

Book Review

Book Title: Vulnerabilities, impacts, and responses to HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction

Since the identification of AIDS and subsequent HIV in 1980's, several studies were carried out to determine risk factors associated to its distribution around the world. Most of such studies were influenced by biomedical perspective with a focus on risk without much emphasis on vulnerability. However, as depicted in the book under review, "... culture, religion, health, illness and sexuality intersect in the everyday lives of people. Despite this, the scientific discourse regarding HIV/AIDS is dominated by biomedical understanding and ... social and cultural aspects of the disease are often marginalized". Building on available literature and experiences in response to HIV and AIDS, the book scanned through the social, political and cultural context of HIV and AIDS that determine not only the understanding of HIV and AIDS, but also design and implementation of interventions.

Organization of the book

The ambit of the book is organized into two parts: 'Contextualizing HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan African countries' and 'Impacts and responses to HIV/AIDS'. The introduction section underscored that available studies on HIV/AIDS has paid little or no attention to the structural factors of vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. This section has also critiqued social science researchers whose research contribution were at best influenced by biomedical perspectives and at worst failed to generate broad evidences about HIV/AIDS.

Articles in part I provided useful insights on the interplays between HIV and AIDS, traditions, culture and religion that documented the unbalanced views on factors of vulnerability to HIV infections. Building on this argument, chapters 3 and 4 pointed out that gender role in socio-economic activities, decision making and space in public sphere that compel women and young girls to disproportionately suffer from HIV/AIDS. The last article of part I, and the first article of part II, reflected on important, yet poorly documented theme - the relationship between poverty, food insecurity, migration and HIV/AIDS. This article articulated the vicious cycle between poverty, food insecurity, migration and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS on the one hand, and its implication on productivity and asset building at individual, households and community levels.

Articles in part II highlighted socioeconomic and psychosocial disruptions in connection to HIV/AIDS at different level. Examples of such impact at mining, education and agriculture levels were highlighted. Community's response to contain such disruption especially in orphan care was presented within the context of established African tradition of care. Responses with far reaching implication are witnessed in the book to the launch of ART in 2005 which has enhanced HIV/AIDS interventions. Yet, concerns over declining funding opportunities gloomed sustainability of hard won achievement.

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The book considered two other themes: monitoring and evaluation, and ethical issues in HIV and AIDS research which makes the book rather complete. The monitoring and evaluation section highlights major challenges in the documentation and reporting of HIV/AIDS response. Efforts made at Global and African level to improve quality and consistency of HIV/AIDS data generation and documentation and yet the outstanding problem of data generation and documentation in Sub-Saharan Africa was discussed. Such problem was attributed to limited capacity in monitoring and evaluation and lack of support from donors. The article suggested the need to strengthen evidence informed planning, decision and management which would improve accountability to HIV and AIDS. The last part blamed socioeconomic and regulatory contexts in Sub Saharan Africa which provided sanctuary for western biomedical research with inadequate protection for human subjects.

Conclusion

Ever since HIV was discovered uninterrupted attempts have been made to determine its distribution, pathogenicity, modes of transmission, sections of the population most affected and why?. Nevertheless, there still is gap in understanding the structural factors to HIV/AIDS.

The book provided strong evidences on how social, cultural, economic and political contexts shape the understanding and response to HIV/AIDS. Such evidences do not only help understand HIV/AIDS but also sharpen interventions that helps meet global commitment of zero new infections, zero death and zero discrimination to HIV and AIDS (4).

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