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Researching Gender: Explorations into Sexuality and HIV/AIDS in African Contexts

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Abstract

The author demonstrates that collaborating with children using a gender-sensitive life-cycle approach yields social and health dividends. The paper focuses upon young people and children engaged in HIV/AIDS education, not only as consumers of information but also as generators of knowledge pertinent to their needs, aspirations, anxieties, fears, hopes and dreams. This subject-centred approach to education is facilitated by innovative methodologies that allow young people to talk frankly with adults and amongst themselves, to participate in community theatre designed to help different types of people address issues of common interest, and to work with experienced adult researchers in generating relevant data.

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1. Introduction

Ranking among regions of the world that can ill-afford modern medicine for managing HIV and AIDS conditions, many of the countries in the Eastern and Southern Africa Region (ESAR) have embraced education as the potent 'social vaccine' against HIV infection that is accessible to their communities. However, cultural beliefs around matters of sexuality and reproductive health issues have continued to thrive in an apparent culture of silence that hampers effective HIV/AIDS education and the participation of children and young people in the related life skills. Many duty bearers, including parents and teachers, lack accurate sexual health knowledge and the life skills that are key to effective sexuality and HIV/AIDS education (Pathfinder, 1999). Sexuality issues pose problems even among educators who are expected to offer guidance in terms of knowledge and attitudes as noted in the studies cited herein.

HIV/AIDS in the ESAR continues to affect not only the quality of education at all levels but also the demand for education in terms of quantity, performance and transition, thus retarding the achievement of Education for All (EFA) goals and by extension, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly those that target education, health and poverty. Evidence abounds on how the rates of HIV infection and AIDS-related attrition among teachers and school administrators has continued to erode the progress made towards achieving universal primary education (UPE) targets (Kickbusch & Payne, 2004; UNAIDS, 2003). In some of the countries of Eastern and Southern Africa, the situation raises great concern for the future of education as noted in Zambia, where an estimated 815 primary school teachers died of AIDS in 2003, thus corresponding to 45 per cent of teachers trained that year (UNESCO, 2004). This means that nearly half of the newly trained teachers replaced the teachers who had died instead of boosting the existing teaching workforce. According to UNESCO (2004), the impact of HIV/AIDS in the education sector will be greater than is currently projected, mainly because of future orphans whose parents are currently living with HIV/AIDS. There is also a view, that although some countries of Eastern Africa (such as Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya) have shown a decline in HIV infections, most of the success stories tend to be more a consequence of public educational practices outside the formal school system where the majority of children spend their waking time.

Most studies recommend a comprehensive approach to the HIV/AIDS epidemic that embraces not just the adults (teachers and parents/guardians) but also the children in their active capacities as members of families and communities as well as their capacities as pupils/students of particular schools and other educational institutions. Based on his work with children on sexuality and HIV/AIDS life skills, Mabala (2003), however, points out that many children appear fatigued of being targeted as the problem and threatened with death should they indulge in sexual relations. He contends that, if treated positively as sexual beings with capacity to feel and think for themselves, children can respond appropriately and make the HIV/AIDS scourge an opportunity through which to revitalise

response to the pandemic in new and innovative ways that are young-person friendly. According to Mabala (2003):

If given the chance, if given the knowledge, life skills and opportunities they require, young people, as rights holders, as the group most threatened by AIDS, and as the most energetic members of society, can lead an effective response and help to shape policies and programmes that are effective in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

This paper argues that education systems, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where sexual intercourse is the leading medium for HIV transmission, ought to invest in curricula that embrace issues of sexuality. The development of this strategy depends, I want to argue, first from a life-cycle approach that is gender sensitive and, second, by focusing on the potential of young people and children in the fight against HIV and AIDS. Those who are affected most need to be empowered in the best way possible with skills that would enable them to deal with the challenges in their lives. Such empowerment should be built on knowledge and information about gender and sexuality, about HIV and AIDS and also on the teaching of relevant and complementary skills and positive attitudes.

Arguably, collaborating with children who constitute the future generation of any nation is bound to yield social and health dividends that have long-term positive implications. Instead of looking at young people as part of the problem of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, we need to look for strategies and solutions for the malady from among them. One way of doing this is to engage young people in the process of HIV/AIDS education, not just as consumers of information but also as generators of relevant knowledge that is responsive to their needs, aspirations, anxieties, fears, hopes and dreams. This should be enhanced by teacher capacities designed to respond to the relatively complex combination of teaching, caring and protecting, not only the children in their care but also the self. It is in this context that this paper highlights the role of children and young people in the ESAR in generating knowledge and providing insights on gender, sexuality, sexuality education and HIV/AIDS and how such different types of knowledge can be used to enhance positive gender relations.

