

FSN FORUM DISCUSSION
**GENDER AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF VULNERABILITY TO FOOD
SECURITY IN HIV/AIDS CONTEXT**
FROM 4TH JUNE TO 30TH JUNE 2009

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Duration: from 04.06.2009 to 30.6.2009

Number of participants: 5

Number of Contributions: 5

II. INTRODUCTION OF THE TOPIC

Dear FSN colleagues,

I am Mariame MAIGA, from Cote d'Ivoire. I am a Rural Development Sociologist, specialized in Gender and Development. I am in the last step of my PhD program in Wageningen University and Research Centre, in The Netherlands. My thesis is on "Gender, HIV/AIDS and Food Security in Cote d'Ivoire: experiences from a Village affected by Deforestation".

Cote d'Ivoire is one of the most AIDS infected countries in West Africa. Women remain the hardest hit by the epidemic. Their vulnerability to AIDS is mainly due to gender ideology and inequity, and impacts highly on food security, since they provide the bulk of food production and concerned most with food security. Indeed, research shows relevance of multidimensional relationships between gender, rural poverty, AIDS, and food security.

However, women's vulnerability to AIDS is not adequately addressed in the mainstream knowledge, policies and intervention to tackle the epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

Although the impact of AIDS on food security has been well-documented, studies are more biomedical and socio-economic-oriented than socio-cultural and gender-oriented. Furthermore, these studies have not adequately addressed the influences of different cultures on gender roles, women's sexuality, their vulnerability to AIDS, and the impact on food and nutrition security. Few studies have analyzed how cultural systems such as matrilinearity and patrilinearity increase women vulnerability to AIDS, and influence the way they respond to the impacts of the epidemic: how they cope with AIDS and economic vulnerability, and other adversity such as deforestation. Hence, there is a need to go beyond the AIDS-related studies with a health and socio-economic focus, to understand how cultural vulnerability and AIDS vulnerability interacts with ecological vulnerability such as deforestation, and how this impacts women and food security.

Therefore, I have posed as research question **“How cultural systems such as matrilinearity and patrilinearity influence gender roles, women's sexuality, rural livelihoods, food and nutrition security, in AIDS context?”**

I would like to ask for your insights and opinion on this issue. I would also appreciate it if you could share any document or study you may know of on Food Security- related gender and cultural issues, as well as on Food security indicators for anthropological and sociological perspective. Additionally, please also share contact details of NGOs or other organizations you are aware of who have done similar studies.

Your advices and responses will be very useful in my research, which intends to stress that HIV/AIDS is not primarily a health problem, but a socio-cultural problem as well. It would contribute to the debate on the fight against HIV/AIDS from a gender perspective. It would also contribute to influencing policies and practices regarding the fight against HIV/AIDS in African countries, for sustaining food security.

I include below some of my findings on the cultural dimensions of vulnerability related to HIV/AIDS and Food Security from a gender perspective. I would appreciate your comments on these as well.

I thank very much in advance for the time that you will allocate to this discussion, as well as for your inputs.

With kind regards,

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Some of the findings on the cultural dimensions of vulnerability related to HIV/AIDS and Food Security from a gender perspective.

From UNAIDS report, Sub Saharan Africa didn't make a real progress in its response to AIDS. 1.9 million People newly infected in 2007-08, bringing the number of people living with HIV to 22 million. 67% of the global total of 32.9 million people with HIV lives in SSA. Cote d'Ivoire is one of the most infected countries in West Africa. Though, women remain the hardest hit by the epidemic. Their vulnerability to AIDS is mainly due to gender ideology and inequity, and impacts highly on food security, since they provide the bulk of food production and concerned most with food security. Indeed, research shows relevance of multidimensional relationships between gender, rural poverty, AIDS, and food security.

In Aids context, women experience a shortage of agricultural labour. Because of their gender identity and gender roles, even if they are not infected, there is a reallocation of their agricultural labour time, to caring for sick persons.

The study area is a village in Cote d'Ivoire, an important zone in terms of food production. This village is a multi-cultural one with a majority of the natives, and migrants. It has emerged from data that kinship systems like matrilinearity and patrilinearity motivate and increase women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and its impacts on food and nutrition security. The native kinship system is matrilineal, whereas the migrant kinship system is patrilineal.

According to the natives' kinship system, only nephews have to inherit from their maternal uncles, as far as their assets and royal/chieftaincy positions are concerned. Rather, kings, and chiefs come from the mother side, i.e., from the children of sisters, in a family. In such a context, women do get a certain 'power', since they are seen to be the ones who should protect and sustain their culture, by ensuring the sustainability of the traditional political authority, through their role of reproduction. Hence, this kinship system imposes strongly to women to get children somehow, for protecting the sustainability of kingship and chieftaincy. As a result, it is common to see, with regard this cultural concern, women having several partners. Therefore, this kinship system exposes women to a sexual freedom, which increases their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. The sexual freedom has to be stopped only once they get married, in a traditional way. Therefore, it is culturally approved of and even stimulated that women have several partners, before getting married.

