

Violence against Women and HIV, a Dangerous Intersection

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What is the role of violence against women in the spread of HIV?

Dangerous Intersections: Current and Future Research Perspectives on HIV and Violence against Women took place at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland from June 14th-17th, 2004 to explore this matter. Presenters included representatives of the World Health Organization, the Medical Research Council (South Africa), FEMNET (Kenya) and National Center for Human Rights Education among many others. SisterLove, Inc. organized the conference which was funded by the World Health Organization and the Guggenheim Foundation.

The purpose of the three-day gathering was to explore research and interventions which examine the connection between violence against women (VAW) and HIV. Countries represented were: India, Peru, Tanzania, South Africa, Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya and United States. The presentations focused on intimate partner violence (IPV), domestic violence, rape and coercive sex. The topics included, "Intimate Partner Violence and HIV Risk Behaviors," "Violent Masculinities and HIV Risk," "Interventions that Combine HIV and VAW Prevention" and "Gender and HIV Prevention Programs: Lessons from the Field." Conference participants engaged in intense discussions to identify future research and intervention directions for the dangerous intersection of HIV and VAW. Other issues raised include the impact of violence in war, prostitution, trafficking, incest, gangs, incarceration and marriage on the infection of women with HIV.

Dangerous Intersections brought together researchers and activists to dialogue about pertinent issues facing women in various parts of the world. The highly quantified scientific research was complemented by candid grassroots activist presentations. Indeed, both researchers and activists confront grave challenges in the face of repressive U.S. funding policies which have negative implications at home and abroad. According to several conference presenters, the current U.S. administration is waging a war on women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. As a result, several grassroots and research organizations are severely limited in their ability to effectively do research, advocate and/or provide services on the issues of violence against women and links to HIV/AIDS.

According to Dazon Dixon Diallo, conference organizer and presenter, the opportunities to affect change in the current oppressive environment are as follows:

- Mobilizing leadership at global, national and community levels to ensure normative change in acceptability of violence against women
- Expanding the evidence base highlighting the prevalence of VAW and its links to HIV/AIDS
- Building the knowledge base on the relationship between VAW & HIV
- Promoting national and community level action that improves education and legal standing of women
- Screening women and, appropriately, girls for IPV, and training health care workers to recognize the health consequences of violence
- Developing culturally appropriate and relevant programs
- Incorporating violence prevention into existing programs, instead of 'simply' funding domestic violence interventions

Looking forward from this significant meeting, important directions for new and continued research and intervention identified were: the importance of indigenous knowledge and participatory research, the role of researchers in community development, referral and support services for women who participate in VAW studies and the crucial value of connecting research and activism. Also, conference participants will continue to work together to develop research and intervention agendas in the field of HIV and VAW, strategizing on how to carry on this work in the current and future political and economic climate. It is vital that activists and researchers continue to sit at the table together to develop a unified voice that demands respect for the issues of oppressed women around the world.