2. Researching gender and sexuality with African children

The project on which this paper is based was funded by UNICEF, Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO). It involved field research in a range of countries comprising Botswana, Kenya, South Africa, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The aim of the project was to explore the potential of young people and children to generate information on issues of sexuality and HIV/AIDS education, which could be used as a curricular resource in schools. Our observations revealed that teachers tended to shy away from engaging their students with interactive learning activities, particularly in the area of sexuality. Conversely, many of the children and young people in our project exhibited eagerness to address issues of gender and sexual relations with friendly adult researchers. Evidently, the kinds of relationships that the researchers established with the young people were exactly the type that teachers ought to establish when addressing sensitive issues of

sexuality and HIV/AIDS. However, many of the teachers who taught sexuality and HIV/AIDS education faced serious difficulties when responding to sensitive questions about sex and sexuality (Pattman & Chege, 2003). They expressed feelings of embarrassment and vulnerability during the lessons, resulting in most of them adopting a moralistic, didactic and authoritarian approach in order to assert their positions and protect themselves from ridicule. To enhance their authority and protect themselves from ridicule and possible embarrassment, the teachers avoided learner-centred methods such as group discussions, brainstorming, debates and visual activities such as drawing. Instructively, these pedagogic approaches are exactly what the researchers used with considerable success in engaging young people in addressing issues of sexuality and HIV/AIDS.

In order to enable young people to participate as key actors in the process of generating data, the researchers were trained, specifically in young person-centred approaches that enabled them to work consciously with young persons and children as subjects who were experts on issues regarding their gendered and sexual lives (see Chege, 2001). This strategy complemented the logic of qualitative research methods that acknowledge the position of researchers and their research subjects as actors who engaged intersubjectively, influencing each other through the research process. The researchers were encouraged to pay particular attention to what the young people said in the interviews with regard to their relationships with others of the same or opposite sex. They were also trained on how to capture *unspoken* language including the silences and other non-verbalised communication for purposes of analysis (see Brown & Gilligan 1992; Taylor et al., 1997). Hence, emotional tones, facial expressions, physical disposition, how much or how little children spoke, as well as the interruptions by others and so on, became part of the data. Also underscored was the value of gender sensitivity, examining the similarities and differences of boys' and girls' 'performance' during interviews – whether in mixed or single sex groups, or individually. The researchers were also encouraged to form mixed teams of female and male, young and older people, with varied experience and fluency in the local language – in order to respond appropriately to different research situations, considering the local cultures that did not foreground the voices of children and young people.

The researchers were also trained on how to ensure that the group and individual interviews were conducted in a *gender sensitive* and friendly manner that was responsive to the particular research settings in which the young people were constructing their identities. Such settings included sites in schools, homes and community, as well as the different interview settings of different gender compositions and sizes. The need to let the subjects 'set the agenda' and dictate both the pace and direction of the interviews was stressed. The researchers were also encouraged to identify and pursue any pertinent points raised by the interviewees themselves.

Our project employed a number of methods for generating data from group and individual interviews, non-participant as well as participant observation, drawing, diary keeping and essay writing. Simulating group interviews was a major component of the research training. This involved

engaging the researchers in criticising each other's performances and making suggestions for improving effectiveness of interviews, transcribing interviews and comparing notes on each other's transcripts. This activity proved to be core in raising awareness regarding the tendency by researchers to paraphrase what interviewees said, and thus distorting the interviewees' 'voices' to reflect the researchers' own interpretations or opinions. Simulations helped the researchers to recognise how their efforts to keep up with the interview schedules could sometimes preclude them from listening to, or even following up on, issues raised by the interviewees.

These interviews emerged as important sites where interviewees not only addressed the research themes but also the forum in which they expressed appreciation for the opportunity to talk about themselves and about issues that they perceived to be of importance to them, freely and without fear of intimidation. This could not be taken for granted as Davies (1999) rightly observed that the experience of participating in loosely structured interviews designed to enhance inter-subjective and dialogical relationships among research subjects as well as between them and researchers was a relatively new phenomenon for many African children. An important outcome of the interviews, in methodological terms, was the ability to solicit different types of data on sexuality among very young children, thus disproving popular arguments regarding the asexuality of the very young. By so doing, the different interviews that were facilitated by different categories of researchers, yielded good practices that could be adapted to inform pedagogical practices on matters of gender relations as well as sexuality and HIV/AIDS.

