

GENDER/CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF VULNERABILITY TO FOOD SECURITY IN HIV/AIDS CONTEXT

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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 legitimation 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.