students by much older men (sugar daddies) who deploy their resources to attract the young women.
- There is need for institutions of higher learning to mount programmes that emphasise the need for self control among the young men and women in the institutions in view of the widespread threat of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Such programmes should educate students on the use of condoms in order to prevent HIV/AIDS and STIs.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Concurrent Sexual Partnerships among University Students in Zimbabwe Questionnaire.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. I shall do everything possible to make sure that nobody can trace your answers to you. Please, do not write your name anywhere on this questionnaire. I shall also not use your for anything else except this study. Please, be as truthful as you possibly can in the answers that you give to the below.

#### Section A: Biodata

1. I am a woman/man (Please, circle your answer).

#### Section B: Main Questionnaire

Please, answer all the following questions on your sex life as truthfully as you can. You may not answer questions that you feel uncomfortable about.

1. Are you sexually active? Yes/No (Please, circle your answer).
2. Do you think people of your age in this institution are sexually active? Yes/No (Please, circle your answer).
3. Have you ever had more than one sexual partner? Yes/No (Please, circle your answer).
4. If you have had more than one sexual partner at the same time, state what attracted you to each of your sexual partners.
  - a. Partner One \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Partner Two \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Partner Three \_\_\_\_\_
5. Have you or some of your colleagues ever had any sexual partnership with a ‘much older’ person/person already in an independent occupation? Yes/No (Please, circle your answer).
6. If ‘yes’, how common is it for you and people of your age to be in sexual relationships with partners who are ‘much older’/already in independent occupations?
  - a. Not common at all
  - b. Rather common
  - c. Quite common
  - d. Very common
7. If ‘yes’ to 5 above, please give the reasons why people like you enter sexual partnerships with much older people.
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
8. How common is it for you and people like you to be in sexual partnerships with persons who are much younger?
  - a. Not common at all
  - b. Rather common
  - c. Quite common

- d. Very common
9. Do you think there is a connection between the spread of HIV/AIDS and having more than one sexual partner at a time? Yes/No (Please, circle your answer)
10. Please, explain your answer to 9 above: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you once more for your co-operation.

## APPENDIX 2

### Moderator:

Thank you for agreeing to come to this focus group discussion. You have already filled out a questionnaire that addressed level of sexual activity, prevalence of concurrent sexual partnerships among university students, extent and motivation for mixed sexual partnerships (where males are much older than their female partners). You have already given your views on the possible connection between multiple concurrent sexual partnerships and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The purpose of this focus group discussion is to enable you to give details and comments over and above the responses that you gave in answer to the self administered questionnaire that you have responded to.

This discussion is expected to take about one hour and half.

Before we get started, there are some ground rules that I need to share with you.

1. I am expecting you to be as honest as possible and to state your own view irrespective of the views stated by some of your colleagues here.
2. You are not necessarily speaking about yourself but about 'people like you'. When you put forward your views, it does not necessarily mean that you are the person, for example, who is involved in multiple concurrent sexual behaviour.
3. I do not expect that any one here will shout down anyone else. We all should express our views freely and await our turn while a colleague is expressing his/her views.
4. For the best results of our discussion, we should avoid side conversations.
5. None of us is wrong. We are all entitled to our own views.
6. Of course we should speak loudly and clearly so that the two people here who are taking down notes on our discussions can hear everything that each one of us is saying. We need to have accurate notes so that when we write up the report, we are perfectly sure of what transpired here