In addition, in some countries such as Tanzania, adolescent girls and boys were trained to work alongside experienced adult researchers in generating data on sexuality and HIV/AIDS. The young researchers doubled as community thespians who articulated drama and role plays developed around the research themes of sexuality and HIV/AIDS. In the community theatre an audience of adults and children of both sexes were engaged in observation and open discussions on themes presented. The discussions were facilitated by the young people with the help of adult facilitators and the process recorded on video for analysis.

In this paper, I focus on interviews to demonstrate their potential in addressing gender relations, childhood sexuality and HIV/AIDS within educational settings. In the section below, I discuss the role of group interviews in eliciting sensitive data *and* developing empathy between the sexes. The key focus is not on the findings per se but also on the methodological value of the types of interviews that can serve as prototypes of pedagogical practices. The examples show how *single-sex* interviews were used to provide safe spaces for girls and boys to discuss sensitive issues of sexuality. They also demonstrate how *mixed-sex forums* were created in safe environments to expose and challenge oppressive gender relations. As a result, the group interviews became important venues whereby young people were able to talk freely and in uninhibited ways about sex, sexual relations, HIV/AIDS and other pertinent concerns, without feeling threatened by possibilities of humiliation, violence or stigmatisation.

3. Interviews and the fallacy of sex for the under sixteens

One of the major issues facing HIV/AIDS and sexuality education in the ESAR is the question regarding the appropriate age for introducing sexuality and HIV/AIDS education to children. This question hinges on the politics surrounding children's sexual innocence, which is founded on the assumption that children are born asexual and that they only become sexual at some stage in the process of their maturing. In this study, this assumption posed a major hindrance. National governments, through their ministries of education problematised HIV/AIDS and sexuality education in ways that made it impossible to conduct interviews on sexuality with children below sixteen years old. They argued that children who were below this age did not have ideas of sex and hence, this kind of study was bound to corrupt the presumably innocent minds of children, making them sexually active before adulthood. For instance, like many of the teachers and parents who were interviewed, personnel in the Ministry of Education in Zimbabwe were of the view that children under the age of sixteen either did not have sex or did not even think of having sex. By implication, this kind of assumption meant that young children would be denied the right to sexuality education, thus condemning them to a life of ignorance and uncertainties with regard to risks associated with sexual health, including HIV infection. Arguably, for both the girls and boys to learn how to become women and men, they need relevant knowledge, skills and the right attitudes that would deliver them into the future with confidence about their sexual and gendered identities.

Researchers in Zimbabwe were only allowed to interview school children that were over the age of sixteen. Importantly, however, researchers found that, contrary to the official claims regarding children's sexuality, older boys were engaging in sexual relations with younger girls aged ten and eleven. Apparently, while older girls had sexual relations with boys who were older than them, or with men, their male peers tended to seek sexual relations with relatively younger girls in what the boys described as the exploitative nature of boys and men. The excerpt below presents a mixed-sex group discussion where boys boast about what they described as their 'oppressive nature' towards the younger girls whom they bragged of 'sleeping with' and eventually 'ditching' them. In addition to these findings discrediting official claims regarding children's sexual innocence, the importance of the group discussion as shown below lies in concretising group dynamics of how interviews can serve to challenge oppressive gender relations as is observed in the interaction between the girls and the boys in the group. The gendered dimensions are explicit in the ways that the girls tended to romanticise love, while the boys talked about sex and violence.

CANAAN (B): These days, kids have big bodies. By the time she gets to Form 1, she will be having affairs.

INTERVIEWER: Even those in Grades 4 and 5 [aged 10–11 years]?

KOKAYI (B): Er, yes ... those in Grade 4, yes. Those are the ones we are jumping for these days.

(Laughter)

INTERVIEWER: Why do you go for such young girls?

KOKAYI: You know what, yes, us boys have an oppressive nature. Once I sleep with a girl I lose interest in her, so usually I want to go for those who still have ‘intact closed presents’. (Laughter and grumbles)

INTERVIEWER: What presents?

