

Full Length Research Paper

# The beliefs of African university men and women on HIV/AIDS being God's indignation

Tuntufye Selemani Mwamwenda

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, 50 Holzner Road, Pinetown 3610, South Africa.

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the tenet that HIV/AIDS is God's indignation for those who engage in sexual intercourse outside the institution of marriage. Moreover, this study aimed at identifying gender differences that HIV/AIDS is God's indignation against sexual immorality. Descriptive statistics comprising frequency, percentage, chi-square and probability was used for data analysis. The sample comprised a diverse sample of 366 men and women university students drawn from Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania. Statistically, majority of the participants did not subscribe to the tenet that HIV/AIDS is God's indignation directed at those who engage in sexual behaviour outside of holy matrimony. In the Kenyan sample, more women than men respondents rejected the notion that HIV/AIDS was God's indignation against sin. As for both the South African and Tanzanian samples, there were more men than women rejecting that God uses HIV/AIDS to inflict punishment on sinners. It was concluded that such tenet must be rejected and combated through public education.

**Key words:** HIV/AIDS, transmission, God's indignation, gender difference, impact of belief, university students, misconception.

## INTRODUCTION

In many countries of the world, people of all walks in life have had divergent views about HIV/AIDS; common among them is the belief that those living with HIV/AIDS are being subjected to God's condemnation for engaging in sin or immorality (Mwamwenda, 2013; Feresu and Smith, 2013; Fraim, 2012). In sub-Saharan Africa, religion has played both supportive or detrimental roles for those who are infected by HIV/AIDS. It has been argued, for the purposes of maintaining and asserting moral ground and moral authority, there is a link between sexual transgression and AIDS as sin and immorality (Mbonu et al., 2009; Kopelman, 2012; Du Toit, 2012; Dete, 2012).

In this context, Kopelman (2002) expresses the view that HIV/AIDS affects sub-Saharan Africa more than any other part of the world, and yet they are least equipped to combat it. Therefore, this calls for intervention from

nations endowed with wealth and necessary recourses. However, the HIV/AIDS infected persons may be distanced from those ready to be of assistance, because of beliefs such as it being a punishment from God for engaging in sexual activity outside marriage. "Religious versions hold that God punishes them in order to castigate, encourage virtue, warn, and rehabilitate (Kopelman, 2012). Along a similar train of thought, Hartwig et al. (2006) point out that in sub-Saharan Africa, there exists hindrance to HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention which has been associated with faith-organizations that play a double role in the fostering and mitigating stigma.

Such religious and secular beliefs are not only untenable, but also are devoid of cogency, place blame on HIV/AIDS infected persons rather unjustly and further jeopardize the compassionate care patients deserve

(Clifford, 2004; Du Toit, 2012; Mbonu et al., 2009). It is argued that, such views are dangerous and irrational, on account that, they influence policies and cost lives (Kopelman, 2002).

Van Dyk and Van Dyk (2007) conducted a study on 1,352 persons regarding their view that HIV/AIDS was God's punishment. In response, majority of the respondents did not agree with the statement, but 16.7% supported that, it was God's punishment for sinners. Manzell et al. (2011) cited one of the participants in their research arguing that, HIV/AIDS is but a scourge visited by God, because society has turned its back against religion and morality.

According to Dete (2012), many people in sub-Saharan Africa are eager to know more about HIV/AIDS and how they can get cured from such a terrible disease, the response they receive from some of their churches is that of hopelessness, as they are convinced beyond doubt that, HIV/AIDS is but God's punishment for people who engage in sin. People with HIV/AIDS are stigmatised through negative attitudes toward them. This is reflected by those who are not accepted in churches because they are living with HIV/AIDS; those who used to be members have been stripped of their membership; and those who held important office or played an important role in church activities have been denied of such roles (Dete, 2012; Mbonu et al., 2009; Clifford, 2004; Du Toit, 2012; Hartwig et al., 2006; Kopelman, 2002).

