

Sexual Activity and Prevalence of Multiple Sexual Relationships among Female Students at a University Campus in Zimbabwe

John Mapfumo¹, Almon Shumba*, Ruvimbo Zvimba¹ and Pauline Chinyanganya²

¹*Africa University, Zimbabwe*

^{*}*Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa*

²*Bindura University of Science Education, Zimbabwe*

*E-mail: ¹<jmapfumo@africau.ac.zw>; *<ashumba@cut.ac.za;almonshumba@yahoo.com>*

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ABSTRACT This study sought to determine the extent of sexual activity and prevalence of multiple concurrent sexual relationships among female students at a university campus in Zimbabwe. A qualitative research design was used in this study. Three focus group discussions were conducted to collect qualitative data from 30 participants. A purposive sample was used and participation was voluntary in this study. Data collected were analysed thematically. The study found that there was a great deal of sexual activity and high prevalence of multiple concurrent sexual relationships among female students in this study. The study found among others the following as some factors leading to multiple sexual relationships: poverty; financial gains (get money to buy food, clothes and pay fees); boyfriend staying far away (distance); and partners provide transport to town and places of entertainment. Despite the threat of HIV infection in the multiple concurrent sexual partnerships, female students still participate in these partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

Several studies refer to multiple sexual relationships as the mode of sexual partnership whereby students participated in overlapping relationships in spite of their high awareness of HIV/AIDS (Borawski et al. 2004; Entou and Agwale 2007; Garnett 2009; Parker et al. 2007; Mapfumo et al. 2007; Shumba et al. 2011). Concurrency is different from having multiple partners over a long time one after another or having one or more partners during an overlapping period (Parker et al. 2007). The study of multiple concurrent sexual partnerships was deemed important because it could be used to explain the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe (Xinhua 2009) or in other countries. Zimbabwe's Ministry of Health and Child Welfare says the HIV prevalence rate in the 15 to 49 age group has declined to 13.7 % in 2009 from 18.1 % recorded two years ago (Xinhua 2009). Studies of multiple concurrent sexual partnerships are also important in order to change sexual attitudes.

**Address for correspondence:*

Professor Almon Shumba
School of Teacher Education, Faculty of Humanities
Central University of Technology, Free State
Private Bag X20539, Bloemfontein 9300.
South Africa
E-mail: ashumba@cut.ac.za,
almonshumba@yahoo.com

Although studies report multiple concurrent relationships to be prevalent, the actual rates of concurrency varies among various societies, countries and sexes (Adimora et al. 2002; Morris 2002; Shumba et al. 2011). A comparative study 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 example, men in Thailand and Brazil were found to be more likely to report five or more casual sexual partners as opposed to men in Tanzania, Kenya, Lesotho and Zambia who reported much fewer partners (Chetty 2000). Very few of the women in the countries mentioned above reported five or more partners (Kaya and Kau 1994). The finding that adult men tended to have more serial and concurrent sexual partners than females made it worthwhile to investigate whether the same situation obtained among female students in a university in Zimbabwe. Young female students in the university were considered a special group because of their high level of knowledge and education that was expected to reveal a special pattern to their beliefs and attitudes towards concurrent sexual partnerships.

Multiple concurrent partnerships have been found to be mediated and strengthened in university and college settings elsewhere by such factors as lax supervision of students in those

institutions and sexual experimentation (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 (Mapfumo et al. 2007). Due to the danger of HIV and the prevalence of multiple concurrent sexual behaviours, it was necessary to study the situation in an institution of higher learning in Zimbabwe.

Factors Promoting Multiple Sexual Partnerships

There are various reasons why men and women participate in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. Studies on young men show that in some cultures there are social, cultural and economic reasons why such relationships occur (Hunter 2005; Shumba et al. 2011). It is expected for a 'real' man to have more than one partner as a sign of masculinity and for a relatively wealthy person to have more than one sexual partner (Leclerc-Madlala 2008). Women were found to have different sorts of reasons for participating in multiple concurrent partnerships. Leclerc-Madlala (2008) argues that for a woman, concurrency may affirm the value of the woman and it may be seen as an expression of love/appreciation as well as social status over and above ability to meet the most pressing economic needs from the contributions of more than one partner.