KOKAYI: Official opening – when you sleep with a virgin!

INTERVIEWER: So how do you feel about it?

KOKAYI: I feel good – it’s nice. After the official opening, you can just ditch her ...

INTERVIEWER (TO THE GIRLS): So if a boy dumps you, what do you do?

DAYA (G): It depends on how much you loved him. If you really loved him, you will be pained.

KAMBO (G): I ... I won’t feel that way. I will actually look around for a replacement boyfriend, and I will show off to the boy who dumped me.

MOYO (B): That’s when I will beat you.

CHIPIWA (G): Why should you beat me? Isn’t it you would have dumped me?

CANAAN: Yes, I will beat her because what she will be doing to me is painful, showing off to me ...

CHIPIWA: But it is you who would have ditched me.

In Zambia, study findings confirmed that thinking and acting sexually was not something that happened at the arbitrary selected age of sixteen. For example, young children aged six were observed constructing sexuality and presenting themselves as sexual beings who spoke openly and animatedly about sex. Interviews with these children further dispelled official make-believe that young children do not think or act sexually. The findings from Zambia are unique in that by the time of the study, no research in the ESAR had captured this kind of data with such young children speaking candidly about sex. This is perhaps because dominant public opinions regarding presumed child innocence may have influenced researchers in the relevant areas.

From the video recording of the interview with the Zambian six-year-old girls and boys, no signs of embarrassment or shyness were noted among the children who appeared so keen to contribute to the conversation about sex and ‘having sex’ that they leaned forward, put their hands up animatedly and even stood up to try and attract the interviewer’s attention. Importantly also was the observation that the interviewer, a young woman in her twenties, sat between the boys and girls on an equal level that created a sense of belonging. She made effort to maintain eye contact with all the pupils around her and did not appear shocked or embarrassed by what the children said with regard to their engagement in sexual activities. They talked of having ‘husbands’ and ‘wives’ and named the human genitals explicitly or using representative terminologies. The interviewer kept smiling encouragingly and reassuringly and asked questions in a matter-of-fact way about what the children meant or did when they claimed to have had sex. The excerpt below demonstrates the freedom with which the children constructed themselves as sexual and gendered beings.

INTERVIEWER: How do you know whether you are male or female?

STEVE: By the small penis.
BWALYA, MUSONDA, BEATRICE AND ELIZA: [All smiling] Penis ...
STELLA: [Smiling] Vagina ...
INTERVIEWER: What do you do with the penis and the vagina?
BEVE (B): [have] sex.
INTERVIEWER: Who do you have sex with?
GELI (G): With my husband.
INTERVIEWER: Where do you have sex?
BEVE: [Holding chin and smiling] In the bush or bathroom ...
MUSODA (B): [Holding his head and smiling] Under the bed ...
GELI: [Playing with a bottle and looking shy] In a small house.
INTERVIEWER: Where is the small house?
GELI: In the bush.

Arguably, it is precisely because of the kind of relaxed, friendly, non-judgemental relationship that the interviewer established with the young children that the interview yielded the kind of data cited above. Contrary to popular belief that ‘sex talk’ was gendered in terms of who should or should not speak about pertinent matters, the interviews with the young Zambian children demonstrate clearly that both the girls and the boys were keen to speak about sex in uninhibited ways. It is noteworthy too that at a relatively young age, the Zambian children talked about their identities in heterosexual relationships in a manner similar to that of much older, post-pubescent children. Even as some developmental psychologists, influenced by Freud, have argued that the experience of sexuality for young children is qualitatively different from sexuality as experienced by adults, Gregory (1987), for example, confirms the research findings with regard to children’s tendency to seek sexual pleasure with themselves or heterosexually. Gregory observes that:

By and large the [sexual] explorations of the child are sensually diffuse rather than erotically specific, though well before the onset of puberty both boys and girls may masturbate to some kind of orgasmic experience without there being, in the boy, any ejaculatory consequences. (ibid., p. 705)

Very specifically, the interviews with young people (including those in prepubescent stage) show that when working with children, the social context is a key factor that determines the level of confidence among the interviewees and the nature of content in what they could possibly share with adult educators or researchers without fearing punishment. Hence, the place and the people present – female and male – often played a vital role in determining how children constructed themselves, and what they said about themselves in relation to others, in terms of gender and sexual relations. This underscores other findings on multiplicity and fluidity of identities (Hall, 1992) and the way these are enacted differently in different contexts and with different people. This has important implications for educators – particularly sexuality and HIV/AIDS teachers – who need to reflect (and encourage their pupils to reflect) upon the ways in which they constructed their identities and positioned themselves in relation to others of the same and opposite sex.