In a sample of 100 Sudanese and Bantu Somali immigrants' women living in Omaha, Nebraska, USA, Feresu and Smith (2013) assessed their knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about HIV/AIDS. The results showed that participants believed that HIV/AIDS was a punishment from God, and 38% held the belief that those living with HIV/AIDS were being punished for engaging in wrong behaviour; and 34% were of the opinion that victims of HIV/AIDS were served right to suffer. A more encouraging result to note was that, 82% disagreed with the statement that God makes the decision as to who should get HIV/AIDS (Feresu and Smith, 2013).

In a study of 1925 university students in Turkey, Fraim (2012) investigated knowledge levels and misconceptions about HIV/AIDS. The results indicated that both male and female students had an extremely high level of HIV/AIDS knowledge. Despite such a high level of HIV/AIDS knowledge, there were some misconceptions noted. For example, 16% stated that HIV/AIDS is God's punishment. The analysis of this collective response based on gender indicated a statistically significant gender difference with males outnumbering females (Fraim, 2012).

In Canada, Loutfy et al. (2012) sought to gain an understanding of gender and ethnicity differences of 1026 HIV/AIDS positive individual in Ontario, Canada on their stigma in response to them being HIV/AIDS. Women had statistically higher scores than was the case with men in terms of level of stigma, with higher scores implying that they experienced stigma more than their counterparts. Feresu and Smith (2013) elaborate that women are

associated with deviant sexual behaviour such as sex work and promiscuity that may lead to contracting HIV/AIDS which is repeatedly associated with God's wrath in terms of consequences.

According to Bell (2002), 50% of people living with HIV/AIDS in the world are women, which are considered disproportionate to them as individuals and in their social roles as both mothers and care givers. According to the World AIDS Day (2012), about 75% of HIV/AIDS transmission is as a result of intimate sexual relationship between men and women. Adolescent girls infected by HIV/AIDS are about six times the number of boys. Both girls and women are disproportionately vulnerable to HIV/AIDS due to their physiological susceptibility by about 2 to 4 times greater than men (World AIDS Day (2012).

The sexuality nature of women has been subjected to stigma and controls, compounded by social, cultural, economic and legal forms of discrimination (World AIDS Day, 2012; Gahagan, 2012; Terry et al., 2005; Bell, 2002). In addition, society continues to make judgment that HIV/AIDS is God's punishment for engaging in sex (Loutfy et al., 2012; Bell, 2002).

In view of the current body of research and societal attitudes towards HIV/AIDS, the present investigation sought to find out the extent to which a diverse sample of university female and male respondents drawn from Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania would either confirm or reject the existing belief that HIV/AIDS is God's indignation directed against those who engage in sexual activity outside the sanction of holy matrimony. The motivation of this investigation is derived from Loutfy et al. (2012) who assert that: "A clear understanding of the association between HIV-related stigma, gender and ethnicity can inform the development, implementation and evaluation of tailored stigma reduction intentions".

## METHODOLOGY

The sample of the present investigation comprised university men and women drawn from Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania. The total number of participants added up to 366 with a distribution of 102 Kenyan university students, 164 South African university students, and 100 Tanzanian university students.

### Measuring Instrument

The questionnaire comprised one question soliciting a response on the basis of three options, namely, "Yes", "No", "Do not know". The respondents were required to mark the option that best expressed what they knew about HIV/AIDS. The question read as follows: "AIDS is a punishment for those who break God's law which says it is wrong to have sexual intercourse outside marriage"

### Procedure

Since the researcher could not be in all places at the same time, arrangement was made for university academics in Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania to be responsible for administering the questionnaire to their respective students. Students were also

**Table 1.** Frequency Percentage Chi-Square and Probability.

S/N	Country	Female	Male	Frequency	%	$\chi^2$	P
1	Kenya	38	64	25.27	66.42	3.2	0.10
2	South Africa	93	71	50.42	50.59	4.2	0.05
3	Tanzania	42	58	23.43	55.74	6	0.05

N=366, HIV/AIDS is a punishment for those who break God's law which says, it is wrong to have sex outside marriage.

advised that they had the choice of responding to the questionnaire, if they so wished. In addition to the statement, participants were to fill in their gender and date of birth. For the purpose of confidentiality, participants were not permitted to write their names or institution of affiliation. On completion of the questionnaire, the academics collected the papers which were sent to the researcher in New York for scoring and analysis.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics in the form of frequency, percentage, chi-square and probability level were used as a method of data analysis as displayed in Table 1.