Poverty has always been known to drive the practice of multiple sexual partnerships to an extent (Hallman 2004; Morris and Kretzschmar 1997). Hallman (2004) found that there were great predisposing forces for poor people to enter intimate sexual partnerships in a transactional manner with more than one man. It is against this background that this study sought to answer the following research questions: (a) What is the level of sexual activity among female university students?; (b) What are the factors that promote the participation of female university students in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships?; and (c) What is the extent of multiple concurrent sexual partnerships among female university students?

METHOD

Design

A qualitative case study design was used in this study. This design was found to be appropriate because the study would be more reveal-

ing if the participants are free to say out their views on major issues that concern them (De Vos et al. 2005).

Sample

A purposive sample of 30 female university students participated in three focus group discussions. The age range of these students was between 18 and 25. Participation was voluntary and participants were free to withdraw at any time. Those who were interested in participating in the study were advised to give their names to appointed persons who were fellow students in the university and who had agreed to help in the study.

Instruments

An interview schedule was used to collect data during the focus group discussions. The study would be more revealing if the participants in the study were free to say out their views on major issues that concerned them. Focus group interviews were used because they gave the researchers the opportunity to observe a large number of interactions on a topic in a limited space of time.

Data Collection

Each focus group discussion comprised of 10 participants. All the deliberations of the focus group discussions were tape recorded. Participation was voluntary in this study. Participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. The study was advertised among the students who were expected to come forward and participate in focus group discussions. The study was publicised in the following ways before it was conducted: Firstly, it was advertised in the dining hall during lunch hours for three consecutive days. Posters were also put at strategic points such as entrances to the Dining Hall and hostels of residence. The study was also advertised by lecturers who agreed to do so during their lecture time with the various classes throughout the university. A total of 30 participants volunteered to participate in the study. Based on availability and time, participants were divided into three focus group discussions comprising of ten participants each.

After the groups were set up, participants were all invited on 10 August 2010 for a briefing

by the researchers. The lead researcher explained fully the purpose of the study and how important the role of the respondents was going to be.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically in this study. Themes were derived from the data collected during focus group discussions. Data were transcribed from the focus group interviews and then coded. Trends and patterns were drawn from the data collected. Themes derived were also used in the presentation of both the results and discussion sections in this study.

Trustworthiness

Permission to conduct this study was authorised by the University Ethics Committee where the study was carried out. A written request was made to all offices that could supply the needed background information such as the numbers of registered students and the age range of the students. These offices cooperated by supplying all the data needed for this study. All participants were informed that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary and individuals were free to withdraw at any point during the study. Participants were also assured that all data collected during focus group discussions was confidential and would only be used for purposes of the study. The data and tentative interpretations of this study were taken back to the participants during the study to check with participants if their responses were correctly captured. All the participants interviewed confirmed as correct their responses used in the study. On the basis of these strategies, researchers were confident that the study had high internal validity.

RESULTS

This section presents qualitative data obtained from the focus group discussions. Data collected were organised according to themes based on the trends derived from the study.

Prevalence of Sexual Activity

All the three groups reported a high prevalence of sexual activity. Participants were actually amazed at the first question that was asked by the moderator of the focus group discussions.

Participants regarded sexual activity as extremely common within the University. One participant in Group A remarked:

Having sex is widespread throughout the university. We all know that nearly everyone is sleeping with somebody else. All the sexual partnerships are accompanied with having sex! I think everybody here agrees with that.

Along the same lines, a participant in Group B (with clear support of group members) also remarked:

How can you talk about something that is so obvious! That is why we have 'Happy Hour and After Hours'..... You see so many students very active during Happy Hour. Our friends even ask for some time in the rooms with their girlfriends so that they can have sex in the absence of the roommates. We know each other well with our partners. Today is the turn of my friend and the following day is my turn.

In Group C a participant noted:

That is a usual activity in this University. Many relationships would probably not last if the sex part is removed.

It is clear from the above responses that sexual activity was prevalent between female students and their actual partners or other partners.

Multiple Concurrent Sexual Partnerships as Perceived in the University

All groups reported that multiple concurrent sexual partnerships were part of University life among the students. The participants expressed that many at the University participated in these partnerships. In Group A, participants commented from what they seemed to notice of the activities of their friends. A participant noted:

We see our friends obtaining, for example, a latest phone which they cannot afford and we are aware that they have many partners from which they can get such items. Their stable boyfriends cannot afford such things or gifts. Young women discuss their relationships with each other almost all the time and you can hear them boast about the different men they have in their lives. I have heard, for instance, that those who do not have multiple relationships are 'somewhat stupid.'