Becoming the 'other'

Based on discourse theory, which requires that what the different sexes say about themselves and others be treated as constructions rather than descriptions of their identities, this study captured the process in which femininities and masculinities were constructed as polar opposites and lacking similarity. In an attempt to elicit gendered perceptions of one gender by the other, girls and boys in the study were asked to imagine that they had changed sex for one day. The outcome of this research activity was that girls and boys in the different countries expressed aversion at the idea in almost similar ways and, consequently, portrayed the polarity with which they constructed gender identities. The common revulsion expressed suggests that many of the girls and boys were strongly invested in constructing themselves in opposition to their views of the opposite sex. Notably, even adults expressed similar revulsion when asked to imagine that they had changed their sex for one day. For example in Zimbabwe, one Ministry of Education official described the question about changing sex as attempts in expecting the 'unnatural'. Further, in a dissemination workshop for this research, more men than women seemed to be relatively more opposed to this idea with some of them claiming that only men with 'hormonal abnormalities' could imagine being women. It is noteworthy that schoolboys in South Africa and Tanzania constructed boys who expressed a willingness to become girls for a day, as 'homosexual'. In South Africa, homophobia seemed to play a significant part in the ways that boys tried to assert themselves as masculine by warding off possible accusations of femininity. Declaring an interest in becoming girls clearly posed an imagined threat to male identities – implying just how fragile those identities were. Studies on boys and masculinity in Britain and other Western countries have also shown how preoccupied boys are with distancing themselves from girls and activities and characteristics that they define as feminine (e.g. Epstein, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996, Frosh *et al.*, 2002).

Findings from other countries in Eastern and Southern Africa are similar, thus strengthening the view that boys, more than girls have greater investment in the power-based masculine construct while girls, more than boys, invested more on the relational and character attributes that are identified with femininity. The interview excerpts below demonstrate these assertions by highlighting boys' and girls' sense of gender boundaries.

Zimbabwean girls would not like to be boys

INTERVIEWER: You will be sad if you were a boy – why?

CHIPO: Yes, because I will be having attitudes of a boy when I am a girl.

INTERVIEWER: What are the attitudes of a boy?

CHIPO: Drinking beer.

NYASHA: Taking alcohol.

JAPERERA: Being attracted to simple things.

Kenyan boys would not like to be girls

WAKESA: Girls respect you and I will inherit property from my father.

CHEGE: Boys are brave and girls keep on laughing – I hate that.

GICHINGA: They are not easily raped.

KAGAI: They don't get pregnant.

MBUI: They will be head of the house.

MUKIRI: Girls wash dirty things in the house.

Some girls wish to be boys sometimes (Kenyan boys and girls)

ABSCO (G): Sometimes I'd like to be a boy. For example, if you want to go [out] with your friends, if you are a boy you just go. If you are a girl, you have to get permission first ... of course, they are concerned about you ... but at times you will just be wanting to go with your friends and just talk ... sometimes you will just be wanting to visit your friend, a girlfriend ... sometimes it is boring, because if I was a boy I would just come back anytime!

INTERVIEWER: Boys, do you ever want to be a girl?

BOYS: Ah, no.

OWINO (BOY): We only thought of it as kids when we were playing home ... as kids ... and were cooking. [Laughter from the group]

WARUI (BOY): It's unimaginable ...

The boys and girls associate masculinity with certain privileges and freedoms as evident in other gender and sexuality studies (see Commeyras & Montsi, 2000; Chege, 2001). Nevertheless, many of the girls in the study, like the Zimbabwean girls, expressed revulsion at the idea of imagining what it would be like to change their sex. They spoke about boys as being 'simple', 'immature' and 'troublesome'. In addition, many of the girls were keen to present themselves as 'good' by distinguishing themselves from other girls who were seen as behaving too much like boys by being too sexual, going out, drinking and attracting people of the opposite sex. This may explain why the Zimbabwean girls characterised boys in the way they did, distancing themselves as 'good' girls from these popular characteristics of boys. But the strong desire of most girls to remain girls, despite the apparent attractions of being male may stem from a sense that girls enjoy more support from each other than the boys receive from amongst themselves.