In the patrilineal system, girls and women are not allowed to decide about their sexual life. Before getting married, girls should keep their virginity, to honor their families, according to their culture. Once they get married, women have to be strongly submissive. Accordingly, they are most of time sexually passive. What's more, in the patrilineal system, women have obligation to be at the mercy of their husbands. From my study, I realized that even in case of suspected AIDS infection, women most of the times don't ask for safe sex. Further, womanhood from their perspective has something to do with risk; i.e. they accept to risk their life, in respect for their culture. Moreover, respecting culture at the cost of their life has something to do with the future of their children. In other words, as long as women do respect culture by being at the mercy of their husbands, they are blessed, but also they can get blessed children, being able to improve in the future their conditions of life, and get paradise as well. Hence, women do compete in risking their life, for respecting culture in that sense.

In sum, the matrilineal and patrilineal systems leads to a strong feminization of HIV/AIDS in both natives and migrants communities, thereby increasing rural livelihoods vulnerability, and food and nutrition insecurity at household, community, national and regional level. But can we change culture? From Bourdieu's perspective, culture is 'Habitus', it is history, i.e. the legitimization of present practices. However in context of stress and chock, 'habitus' are limited options for change. Therefore, we can impact on some cultural practices. Though, this requires action research activities such as creating dialogue among the key stakeholders, and engaging in negotiations and facilitation for the change process.

III. LIST OF CONTRIBUTIONS

Contribution by Shambhu Ghatak from the Planning Commission, India

Dear all,

I would like to point out the following while contributing in the area of "Gender/cultural dimensions of vulnerability to Food Security in HIV/AIDS context ".

1. Poor women are very much vulnerable to food insecurity, particularly in the presence of war, famine and drought. Women who depend a lot on common property resources (CPRs) such as forest and water resources for food, fodder, medicinal plants and herbs etc. are adversely affected if war, famine or say unrestricted land acquisition destroy CPRs. Since women traditionally take the onus of feeding children and ensure food security of the households, so access to CPRs matter a lot.

2. Female-headed households exist in both Africa and Asia. There are households, which are run by females, when males have migrated to cities or towns in search of livelihoods. In such cases, access to credit and other inputs of production as well as technology by females engaged in agriculture or farming can determine the level of household food and nutrition security. Countries and regions where female literacy is low can see higher prevalence of undernutrition among children. Anaemia arising from iron deficiency disorder (IDD) is quite common in women from underdeveloped countries. Early childbirth and marriages as well as gender based norms affect the overall nutrition status of women in countries like India.

3. HIV/ AIDS has a gender dimension too. It is the women who are generally at the receiving end of trauma, which can affect their nutritional status. It is generally perceived by patriarchal societies that women are the carriers of HIV/ AIDS. The males who generally take no precautions such as condoms etc. (during their visits to brothels) often go scot free on spreading the dreadful virus. Sex education is not considered seriously in mainstream education in such societies. There also exists the problem of rising prices of anti-retroviral drugs. The lack of a regulatory regime of keeping the drug prices low are affecting the females affected by HIV/ AIDS. Women's consent are not taken seriously during sexual intercourse. Women are mainly victims of patriarchy in such societies.

Regards,

Shambhu Ghatak

www.eIndia2007.blogspot.com

Contribution by Joseph Opio-Odongo from the Sustainable Development Services, Uganda

Dear Mariame,

You may want to consider the following:

1. Clarity on the nature of food insecurity in Cote d'Ivoire and the character of its differential impacts on segments of the population, especially women.

2. Clarify on the nature of cultural vulnerability in the country and how this has been changing over time, if at all.

3. Same level of clarity on the cultural, structural factors that perpetuate women's vulnerability to both HIV/AIDS and food insecurity and malnutrition.

4. Careful analysis of how increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS and the increasing number of the people with full-blown AIDS: a) divert women's productive time from food production to patient care; and b) reduce the labour productivity of women who may have the disproportionate responsibility for food production as a result of the differential gender roles in society.

5. While it may not be necessary to dwell much on the causes of deforestation, it is essential that you articulate the environment-energy relationships for the majority of the population in the country and the manner in which the relationships translate into an energy crisis that compels people to prefer cooking foods that are less energy demanding. This has serious implications for

household nutrition. Increasing distances covered by women in search of biomass energy also reduces the time that women would routinely devote to care, food production and food processing.