Over and above this observation from Group A, it was noted in Group B that peer pressure was an important factor in pushing some young women into multiple concurrent sexual partner-

ships. Other factors seemed to come from how people of different cultures treated each other.

It emerged from Group C that the common feeling was that one girlfriend/boyfriend was never enough. A participant in that Group stated that:

You have different boyfriends for different functions. One can be there for you when the other is not there. Different boyfriends provide certain essential functions at different time.

The issue was explained in both Group A and C where it was noted that some boyfriends provided excellent company, others provided transport and yet others helped with school work and other services. Some of the needs were important for a few days or a few hours and some relationships that long too.

Group C raised the issue of 'underground relationships' whereby young men could engage in a secret relationship with a young female who was known to be in a well-known affair with another young female or even a close friend. One participant in Group C remarked:

So many students here are in underground relationships. You see a lot of students who are known to be in a relationship with other partners during the odd hours of the night. The partners they are involved with know that they should keep the partnership secret and during the day, when they meet they make signs to each other that are not known by their known partners.

These underground partnerships were reported to last for very short periods of time and some young females could be with different partners each day they participated in that relationship. It was also suggested that this kind of relationship was normally transactional with male partners giving something tangible each time they had sex with their 'underground' partners. Other benefits for the young women included assistance with school work, money to buy some goodies from town and so forth.

Experiences of Students in Multiple Concurrent Sexual Partnerships

Interesting ideas emerged in the discussion around this theme. A major reason given for participation in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships was peer pressure. A participant in Group A remarked:

Young female friends can motivate each other to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. If I feel that my friend has a boring boyfriend I can organise one that I think is more suitable and exciting for my friend. So some decisions to have another relationship in addition to the existing one are really group decisions. We can then cover up for our friends when their usual partners begin to ask suspicious questions about what is going on.

Another important factor that was mentioned for multiple concurrent sexual partnerships was the distance between young women in the University and their original boyfriends. It was felt that when someone came to the University that tended to remove the person from a boyfriend or boyfriends she had while she was in high school. One participant in Group A said:

When I was in first year I met a guy here and started a relationship even though I had a boyfriend back home. The distance from the first partner was so much. He did not visit at all regularly and I had emotional needs of my own to satisfy. I did not throw him away because I continued to see him when I went back home and from time to time when he happened to visit.

Another reason young women entered into multiple concurrent sexual relations was that they were consistent with the young women's liberal view of sex and the sexuality. Female students who participate in these concurrent sexual relationships are adults and are free to meet each other in their residences. One well-known practice was 'Happy Hour session'. The relationships were not meant to last and the 'Happy Hour' contacts changed very regularly with partners moving around to other partners with whom they have casual sex.

In the words of one young female focus group discussion participant in Group B:

These relationships are very much like bubble gum. They are to satisfy financial constraints, sexual appetite and for entertainment. They are stress relievers and materialistic in nature. Once the stress is gone, you find yourself another partner and life goes on.

Young women seemed to be caught up in the matter of competition to meet the needs of the young men in the University who were trying to have sex with as many young women as they could. It was learnt that the competition came up as older young women in second and higher years were abandoned by their boyfriends who preferred younger women who were in first year.

In response to a probe why senior young women do not just let their boyfriends with the younger girls in first year, it was learnt that far from letting go, the senior young women simply had greater opportunity to seek other sexual partners that tended to include older men. This then resulted in the development of wide networks around some young women and men in the University. Explained a participant in Group A:

By the end of it all there is a blame game where young men and young women trade accusations of double crossing. But then things are accepted as they are and life goes on. For some reason young women hold onto their male partners even when they know that those partners have affairs with other young women.

Initiation of Multiple Concurrent Sexual Partnerships

All the groups raised several ways in which multiple concurrent sexual partnerships could arise. Some of the ways in which multiple concurrent sexual partnerships arose were during drinking sessions, from encouragement by peers and through direct requests to engage in sexual activities. At times, it was mentioned that young men made some sexual favours available to target young women who reciprocated by agreeing to enter multiple concurrent sexual relationships.

