

## **Introduction. Sexual networking, knowledge, and risk: contextual social research for confronting AIDS and STDs in Eastern and Southern Africa**



**Philip W. Setel**

*Health Transition Centre, National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Australian National University*

The Workshop on Multi-Partnered Sexuality and Sexual Networking in Southern and Eastern Africa, from which this selection of papers originated, took place at the University of Natal, Durban, on 7-8 February 1997. The workshop was primarily a gathering of young scholars, mostly from Eastern and Southern Africa, engaged in behavioural and cultural studies related to the spread of HIV/AIDS. In the context of the workshop, the organizers acknowledged that while a great deal of social research on AIDS in Africa has been done, it is not enough.

While demographers and epidemiologists may chart the epidemic, the answers to stemming the tide of AIDS remain with those who can assess the cultural and behavioural dimensions of this disease, and provide a meaningful basis for designing and evaluating interventions that focus on behavioural and cultural change. That Africans conducting such grassroots social science do not receive enough support is not a new insight, yet only marginal progress has been made in promoting such capacity in the decade and a half of the AIDS epidemic in Africa. Despite the enormous challenges for social research on AIDS, training opportunities for Africans in anthropology, sociology and qualitative research have lagged far behind those in epidemiology, demography, and international health. On the ground, AIDS research and intervention projects that have allocated multiple senior staff and teams of assistants necessary for demographic surveillance and epidemiologic monitoring often operate with a single expatriate social scientist and a junior African colleague for research assistance. Much of what is known has been produced by outside researchers and European and American graduate students, few of whom have the time or resources to properly aid in the development of the capacity of African colleagues to carry on research. Those African scholars who have received training often lack opportunities for professional development, research funding, and access to forums for publication.

By bringing the participants of the Durban workshop together, we sought to begin the task of drawing together those who are beginning their careers in this important field, and those who are moving toward it in mid-career. The participants were provided a platform in which they could engage one another in order to assess the state of current research on multi-partnered sexuality and sexual networking in the countries of the region; discuss the significance of regional dynamics of multi-partnered sexuality and sexual networking in relation to HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health, fertility, and gender; and consider ways forward in co-ordinating a regional program of research and support for junior African scholars working on these topics.

In all, 22 researchers from nine countries in Eastern and Southern Africa participated. There were also several participants from outside the region, including three from West Africa. A few senior scholars attended, but most were Masters degree holders or graduate students in the disciplines of anthropology, demography, public health, history, education, and social medicine or psychiatry. The workshop culminated in the formation of 'SafeSexNet',

which is to serve as a facilitating body, keeping links alive in a regional network for scholars conducting behavioural and cultural studies on sexuality and risk in the context of AIDS.

Many of the papers and research reports published here represent work in progress. They all deal with issues that remain a focus of concern in addressing sexual networking, knowledge, and risk in Africa. These include young people entering sexual and reproductive life; the sexual activity of mobile and migrant men; and the role of qualitative methods and ethics in relation to AIDS research. Contributions by Leshebari and Kaaya, Kalunda, Nnko and Pool, and Varga explore issues of communication, knowledge, negotiation, and gender among adolescents and young adults in Tanzania, Zambia, and South Africa. Chirwa, and Lurie et al., take up the complex topic of men, migration and mobility with regard to risk of HIV/AIDS in Malawi and South Africa, respectively. Contributions from Harrison et al., and Letamo and Bainame examine the use of qualitative studies of sexual networking for improving STD services in South Africa, and cultural values about multi-partnered sexuality in Botswana, respectively. Some of the ethical challenges of qualitative cross-cultural research on sexuality (much of it, by necessity, conducted with people considered by fellow community members to be 'too young' to be involved in sex) are addressed in Bond's paper from Zambia.