

Communicating HIV & AIDS among Students in Kenya's Institutions of Higher Learning: A Challenge for the 21st Century

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Abstract

HIV/AIDS is tearing the African continent to shreds. The epidemic is taking an enormous toll on the region's youth, majority of whom, often lack sexual information and health services. Universities in the continent have not been spared either. The population of these universities comprise of young adults aged 18 – 35 years. This population is sexually active and therefore vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection. But perhaps what is worrying is that Universities lack policies and are reluctant to commit resources to address the menace. Where HIV/AIDS communication has been attempted, it has been done without taking into consideration the social, cultural, physiological and other important factors. There is a general perception in this paper that in some years to come, African countries, including Kenya will have lost the cream of the society to the pandemic.

Key words: HIV/AIDS, Higher Education, Kenya, Communication

1.0 Introduction

HIV/AIDS has become the world's greatest challenge in the 21st century. Nowhere else has the disease been more prominent than in sub-Saharan Africa. The region has 2/3rds of the world's HIV/AIDS infections and 74% AIDS cases. One of the most severe consequences of the disease in Africa is the loss of young adults in their most productive years. High levels of abortions, school dropouts and sexually transmitted infections confirm that youths are engaged in early sexual activities that predispose them to the danger of HIV/AIDS. The high rate of infection among the youth depicts a situation whereby, either the youth have not received sufficient information regarding the dangers associated with the disease, or they have ignored the message.

It may be assumed that university students have the knowledge on HIV/AIDS and how to protect themselves from the pandemic. However, a study on African universities by (Owino 2004) proved the opposite; that university students are at risk just like any other population group in society.

In recognition of the fore mentioned statistics, this paper gives a critical analysis of HIV/AIDS prevalence among students in Kenya's institutions of higher learning. The paper delves into the question of whether communication pertaining the pandemic has been effectively relayed to Kenya's young adults. If it has been relayed, has it been relayed in the right manner? Have the students ignored the message, and why

have they done so? The social and economic consequences of HIV/AIDS prevalence among the youth are also examined.

1.2 HIV/AIDS Prevalence among the Youth in Kenya

Kenya is one of the most affected countries by HIV/AIDS in East Africa (table 1). The face of the pandemic in the country is primarily young, with majority of the victims aged 15 – 24 years. This is the bracket under which students in higher institutions lie.

Table 1: estimated percentage number of 15-24 year old men and women living with HIV/AIDS in Eastern Africa, 2001

Country	%	%	000's	000's
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Ethiopia	5.7 – 10.0	3.2 – 5.6	354 - 622	199 - 348
Kenya	12.5 – 18.7	4.8 – 7.2	448 - 671	172 - 258
Tanzania	6.4 – 9.7	2.8 – 4.3	239 - 362	104 – 160
Uganda	3.7 – 5.6	1.6 – 2.4	90 - 136	39 – 58
Rwanda	9.0 – 13.4	3.9 – 5.9	78 - 116	33 - 51

Source: UNAIDS, 2002

In 2003, 3.0 – 3.4 million new cases of HIV infection in sub-Saharan Africa occurred in the same age group, aged 15 – 24 years (UNAIDS and WHO 2003). From the statistics presented above, it is clear that the enormity of HIV/AIDS in Kenya's institutions of higher learning cannot be underestimated. With the current situation, effective communication is the only remedy for halting the spread of HIV/AIDS. Yet, it is worrying just how little information is availed to students alerting them about the dangers involved.

1.3 HIV/AIDS Communication in Kenya

In tackling the problem of HIV/AIDS, communication is vital. It has the potential to provide information, knowledge, attitude and skills that will inform and lead to positive moral behaviour and self-protection.

It is apparent that communication regarding HIV/AIDS has been carried out in Kenya. The government, individuals and various non-governmental organizations have put much effort in creating HIV/AIDS awareness. Despite the vigorous campaigns, the disease has still managed to claim a large number of victims daily. This is a clear indication that there is a hitch in HIV/AIDS communication process. According to (Obel 1995), "Many people in Kenya are not bothered about the consequences of being exposed to the virus." People in the country are aware of problems associated with the pandemic, but their attitude does not reflect this awareness. Obel (ibid) observes, "They lack in-depth communication."