It was also reported in the groups that some of the multiple concurrent sexual partnerships came as a result of young women being dissatisfied with their 'steady' relationships. A participant in Group B explained the situation thus:

Some students might be experiencing problems in their steady relationships and having another partner might be seen as a way of getting out of the problem without terminating a previous relationship. You do this so that you do not break anyone's heart. You just solve the problem by getting another partner.

Experiencing problems with a steady partner was akin to the expressed view that stable partnerships were outright boring and those who perceived them as such tended to seek out additional partners for the variety that would add to their love life. A sentiment expressed by all the groups was that young women also initiated the multiple concurrent relationships by directly seducing some men. Group C indicated that the young women on some occasions also acted in front of older men many of whom ended up in

sexual relationships with the young women in University.

Role of Agents in Initiating Multiple Concurrent Sexual Partnerships

The role of agents in initiating multiple concurrent sexual partnerships also came up for discussion. Special mention was made of pimps who acted as middlemen in connecting the young women with older men who offered varying sums of money for sexual favours from the young women. All the groups were aware of the role of the pimp in connecting young university females with men who had resources enough to offer when the young women agreed to give sex. A participant in Group C who seemed to reflect the majority position stated:

Pimps get money and the girls can also get substantial amounts of money. For instance, a male student can pimp up young female students by offering the money or by simply targeting those young women who enjoy having good times with men.

It also emerged during the discussions that a good number of young women seek out the services of pimps to put them through to men who are willing to have sex with them. It further emerged that these young women enter multiple concurrent sexual relationships which are clearly transactional in that sex is given in exchange for money.

The role of friends in initiating multiple concurrent sexual partnerships was reported to be a very clear one. Some female friends made it their business to connect their other friends with various men so that they in turn could derive benefits from those connections or simply enjoy the many relationships in which their friends are involved.

Family members were also mentioned as catalysts in initiating multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. It was noted that families participated in initiating multiple sexual partnerships at two levels. At the first level they positively encouraged their young children to seek assistance of various kinds from different (normally older) men. This could include financial assistance for further education help with getting places for higher education, assistance with transport to the University at different times of the year and so on. With time, older men set up sexual part-

nerships with young women who seem to be seeking such relationships. A participant in Group A explained this situation with the following story:

Some family members and parents are also involved in setting up these relationships. These family members are out to get something in the form of financial gain. For instance, a young girl that I used to know and who is now in university was introduced to different men at a young age by an aunt who obtained food for her family in that way.

Poverty and Multiple Concurrent Sexual Partnerships among Female University Students

Discussants in all groups agreed that poverty was an important factor tempting young women to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. Poor young women entered multiple concurrent sexual partnerships to make sure that they could provide for basic survival needs whether from same-age or age-discrepant partners. Most participants mentioned that for many of the young women, it was very difficult to survive at the University considering the very high cost of living. A participant in Group C with the apparent agreement of most members in her group said:

Some cases are quite desperate here. There are people who come here without money enough to last for even a few days. These people have no choice. Different men offer meals for these girls and the girls are very willing to accept. Some of the basic needs for these girls include soap and clothes that are acceptable for girls in a University as opposed to girls in high school.

Further discussion on the importance of poverty in leading to multiple concurrent partnerships led to other views being expressed. In answer to a probe on whether the poorest young women were the ones most involved in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships, it emerged that that was not always the case. A participant in Group A, observed that:

There are many girls around here who seem to have everything they need. They are well provided for. Their guardians and parents even visit quite regularly to make sure that they have what they need for their upkeep. But many of them participate in these multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. Their participation in multiple concurrent partnerships is not about poverty

Reasons Why Young Women Engage in Multiple Concurrent Sexual Partnerships with Young Men

The study found that young women engaged in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships for different necessities which included getting their assignments done, a lift into town or to invitation to and entertainment at a party. The needs of the young ladies were summarised by one young lady in Group A who said:

If you have a clever 'boy' in the University he will help you with your school work or organise things for you such as a computer in ICT. You can even ask him to gather information for assignments or even draft or type the assignment for you. But come Friday or when the need arises, you need someone who has a car or can arrange transport for you to go into town or to some interesting places. The University guy normally does not have the resources to take you where you want to go. Sometimes too, one of your boyfriends is outright boring but he seems to be more loving than the others.

