

Multiple concurrent partnerships and gender power dynamics: Findings from a survey of church-goers in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

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Background

The practice of having multiple concurrent partnerships is culturally sanctioned in many parts of South Africa and is often inextricably linked to gender power differentials. Power imbalances in sexual relationships can hinder healthy couple communication and negotiation for safer sex, and may facilitate gender-based violence, which in turn can increase women's vulnerability to HIV.



Methods

- As part of baseline data collection for a partner reduction HIV prevention program in churches in Mdantsane Township in the Eastern Cape Province (November 2007), interviewer-administered questionnaires were completed by 592 church-goers (450 women and 142 men) in 10 churches.
- Eligibility criteria: Men and women aged 18–65 years attending regular church service in participating churches.
- Questionnaire elicited information on:
 - Demographics;
 - HIV-related knowledge;
 - Intimate partner abuse;
 - Infidelity (self and partner);
 - Attitudes and perceptions around multiple concurrent partners (including perceived difficulty of communicating about fidelity); and
 - Sexual relationship control (scale adapted from Pulerwitz 2000¹).
- Perceived difficulty communicating about fidelity was measured with two items, where respondents were asked about their level of agreement ("It would be difficult to talk to my spouse/partner about not having sex with other people outside our relationship"; "I would be afraid to talk to my spouse/partner about not having sex with anyone else outside our relationship").

Description of the Sexual Relationship Control Scale

- The Relationship Control scale is a sub-scale of the Sexual Relationship Power Scale (SRPS) (Pulerwitz 2000). The SRPS is a theoretically-based and validated scale to measure relationship power dynamics, and has been directly associated with safe sexual practices such as consistent condom use among women.
- A 13-item scale was used to measure sexual relationship control; Respondents were asked to agree, partially agree or disagree to items related to who has control within their relationship. Examples:
 - "My spouse/partner tells me who I can spend time with";
 - "If I asked my spouse/partner to use a condom, he would be angry"; and
 - "My spouse/partner won't let me wear certain things".
- The 13-item relationship control scale demonstrated good internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$).

Analysis

- For this presentation, the analysis is limited to women who reported having a spouse or co-habiting partner ($n = 171$) and answered all 13 items of the Relationship Control scale ($n = 133$; 78%).
- The scale score was calculated by summing the 13 items, with lower scores reflecting little to no control in the relationship.
- For this analysis, the Relationship Control score was dichotomized by splitting the scale to one-third percentile of respondents scoring the lowest and the remaining two-third percentile of respondents. The **Low Relationship Control group** had scores ranging 13.0 – 29.0 and the **Medium/High Relationship Control** group had scores ranging 29.1 – 39.0.
- Logistic regression analysis was used to determine if partner's infidelity (self-reported by respondent) was associated with low relationship control, perceived difficulty communicating about fidelity, and experience of abuse. Variables found to be significant in univariate analysis ($p < 0.05$) were included in the multivariate analysis.

Characteristics of Study Population

	n	Sample %
Education	133	
Never attended; completed some, or all primary school	32	24
Completed some or all secondary school	62	47
Completed some or all tertiary education	39	29
Median age (IQR)	46 (36, 52)	
Marital status	133	
Married, living with spouse	110	83
Married, not living with partner	12	9
Not married, living with partner	10	8
Divorced/widowed, living with partner	1	1
Length of time married to current spouse	122	
Less than 1 year	6	5
1–5 years	22	18
6–10 years	13	11
More than 10 years	81	66
Length of time living with spouse or live-in partner	133	
Less than 1 year	5	4
1–5 years	22	17
6–10 years	12	9
More than 10 years	91	68
Not living with spouse	3	2
Length of time as a member of their congregation	133	
Less than 1 year	7	5
1–3 years	10	8
More than 3 years	116	87
Frequency of church attendance in the last 6 months	133	
Once or twice a month	5	4
3–4 times a month	41	31
More than 4 times a month	87	65
Member of any church groups, clubs, or fellowships	133	
Yes	109	82
No	24	18

IQR: Inter-quartile range

¹Pulerwitz J, Gortmaker S, DeJong W. 2000. "Measuring sexual relationship power in HIV/STD research." *Sex Roles* 42(7/8): 637–660.