1.3.1 Communication Challenges Pertaining HIV/AIDS

Going by Obel's observation, it is important to look at critical areas that anti-HIV/AIDS campaigners in Kenya may have ignored, that prevent recipient audiences from internalizing this communication. Kiuna and Muhoro (2003) insist that rising HIV/AIDS prevalence calls for candid analysis of factors that constrain behaviour change. Such factors may include biological, social and cultural.

1.3.1.1 Biological, Social and Cultural Factors

One of the challenges that HIV/AIDS communicators face is keeping aside the biological, social and cultural factors while addressing the pandemic. For example, while asking young people to use condoms while engaging in sexual activities, many campaigners ignore the details concerning how to procure condoms, how to negotiate their use with a partner and how to use and remove them effectively.

Culture is also a very vital component of communication. According to (Nduati and Kiai, 1996), the centrality of culture cannot be ignored in any discussion on HIV/AIDS. An understanding of people's culture helps in designing communication programs that focus on the manner in which knowledge can be introduced into a cultural system. Such understanding fosters the ability to force community to rethink their approach towards issues regarding sexuality and human relationships.

Communication materials used in advocacy campaigns must also be relevant to the culture in which they are used. According to (Gakahu 2005), electronic media has adversely been used in sensitizing the youth on the need for behaviour change in Kenya. This paper, however, is of the opinion that however crucial, electronic media is, it may not be a very efficient tool in addressing HIV/AIDS in Africa. Many people lack access to electronic media and where it is available, it may fail to give detailed information due to time constraints. HIV/AIDS campaigners have failed to produce targeted results because the communication materials used in the campaigns are not culturally appropriate in most African cultures.

One of the major aspects of culture is language. This language is very important in any communication policy (Thiong'o 1981). Anti-HIV/AIDS campaigners have failed to recognize the fact that there exists a unique language of the youth in any society. This language is significant for effective communication, and should be given prominence in addressing the youth in matters pertaining HIV/AIDS. According to (Ogechi 2005), there is need to use the lexicon and expressions that students employ in the discourse on HIV/AIDS, and in Kenya, this lexicon is "sheng."

1.3.1.2 Communication Strategies

Some universities in Kenya have tried several ways of creating HIV/AIDS awareness among the students. Maseno, Nairobi and Kenyatta universities have outreach activities in response to HIV/AIDS crisis. These activities include peer-to-peer counseling, skits, dances, songs, drama among others (Owino 2004). The question however is, are these strategies in depth enough to address the pandemic? Such communication strategies that are used to create awareness pertaining HIV/AIDS in Kenya are ineffective because they are limited and shallow in what they discuss.

Another challenge of HIV/AIDS communication in Kenya is its focus on behaviour change. According to (Asta and Peppia 2007), however, to think of HIV/AIDS communication in terms of behaviour change is limiting. They argue, "It is insufficient to understand the challenges of HIV/AIDS prevention communication as being only to do with addressing behaviour." HIV/AIDS communication should be thought of as a broad based set of communication activities that consider the implications of all sets of the disease's transmission and infection.

1.4 Social and Economic Consequences of HIV/AIDS Prevalence among Students

By losing young people at their most productive years, Kenya risks its future. The country will be faced with demographic, economic and social consequences. For instance, there will be diminished productivity, lack of human resource, low birth rate among other factors.

Most University students are amongst the most talented and skilled in the young adult population. This population is the one that the country will rely on to make up a high skill base in its economy. The pandemic, therefore, poses a major obstacle to economic growth because of the effect it has on the stability of the future workforce, both in private and public spheres. HIV/AIDS may interfere with the future economy of Kenya by squeezing productivity, depleting skills and distorting labour.

1.5 Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, it is apparent that HIV/AIDS poses a major challenge among students in Kenya's higher institution. More so, the pandemic raises many communication challenges especially if this communication has to be effective. To counter these challenges, this paper recommends the following; HIV/AIDS prevention strategies that focus on students must be innovative, creative and comprehensive. They must address the environmental factors that place students at risk such as cultural and biological factors that contribute to HIV/AIDS risk. While passing the message concerning HIV/AIDS, communicators need to stress and consider factors that inhibit prevention. These factors include socio-cultural factors such as female disempowerment and economic factors such as the inability to purchase contraceptives, hence resulting to unprotected sex. Understanding communication process among young people is crucial in order to design preventive strategies. The country should embark on multimedia, multidimensional and interactive communication strategies so as to address every individual in a heterogenous group.

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