

From Social Silence to Social Science: Same-Sex Sexuality, HIV&AIDS and Gender in South Africa

Raising visibility on same-sex sexuality within HIV/AIDS

By Reddy V, Sandfort T, Rispel L (eds). (2009). South Africa. HSRC Press. 252pp. ISBN: 978-0-7969-2276-2.

From Social Silence to Social Science presents significant innovative ideas and understanding of issues related to sexuality, gender and HIV/AIDS in South Africa. The text highlights the struggles of vulnerable and marginalised groups, notably same sex populations, and also draws attention to concerns regarding the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa. A central theme of this book is that same-sex sexuality has been erased from the total picture about HIV and AIDS in South Africa. The book critiques the assumption that the pandemic is generalised, claiming that the absence of evidence-based data and discussion on homosexuality in the context of HIV and AIDS presents a gap in our knowledge. By implication, a gap in knowledge implies that interventions to curb the spread of HIV cannot take place in any informed way.

This edited collection of essays is organised into four interconnected parts that address four areas of thematic concerns: (1) Theory, methodology, context; (2) History, memory, archive; (3) Perspectives from sub-Saharan and southern Africa; and (4) Needs, programming, policy and direction for future research. The book offers an understanding of sexuality by focusing on same-sex sexuality, providing a background on issues that address same-sex/lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) individuals as marginalised and vulnerable communities in the era of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

According to Reddy, Sandfort and Rispel (2009), gender is persistent and deeply entrenched in all aspects and processes of society, culture, sexual relations and social institutions. It is central to a better understanding of the epidemiological and social and sexual networks within which same-sex practices are organised. It is also clear that gender is integral to all aspects of sexuality, and the logic proposed in this book is that a representative picture of the HIV and AIDS landscape cannot be achieved without consideration of the gendered dimensions that shape sexual and social behaviour. Hence, the claim is made in this book that same-sex sexuality is also gendered. It is from this perspective that the HIV/AIDS pandemic needs to be understood when it comes to vulnerable and marginalised groups, like the same-sex community.

The twenty chapters in this book reflect the perspectives of a range of stakeholders (academics, practitioners, community activists and policy makers), enabling authors to think critically about vital issues significant to developing our understanding of the multifaceted relationship between gender, same-sex sexuality and HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

Through the diverse perspectives, with their focus on HIV/AIDS and same-sex sexuality, the book attempts to bridge the gap between policy, needs, service provision, research, practice and

prevention. The ultimate aim is to direct debate and discussion to develop research-based interventions that could aid in changing sexual practices that will reduce the further spread of HIV.

This book also responds to South African HIV policies and programmes that address the needs of same-sex individuals and women. Several chapters refer to the National Strategic Plan (NSP) and its zeroing in on marginalised and vulnerable groups (men who have sex with men [MSM] being one category). The book also addresses the concern that, despite the South African Constitution's prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, social attitudes towards homosexuality are still discriminatory in this country, and it is for this very reason that not only MSM, but the LGBT community at large, are so marginalised and remain vulnerable.

Several authors claim that although the issue of HIV transmission among MSM in South Africa is addressed in the NSP, there is a lack of available research/data on MSM prevalence in South Africa. Hence this book sets out to explore and motivate why further research into HIV prevalence, risk and sexuality among MSM in South Africa is necessary.

South African LGBT organisations have already started doing small scale research addressing some of the research issues with regards to HIV/AIDS and LGBT communities. However such research structures are not enough, and there is a vital need to fill the gaps (Reddy, Sandfort & Rispel, 2009). And by doing so, the book suggests, we need to improve understanding about the possible increase of HIV infection, moving beyond individual behaviour to investigating social and sexual networks.

The book further suggests that where MSM are concerned, the NSP should be viewed as a call for researchers to fill the information gaps that currently exist regarding the challenges that South African MSM face in the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The authors further emphasise that vital conditions need to be met to be able to shift research and prevention forward, so as to develop our understanding of how homosexual transmission could be fueling the existing HIV/AIDS pandemic. Several chapters in the book demonstrate that research to develop appropriate programmes on HIV prevention for same-sex individuals is important if we want to see behaviour change and a reduction of the pandemic. Thus, for HIV policies and prevention programmes to be successful, adaptation measures need to be put in place that incorporate marginalised and vulnerable groups, specifically same-sex/LGBT communities, to tackle issues surrounding the spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa.

Overall this is an informative and critically important first text on the subject of same-sex sexuality and HIV and AIDS in South

Africa. In order for us to understand fully the implications of adaption measures for all people involved, it is necessary that all members of society, government, academia, civil society and LGBT communities be represented in the planning and governance processes with regards to marginalised and vulnerable groups susceptible to HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

From Social Silence to Social Science suggests that silence cannot be accepted, and that there is a real need for evidence-based social science research that will help to better understand the pandemic. This text is a valuable addition to the critical literature on HIV and AIDS on the African continent.

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