In Group C it was brought out that young women engaged in such partnerships because some of the young women literally offered themselves to young and not-so-young men for the various reasons that have been given above. This situation was complicated by young women being deceived by young men who pretended to be seriously in love with them when in fact all they wanted was sex. A participant explained how this all ends up in multiple concurrent relationships said:

With time, you have all these young men telling you that they love you and you lose all trust in them. Sometimes the best thing is to have a number of them. If they are cheating on you, you cheat on them and it goes like that.

There was some discussion on how older men ended up part of the multiple concurrent sexual partnerships with young University women. All groups reported that older men engaged in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships with young women. Young women were reported to be happy to accept the advances of the older males because these males had the financial resources which the young women were interested in. A participant in Group B who seemed to capture the feelings of the other groups said:

The point seems to be very clear. I do not think that any of the young women can really

say they love the older persons. The older people are good to have because they have money and can give the young women the money and services that they want. This is all about money and gifts and if you work it out correctly you can get gifts and money from a number of people.

It was also learnt in the discussions that young women were enticed to enter relationships with older males by being given the impression that the partners of those men in principal dyads were boring and no longer interested in sex. A participant in Group C said:

We seem to notice that older men are interested in taking us to some interesting places where they do not want to take their wives. We like that very much and we believe that is one way in which the older men express their care for us. It also feels good just to ride in a nice car and to such places as Vumba and other holiday resorts which many of us would never dream of visiting.

Advantages of Multiple Concurrent Partnerships

Access to Resources

Discussions also examined advantages of concurrent partnerships. Some of the advantages that were mentioned were financial stability, security, connect you to jobs, luxurious holidays and means to survive in difficult economic circumstances. Participants also mentioned satisfaction of emotional needs as well as having sex for fun. A participant in Group A said:

Young women nowadays want to look 'hot'. They want to look better than the next girl and in order to obtain the latest fashion such as the most recent pair of jeans. You are sometimes given a whole new lifestyle with your bills being paid and sometimes even having fees paid. It is very nice to have someone who does all this for you.

The need for basics of survival among many of the young women was underlined by a participant in Group A who said:

Young women in this University need food. With the hard economic situation in Zimbabwe multiple concurrent sexual partnerships can provide you with what you need to survive from different sources. It is really good investment and you are certain than if one of the partners does not come in to help at least there will always be someone there to assist you.

Sexual Satisfaction and Multiple Concurrent Relationships

There was mixed feeling among the groups whether older men satisfied young women more than same-age boyfriends. Some discussants emphasised that younger men were more satisfying sexually because they were more energetic and more adventurous. But others were equally emphatic that older men were more experienced and did not concentrate on the sex act but on other things which made their company very good. An example of the latter argument was given by one participant in Group B who said:

Older men take you to nice places and the whole thing is much more enjoyable but the same-age boyfriend will normally just want to come to your room or invite you to his room. There is no other entertainment surrounding the sex that you may have there.

But this view was strongly contested by others. A participant in Group C said:

Although older men are more experienced, they are boring. They are not as spontaneous as the younger males. The conversation with the younger males is more in tune with the interests of the young women and not the stories of the older people who often do not understand that they belong to a different generation from that of their sexual partners.

Disadvantages of Multiple Sexual Partnerships

Multiple concurrent sexual partnerships were said to be a high risk of infection with sexually transmitted diseases. These partnerships were also said to be time-consuming and usually. Nearly everybody in all the groups agreed that it was very rare for contemporaries in University to get married and taking these partnerships seriously was not much use to any of the people in the partnerships. A participant in Group A emphasised:

These multiple concurrent sexual relationships just lead to AIDS and death particularly when they include older men. With the older men most young women do not have the ability to negotiate safe sex. Some young women do not even mention safe sex when they are dealing with older men.

A participant in the same group added an interesting point:

The danger of HIV is not only for the young women. When the young women contract STIs, they have sex with different boyfriends.