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Director, Sustainable Development Services (SDS)
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Kampala, Uganda

Contribution by Max Blanck from Italy

Dear all,

I've come across some publications that can be of interest for the topic discussed:

The publication "Impact of HIV/AIDS on Rural Livelihoods and Food Security" contains information of the impact of HIV/AIDS on women and features a short chapter dedicated to the role HIV/Aids plays in worsening existent gender-based differences.

http://www.uneca.org/chga/Ethiopia/Interactive_ethiopia.pdf

A second interesting report is the report of the UNFPA-organized breakout panel of the African Development Forum "Gender and HIV/Aids: Leadership roles in Social Mobilization". Of special interest is the section by Marcela Villarreal (director of FAO's Gender, Equity and Rural Employment Division), "Gender perspective on the impact of HIV/AIDS on Food Security and Labour supply: Leadership challenges".

<http://www.unfpa.org/africa/newdocs/hivaidsbreakoutpanel.pdf>

Of further interest can be the book "HIV and AIDS in Africa: beyond epidemiology" by Ezekiel Kalipeni (Ed.). Part III focuses on the socio-cultural implications of the disease also from a gender perspective.

http://books.google.it/books?id=IFouj3IHGxEC&dq=Ezekiel+Kalipeni,+HIV+and+AIDS+in+Africa:+beyond+epidemiology&printsec=frontcover&source=bn&hl=it&ei=IQYtSriaCsPdsgbcn9nWCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4#PPR6,M1

An interesting operational guide on the topic is the publication prepared by the Canadian Development International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Inter-Agency Coalition on AIDS and Development (ICAD) "the Addressing HIV/AIDS and Gender Equality in Food Security and Rural Livelihoods Programming" which can be accessed under

http://icad-cisd.com/pdf/publications/E_MakingtheLink_AIDS_AGRICULTURE2.pdf

I hope these can be useful.

Regards,

Max

Contribution by Raga Mohmaed Elzaki from the University of Gezira, Sudan

Dear FSN colleagues,

I am Raga Mohamed Elzaki from Sudan. The gender issue is one of my top careers.

Sudan is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and various types of tribes, an Afro-Arab country. Woman's vulnerability to AIDS is differing in the north and south Sudan. The AIDS infection governs by norms, culture and traditional practices (e.g. earlier married of girls).

Women in the North have been relegated to the role of legal minors with the application of Sharia law to govern all aspects of social and political life, the effect of AIDS is rear, except in case of blood transfer due mistake of some investigating of blood in hospital during surgery operations. Woman are obligated to be at the mercy of her husband, no other informal sex relation with any foreign man, generally in Sudan woman not allowed to decide about her sexual life. Before getting married, girls should keep their virginity, to honor their families, according to their culture and Islamic law (this in Islamic societies). After they married they have to be strongly kept the sexual life with her husband. But in case of man may be have sexual life with more than one woman, because Islamic law permits to man to married up to four wives, in this case man is the first tool of transfer of AIDS within their wives if the one of them have infected in any way (but transfer is usually by the mistakes of blood transfer or other ways of infection other than sex practices)

In the south, customary practices and denial about the incidence of HIV/AIDS have given rise to a casual approach to the disease. In south, the AIDS is more spread than in the north. Woman in southern Sudan is more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS". Polygamy and wives inheritances are widely practiced in Southern Sudan, men tend to have more sexual partners than women.

Currently, the awareness levels on HIV/AIDS and sexuality are very low and the communities do not appear to appreciate the seriousness of the disease. There are many women who claim not to have heard about HIV/AIDS and those who have heard do not believe the facts; even fewer women know how to protect themselves.

Some studies indicated that there are strong relationship between AIDS, food security and spread of poverty particularly among rural woman; hence the woman has a big role in food security in all over the country.

Dr. Raga Mohmaed Elzaki
, women's Department of Rural economics and Developments
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Contribution by Elizabeth Cooper from the United Kingdom

In HIV/AIDs context where many women are left as head of the households vulnerability to Food Security is further aggravated by inheritance practices. In this regard, the paper "Inheritance practices and the intergenerational transmission of poverty in Africa - A literature review and annotated bibliography" (<http://www.chronicpoverty.org/pubfiles/116%20Cooper-annotatedbib-litreview.pdf>) can be useful to examine the impact of different cultures on Food Security.

The paper investigates the links between inheritance systems and the intergenerational transmission of poverty in Africa. Central to questions of inheritance inclusion and exclusion are property rights, and the bulk of this body of poverty studies literature addresses women's exclusion from land ownership in Africa. As such, attention is paid to work that analyses gender equity in property and inheritance rights as well as opportunities for legal reform in particular African countries. Studies concerning the social roles of widows in African societies have predominantly highlighted their marginality and insecurity in terms of property ownership and economic livelihoods. This paper further emphasises the point that marriage is a key factor influencing women's economic security and inheritance rights. The paper account for those studies that focus on the poverty effects of exclusionary inheritance rules and practices for widowed women, children and households affected by HIV/AIDS, among others.

Best wishes

Elizabeth Cooper