

# Need for strengthening HIV related evidence base about most at risk populations

Damen Haile Mariam

Population level data suggest the presence of high risk sexual behavior among a substantial proportion of the adult population that may continue to contribute the propagation of the HIV epidemic in Ethiopia (1, 2). This makes the identification of Most at Risk populations (MARPs) an important task in the prevention and control of the epidemic. Besides the usual practice among commercial sex workers, sex work in Ethiopia has evolved over the years; and it has now been recognized as having different forms, and further investigations are required to understand the role of such behavior in fueling the epidemic (3).

Among the areas that require further investigation are the roles of anal sex as well as injecting drug use where circumstantial evidence is available for their possible contribution to HIV transmission (4). Even though it is said that widespread denial by society, stigma, discrimination and human rights abuses of persons engaging in penile-anal sex render studies in these areas difficult to conduct in countries such as Ethiopia (5), few investigators have managed to explore some of these issues. In one such study in the present issues, Tadele describes how sexual abuse and exploitation is one of the emerging social problems affecting the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of male children in Addis Ababa. According to this qualitative study, significant number of male street children in Addis Ababa get abused. The magnitude of the problem seems much worse among the street boys because of their precarious living conditions, physical and mental immaturity, secrecy and lack of awareness, use and abuse of drugs, exposure to pornographic films and the limited access to legal enforcement (6).

Few other studies have also reported the occurrence of anal sex as being practiced by homosexuals and heterosexuals in Ethiopia (7). A qualitative study that has explored the possible role of men having sex with men in the transmission of HIV has also looked at the

extent and patterns of the practice of men having sex with men (8). According to this latter study, homosexuality is not a new phenomenon in the city of Addis Ababa and its extent is considerable, compared to prevailing assumptions. This particular study has also noted sexual assault on street children and school boys as being committed usually by covert homosexuals and the elderly, following drug use.

Moreover, Berhanu and Haidar, in the present issue, have also found frequent exposure to sexually explicit movies as being a major predictor of sexual initiation among in-school youth (9). An earlier case-control study that was carried out in Addis Ababa has also shown statistically significant association between substance abuse and HIV infection among people visiting HIV counseling and testing centers in the city (10).

Nevertheless, there are still significant research gaps in almost all areas related to HIV/AIDS epidemics in the country, particularly among MARPs, requiring further investigations for generating adequate evidence base to direct the prevention and control activities (3, 11). The availability and effectiveness of proper legislations on human rights and stigma related issues of people living with HIV/AIDS need also to be explored, as most MARPs tend to underreport their problems for fear of stigma and discrimination, and therefore, having relatively lower access to HIV prevention and care services (8, 12).

It should also be noted that further research as well as prevention and control activities need to get focused at the newly expanding higher learning institutions, where students in pre-colleges and universities, in addition to staying in out-of-home environment, usually tend to get involved in drinking alcohol and chewing khat (habits that are associated with risky sexual behavior) (13).

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