In response to the a probe why the young men would find themselves in problems with STIs when their same-age girlfriends had sex with the older men, another young woman in that same group said:

When a young woman has had unprotected sex with an older man, she knows that she could be pregnant and therefore she will accept sex without protection with the same-age boyfriend. That is the only way the young woman can then hold the young same-age boyfriend accountable for the pregnancy. In that way the same-age boyfriend is also exposed to infection with STIs/HIV. You cannot get tested all the time and it is not much point if you know that once in a while you will have unprotected sex which you cannot avoid.

There was also mention of a longer term problem when the young women married in the future. It was learnt that some of the relationships would not come to an end and would continue with their wives. A participant in Group C said:

These multiple concurrent sexual relationships are really the beginning of unfaithfulness in married life. When the young women marry, they are very likely to continue their multiple concurrent sexual relationships which is not a good thing.

It was also mentioned in all the groups that one of the most common problems was that the young women, unable to hold anybody specific accountable for their pregnancies do resort to abortions.

DISCUSSION

The study found a high prevalence sexual activity among young women at a University campus used in this study. Multiple concurrent sexual partnerships were found to be the result of such things as poverty, financial gains and services needed such as being offered money for meals, transport and clothes. These findings were found to be consistent with other studies (Lurie and Rosenthal 2009; Shumba et al. 2011) who reported that multiple concurrent sexual partnerships were the product of a wide variety of situations.

Multiple concurrent sexual partnerships were found to be relationships entered into because of the cultural norms that accept informal polygamy and see concurrency in men in positive light. These results are consistent with findings of other studies (Garnett 2009; Parker et al. 2007; Shum-

ba et al. 2011). All these studies shed light on the underlying socio-cultural norms which foster the existence of multiple concurrent sexual partnerships in most parts of Africa.

The study also found that young women enter these relationships for sexual pleasure, love, status, economic benefits, and luxuries. This implies that these young women entered these sexual relationships for economic benefits and luxuries not provided by their boyfriends. These findings are consistent with other studies (Lurie and Rosenthal 2009; Mapfumo et al. 2007). These studies reported that older men having multiple concurrent relationships with young women at the University because they were in part no longer sexually satisfied with their wives (Leclerc-Madlala 2008).

Poverty was also found to be a factor of concurrent sexual partnerships in this study. For example, some young women interviewed indicated that they engaged in such practices in order to get money to buy clothes, food and for fees. These findings were found to be consistent with other studies (Leclerc-Madlala 2008; Mapfumo et al. 2007; Shumba et al. 2011). Poverty was also found to be enticing family members and others to condone young women who engage in these multiple concurrent sexual partnerships (Borawski et al. 2004).

The following advantages were mentioned in this study: financial stability, security, connect you to jobs, luxurious holidays and means to survive in difficult economic circumstances, and having sex for fun. These findings are consistent with literature (Borawski et al. 2004; Leclerc-Madlala 2008).

Participants also indicated that multiple concurrent sexual partnerships were a high risk of infection with sexually transmitted diseases including HIV. Despite being knowledgeable about the risks of engaging in such multiple concurrent sexual partnerships, the study found that young women continued having such sexual activities with their partners. The above findings are consistent with literature (Leclerc-Madlala 2008; Mapfumo et al. 2007; Otaala 2004; Shumba et al. 2011).

CONCLUSION

The following conclusions were drawn from this study:

- ♦ There is high prevalence sexual activity among young women at a University campus used in this study.

- ♦ Despite the fact that young women are aware of the threat of HIV infection in the multiple concurrent sexual partnerships, they still participate in these partnerships.
- ♦ Although poverty has a role to play in motivating young women into multiple sexual partnerships, there are other important factors such as the desire by young girls to have access to luxurious goods and services in what has been called a consumerist attitude.
- ♦ It is possible that HIV is being driven by the participation of older men in the sexual circles of young women in Universities with too little power to negotiate safe sex.
- ♦ Although there is wide participation of young women in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships, the disadvantages of these partnerships are many and dangerous.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- (a) Those responsible for HIV prevention programmes should seek new ways of alerting the young women to the scourge of HIV so that the young women can move from awareness to action
- (b) Since most incidences of the concurrent partnerships are driven by poverty and lack of access to basic necessities, universities should mount ways of creating wealth for the young women so that they do not depend too much on older male partners for their sustenance.
- (c) Universities should set up programmes that include aspects such as assertiveness skills to enable the young women to strongly stand up for their rights to protected sex.

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