

## The Role Of Traditional Leadership Preventing Violence Against Women Towards Effective HIV Prevention In Southern Africa



### Introduction

Traditional leaders and traditional structures remain influential among a large majority of the population in Southern Africa, in both urban and rural areas. Traditional leaders wield influence and command much respect in their communities. Despite undeniable evidence that shows the linkages between violence against women and HIV, traditional leaders' potential to actively participate in HIV prevention activities and projects to eliminate violence against women however, remains untapped. With adequate support, traditional leaders can facilitate positive change in local communities working to address HIV and violence against women.

### The Influence of Traditional Leadership in Societal and Cultural Norms

In addition to the formal links that traditional leaders have with ruling governments, traditional leaders preside over customary law courts and exercise legislative power in many communities.

They are able to apply customary laws to penalise offenders. Customary laws however, are typically influenced by values and beliefs that are inclined to normalise violence against women. As custodians of culture, traditional leaders have the required influence to alter underlying values and beliefs that are detrimental to community members. Such values and beliefs include inequitable gender roles that lead to culturally sanctioned gender-based violence.

### Are Cultural Norms and Beliefs Related to Violence Against Women

The United Nations defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (UN, 2009).

Violence against women takes many forms. Most violence occurs in domestic settings between intimate partners and can include physical, psychological or sexual violence. Of these the most common is physical violence perpetrated by male intimate partners such as husbands or boyfriends. Violence against women also includes traditional practices such as forced marriage (including widow inheritance), child marriage, sexual cleansing, and virginity testing. Such violence against women is often linked to cultural norms and beliefs that put women at risk of HIV infection.



SAFAIDS/REACH, Cape Town 2011.

**“Women living with HIV are more likely to have experienced violence, and women who have experienced violence are more likely to have HIV infection.” – UNAIDS, 2009**

**“Violence against women is a fundamental violation of human rights and is often fuelled by longstanding social and cultural norms that reinforce its acceptability in society” - WHO, 2009**

Violence against women reflects and reinforces gender inequities between men and women while putting women at risk of HIV infection. It is sustained by cultures that ignore such violence or worse, justify and encourage it (even if inadvertently) in the name of tradition and culture. This is common in Southern Africa. In Swaziland, 33% of women up to the age of 24 years have experienced some form of sexual violence by age 18 (UNICEF, 2007). Prevalence of violence against women is 30% in Zimbabwe, 50% in Zambia and Tanzania, and as high as 60% in the Democratic Republic of Congo (UNAIDS, 2010).

## Inter-linkages between Violence against Women and HIV

Violence against women is not only a human rights violation, it also increases women’s vulnerability to HIV Infection. There are numerous ways in which violence against women contributes to heightened risk of HIV infection:

- Violence can result from myths regarding sex with virgins. In some cases, it is believed that if an HIV positive man has sexual intercourse with a virgin, he will be cured of HIV. Such myths place young girls and women at risk of sexual assault.
- Sexual violence (e.g. rape) increases chances of HIV infection through the tearing of vaginal tissue allowing more efficient HIV transmission.
- Violence can affect a woman’s willingness to prevent HIV through condom use as insisting on a condom may lead to physical abuse. The fear of violence can also prevent women from undergoing HIV testing.
- Violence can affect a woman’s willingness to disclose her HIV status to her partner.
- Violence can affect a woman’s ability or willingness to access treatment services or to adhere to HIV treatment or PMTCT programs.
- Women living with HIV are more likely to experience violence because of their HIV status than women who are HIV negative, due to stigma.
- When young girls are exposed to violence against women, it can lead to other factors that increase risk of HIV infection later in life. These can be such as, high probability of sexual risk taking (including early sexual debut, multiple sexual partners, and unprotected sex), and substance abuse. These behaviours increase the risk of HIV infection.



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SAFAIDS/REACH, Cape Town 2011





**Queen Hosi Nwa' mwitwa II, Tzaneen, South Africa**, speaks on Gender Based Violence, Sexual & Reproductive Health and HIV. SAfAIDS, South Africa, 2010

### The Role of Traditional Leadership in Curbing Violence against Women for Effective HIV

As custodians of culture, traditional leaders can facilitate the creation of protective cultural environments in their communities.

They have significant influence and can promote positive and culturally sensitive behaviour change and address socio-cultural norms and beliefs that fuel the spread of HIV. They can confront violence against women in all its forms including rape and those cultural norms, beliefs, and practices that increase risk of infection such as child marriages, widow inheritance, marital rape, and sexual cleansing. Traditional leaders are also able to enforce customary law in traditional courts. In addition to this, they have wide reach in their communities through various traditional fora. Such opportunities can be used to inform community members of the adverse impact of violence against women and HIV.

Their influence should be used to encourage protective practices and advocate for women's rights and to address violence against women and HIV by minimising risky practices that exacerbate vulnerability to HIV. Several countries in southern Africa have realized the crucial role that traditional leaders can play. National Strategic Plans for HIV/AIDS in Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Swaziland, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe acknowledge the key roles that traditional leaders can play.



### Case Study: SAfAIDS Leadership Rock Programme for HIV Prevention in Southern Africa

The Leadership Rock Programme for HIV Prevention is an innovative development initiative that is meant to unleash the power of traditional leaders in promoting and scaling up HIV prevention in their communities in order to contribute to reducing by half all new HIV infections by 2015. The programme supports traditional leadership to champion HIV prevention at community level by creating an enabling environment that promotes behavior change towards risk reduction and address cultural norms that fuel HIV within communities. The programme empowers traditional leaders to reduce new infections by addressing gender and societal cultural norms and stopping violence against women and girls.

### Recommendations

Traditional leaders are a gateway to the communities targeted in HIV prevention programmes. To address the intricate issues of culture, violence against women and HIV, traditional leaders must be engaged to bring about meaningful changes that can aid HIV prevention efforts.

#### Recommendations for Governments

- Government must engage and support traditional leaders to empower women and inform their communities about the laws and penalties relating to violence against women.
- Work with traditional leaders to enforce harsher community sanctions against perpetrators of violence against women.
- Support Traditional leaders especially in supporting and upholding customary laws.
- Link traditional leaders with the justice system, the police, social services, and health systems in order for them to deal effectively with perpetrators and compassionately with survivors of violence against women.
- Scale up knowledge of Traditional Leaders on the link between gender based violence and HIV.

## Recommendations for Civil Society

- Promote the meaningful involvement of traditional leaders including conceptualising and implementing projects in their communities to address violence against women and HIV.
- Work with female traditional leaders to sensitize communities. They can be engaged in HIV education, particularly for young girls.
- Strengthen capacity of traditional leaders to educate about the connections between violence against women and HIV.
- Where appropriate, use cultural ceremonies for HIV, sex and rights education.

## Recommendations for Traditional Leaders

- Become informed of HIV and its linkages to violence against women.
- Protect women against violence by enforcing traditional sanctions and laws in traditional court structures.
- Encourage open discussion of cultural beliefs and practices in the community as a way of identifying those that minimise risk to HIV and those that deter violence against women and protect against HIV.

## Conclusion

There is ample evidence supporting the effectiveness of partnering with traditional leaders to support HIV prevention efforts by ending violence against women. Unless custodians of culture look critically at their cultures and modify them to uphold the rights of all people including women and address current challenges such as HIV, women will remain the face of HIV and AIDS. Further, HIV will continue to have devastating effects on our communities. There is much potential among traditional leaders to turn the tide against HIV and violence against women.



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