The response to the statement for Kenya university women was 66 and 42% for men; South Africa women was 54 and 59%; and Tanzania women was 55% with men scoring 74%, respectively. The chi-square results were as follows:  $\chi^2$  (1df, N100)=3.2,  $p < 0.10$  Kenya university;  $\chi^2$  (1df, N162)=4.2,  $p < 0.05$  South Africa;  $\chi^2$  (1df, N98)=6,  $p < 0.05$  Tanzania. All the values of the chi-square were statistically significant in favour of those who rejected the statement that HIV/AIDS is God's indignation against sexual immorality. In terms of gender differences, Kenya women were more inclined to express that, HIV/AIDS was God's punishment against sexual immorality. South Africa men were of the view that, HIV/AIDS is God's condemnation for engaging in sexual immorality. In Tanzania, the opposite to Kenya held true, in so far as more men held the belief that HIV/AIDS is God's indignation against sexual immorality.

In summary, the analysis of data showed that university women and men differed regarding their views regarding HIV/AIDS being God's wrath against engaging in sexual activity contrary to cultural expectations. In terms of gender difference, the ratio was 1:2 as in Kenya more women were in agreement with the statement, whereas the respondents in both South Africa and Tanzania were of the view that HIV/AIDS is God's punishment for those who do not adhere to his law regarding sexual morality.

## DISCUSSION

The objective of this investigation was to find out the extent to which university men and women would believe that HIV/AIDS is God's indignation against individuals for engaging in sexual behaviour outside wedlock. The

results showed that majority of participants in all three of the diverse groups did not agree with the premise that God was using HIV/AIDS as a plague to discipline sinners. The results indicated that gender differences were rather divergent. In Kenya, there were more university women who concluded that God did not use HIV/AIDS as a punishment. However, for both South Africa and Tanzania there were more men who were of the view that HIV/AIDS was not used as punishment.

The findings of this study are in agreement with what other researchers have reported, as well as those who have reported different findings (Mwamwenda, 2013; Fraim, 2012). Van Dyk and Van Dyk (2007) reported that in their study of 1,352 university students, 16% agreed with the statement that God punishes people with HIV/AIDS for engaging in sexually immoral behaviour. In the present findings, those who were of similar view exceeded 16%. The same held true with what has been reported by Manzell et al. (2011). A similar percentage was reported by Fraim in Turkey, in a sample of 1,925 university students, and the majority of those expressing such view happened to be men. The same was observed in the present investigation with both South African and Tanzanian men. On the other hand, it is different from the Kenyan sample where more university women subscribed to the tenet than was the case with men.

Given the extent to which HIV/AIDS has a tremendous impact on women and girls due to cultural, economic, and physiological factors (Bell, 2002; Gahagan, 2012; Worlds AIDS Day, 2012; Feresu and Smith, 2012; Loutfy et al., 2012), one would have expected more university women than men supporting the view that HIV/AIDS is God's indignation against those involved in sexual immorality. However, in the present investigation, it was not the case. To the contrary, more men in the South African and Tanzanian samples expressed such view. It was in the case of the Kenyan sample only, where women more than men who thought the statement was unacceptable.

## Conclusion

In this investigation, it has been shown that there are gender differences in the extent to which university men and women feel about HIV/AIDS being God's punishment for engaging in sexually immoral behaviour. For the Kenya sample, more women than men rejected the

notion that HIV/AIDS is God's indignation against sinners. In both the South African and Tanzanian samples, the contrary held true. What is of interest in the present study is not so much the level of knowledgeability about HIV/AIDS, as it is the misconceptions. The numbers of those who accepted the notion of HIV/AIDS is substantial. This therefore should be a matter of concern in the field of HIV/AIDS public education.

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