Using the two-stage interview sessions, researchers encouraged the Zambian girls and boys to address problems of the other gender. In the first stage, same-sex groups were asked to identify the sorts of gender-related issues that they thought people of the opposite sex had to deal with. In a follow-up stage, the boys and girls came together to present and discuss their findings. Even with the evidence of polarisation and the expressed aversion of being the other gender, it was interesting to note how empowering single-sex group discussions were for the girls. Furthermore, the experience of working in single-sex groups clearly encouraged girls, in particular, to be more outspoken when they joined the ensuing mixed-sex group discussions. Researchers found that, in some of the mixed-sex plenary sessions, the girls were as outspoken and critical as the boys – a fact they attributed to the confidence and support they had gained in the single-sex group. It was also in such groups that girls and boys developed the kind of gender empathy expressed when they were asked to reflect consciously on the problems that the other genders encountered in society and their role in addressing the same. This experience reflects the pedagogical tenets of societal conscientisation (see Freire, 1973).

Analysis of data showed that this two-stage strategy of group discussions addressing gender issues and relations could be effectively incorporated in the kind of learner-centred and gender-sensitive pedagogy for addressing HIV/AIDS and sexuality education. This would help embrace the learners' views as key resource materials in informing gender issues in education.

Gender expectations

One major problem that emerged consistently about boys revolved around the economic responsibilities boys were expected to fulfil, the better exam marks they were expected to achieve, their presumed susceptibility to peer pressure, their presumed physical toughness and sexual proclivity, and their relative detachment from their mothers and fathers. In a girls' group discussion in Zambia, participants empathised with the problems of boys, observing that:

Boys faced problems at home mainly because they were considered stronger than girls. They were always given hard jobs to do [and] even when they can't do it, they will just continue because their parent commanded [them] to do so.

In addition,

When men got married, they faced problems of looking after the family. [Also] unemployment and school dropout resulted in men being unable to meet expectations of supporting families. [Hence, boys are pressured to outperform girls in school.]

It was further observed that:

Boys were teased by other boys and girls for being physically small and for having a small penis.

In Zimbabwe, rather surprisingly, given the ways in which the boys prided themselves in being 'free' and saw girls as subordinated people who were tied to the home, some teenage boys confirmed the girls' view that boys' advantage over girls was exaggerated on some issues. The boys complained about their parents favouring their sisters over them as captured in a boys' group discussion below:

CHARLES: If you have a sister, when she asks for money from your parents, they just give [it to] her without asking any questions. All she does is state how much she wants and she gets it. But for me, a boy, I have to explain and usually they don't give me the cash. They would rather buy me what I want than give me the money.

OWEN: My parents expect [a lot] from me. When I get what I call my best results, they still expect me to have done better, so we have problems. If I try to explain, they won't listen. They simply accuse me of being playful in school. I think they expect too much from me.

JONAH: In my family, I talk to my sisters and [we go] around together. But the way we are treated is different. The girls are regarded highly and us boys are simply brushed aside as being a mischievous lot. Even though my sisters are as mischievous as the boys, it's never discovered.

For educators and other duty-bearers, understanding the dilemmas facing boys and girls from their own perspective is primary to understanding how stereotyping works in the politics of gendering the sexes. Teachers can build on these understandings to improve on their interaction with students and even engage young people in their care to challenge gender differentiation with the aim of developing healthy gender relations based on empathy.

Allowing boys to address the problems facing girls was an equally important process of developing empathy as found in some of the research countries. When asked to identify the problems that girls commonly experienced, Zambian boys focused on sexuality claiming that girls were sexually disadvantaged because they were identified with unwanted pregnancies, rape, prostitution, early marriages and sexual abuse. According to the boys, girls' problems emanated from the fact that they were constructed as the 'weaker' sex; their physical movements were restricted, they faced low academic expectations and were considered to be less powerful than boys. The girls concurred with these views and observed that:

Teachers [both male and female] have a negative attitude against the girls. They say boys are brighter or cleverer than girls and treat them as such. For this reason, women were given lower jobs than men, like teaching and nursing. Where there are men, they will always be appointed for higher posts. Very few women are in high positions.

Notably, almost all the girls' groups identified sexual harassment and abuse as the most pressing problem faced by girls. Some of girls observed that sexual harassment was experienced from grandfathers to school peers. The following are some captions from girls' group discussions in Kenya:

After [male] grandparents or stepfathers pay for school fees, they want sex from you in return.