Key Findings

Infidelity and gender-based violence

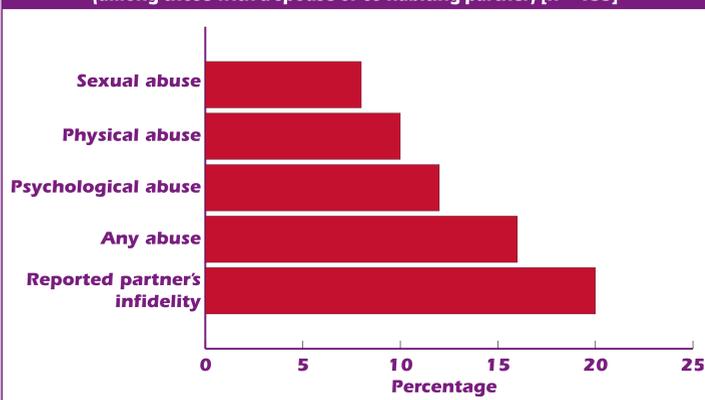
A high proportion of women believe their main partner has another sex partner (Fig. 1).

- Approximately 20% reported that they thought their partner is having sex with someone else outside of their relationship.
- Of those who reported partner's infidelity, approximately 44% thought her main partner was having sex with one other partner, 27% thought her partner was having sex with more than one other partner, and the remaining portion were not sure how many partners he had.

Approximately 1 out of 10 women reported having experienced some form of gender-based violence (Fig. 1).

- Sixteen percent of women reported some kind of abuse by main partner in the past six months (psychological abuse: 12%; physical abuse: 10%; sexual abuse: 8%).

Figure 1 Percent of female church service attendees who reported abuse by a sexual partner and suspected partner's infidelity (among those with a spouse or co-habiting partner) [n = 133]



Communication with partner about infidelity and control within relationship

Low relationship control was the strongest factor associated with reported partner's practice of concurrent partnerships

- Over one-quarter of the women (27%) perceived communicating to partner about infidelity difficult (Table 2).
- In univariate analysis, perceived difficulty communicating about fidelity, having low relationship control, and experience of abuse was significantly associated with greater odds of reported partner's infidelity (Table 2).
- However, in multivariate analysis, only relationship control remained independently associated with reported partner infidelity. Those with low relationship control were nearly 8 times more likely to report that they thought their main partner had another sex partner outside of the relationship (Table 2).

Table 2 Factors associated with partner infidelity as reported by respondents

	n (%)	Odds Ratio (95% CI)	Adjusted Odds Ratio (95% CI)
Perceived difficulty of communicating about fidelity* (n = 122)			
Not difficult	89 (73)	1.0	1.0
Difficult	33 (27)	3.6 (1.4 – 9.4)	1.75 (0.6 – 5.5)
Sexual relationship control (n = 133)			
Medium/high control	88 (66)	1.0	1.0
Low control	45 (34)	11.1 (3.9 – 31.5)	7.7 (2.5 – 24.0)
Experience of any kind of abuse by partner (n = 120)			
No	101 (84)	1.0	1.0
Yes	19 (16)	5.2 (1.8 – 15.3)	2.2 (0.6 – 8.0)

Note: Sample sizes vary slightly because of missing data.

*A measure of how difficult the respondent thinks it is to talk to partner about mutual monogamy (i.e., having sex only with each other and no one else).

Conclusions and Recommendations

- A considerable proportion of female church attendees experienced some form of gender-based violence and perceived themselves to be in non-equitable relationships with their spouses or co-habiting partners.
- Low relationship control was the most important factor associated with the respondent's report of her partner having sex with someone else outside the relationship.
- Any multiple concurrent partner reduction programs in South Africa must also address related issues of gender-based violence and gender equity within relationships. Counseling about partner reduction must include counseling on improving gender equity in relationships and should target both men and women.
- A church-based partner reduction intervention targeted at both men and women that aims to increase gender equity and improve couple communication and conflict resolution skills is currently being evaluated by the Population Council. The intervention uses church leaders to influence and facilitate congregation members in positive behavior change.