A teacher starts giving you more marks, invites you to his home and asks for [a] sexual favour. If you refuse ... you get to be a victim in class.

Bus conductors or call boys touch you and make you [feel] uncomfortable. They use offensive language. They also favour you by not making you pay the fare.

Research findings from the interviews indicated that few girls and boys were aware of their rights as children. There were suggestions that the schools lacked functional mechanisms through which girls – or even boys – could channel their grievances with regard to sexual harassment or other gender constraining issues. Considering the link between power relations involved in sexual harassment and abuse and HIV/AIDS, sexuality matters needed to be addressed by schools, not just generally but also specifically and formally as key to healthy relations between the genders (see Posada, 1999).

The value of bringing girls and boys together in an attempt to develop positive gender relations and empathy was captured in an interview with a Zambian parish counsellor, Mary, whose view was that nurturing healthy gender relations was dependent on teachers' attitudes and abilities to

facilitate boys and girls to get together as friends. This, she argued, would help minimise the tendency to focus on sex as the only reason why the two sexes should relate. She explained that engaging girls and boys in various activities helped to demonstrate the many commonalities between the genders and consequently divert attention away from sex per se. She said:

It is the same when you mix these boys and girls, you know that feeling [sexual] goes away. (...) We want to make them feel they are brothers and sisters, which should be the case. I remember when I was growing up ... sorry to take you back some 50, 60 years [laughter] ... we used to bathe with boys in a stream with no costumes and we didn't see each other's nakedness, because [of the way we] were brought up like. That is the culture we want to bring to these children ... that there is really nothing peculiar or strange about each other.

Mary's explanation implies that, separating boys and girls so that they do not engage in sex, may only serve to construct the relationship between them as essentially, and only, a sexual one. Hence segregating boys and girls, in her view, made them ultimately more likely to engage in sex when they did get the chance to mix.

4. Conclusion

Our findings from the countries cited in this paper show that young people were eager to discuss sexuality and by extension sexual and reproductive health issues including HIV/AIDS with friendly and non-judgemental researchers. It is therefore important that gender relations that influence the nature and form of sexual activity be addressed with young people taking up their positions as sexual beings who are actors and experts of their experiential encounters. Development of empathy should be encouraged through group discussions where young people are provided the space to explore the merits and demerits of healthy gendered relations. Discussions of this nature should be done in a manner that is participatory, subject centred, gender sensitive and nonthreatening.

In order to implement sexuality and HIV/AIDS education effectively among children and young people, the study suggests that teachers focus more on identities of girls and boys and the link between constructions of 'self' and 'other' and how this could put them at risk of contracting HIV. They also need to develop safe environments through single-sex discussions as well as mixed-sex settings in which both genders feel safe to express themselves, their expectations and fears. Teachers and other educators should encourage the development of empathy between the genders focusing more on commonalities between them.

It is important that educators present safe spaces through which to challenge the assumption that sexual desire is mainly male and that heterosexual relations invariably involve males harassing females. In order to minimise sexual vulnerability of girls and to establish more equal sexual relations between girls and boys, HIV/AIDS and sexuality education should be designed in ways that encourage girls to express themselves more openly regarding their sexual desires and expectations in relationships. While sexual harassment must not be tolerated in schools, it is important that schools

respond not just by simply punishing boys, and potentially making them more hostile to girls, but rather through reflective discussions that promote mutual understanding and empathy and equal relationships between the genders.

Educators should be trained to tap the sexual experiences and practices of children and young people in order to tailor education for the very young children who have an equal right to access sexuality and HIV/AIDS education that is gender and age appropriate. Given the common taboos that surround talking about sexuality in many African communities – particularly between adults and children – it is clearly not easy to be an effective HIV/AIDS and sexuality education teacher. Teachers need to be enabled, through training, to take an active role in challenging misconceptions on gender relations and encourage girls and boys to respect each other, listen to one another and participate equally in all learning activities, including sexuality education. While research has shown that young people find it easier to talk about sexuality issues in single-sex groups, it is vital that such topics do not become characterised as exclusively male or female. We have seen that with assurance of protection from humiliation and harassment, boys and girls are willing and even eager to talk about these issues in the presence of each other, and even in the presence of caring and trusted adults.

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