Can males ever be a vulnerable group? HIV/AIDS conspiracy of silence

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My opinion

"Girls and women are almost universally less powerful, less privileged, and have fewer opportunities than men." [1,2] But does this prevent people from recognizing and acting if gender inequality affects males? [3]

Let us take the case of HIV/AIDS in South Africa a country which has less than 1% of the world’s population, but accounts for about 15% of this disease’s global burden [4].

Commonly, it is stated that the brunt of the HIV epidemic is mainly felt by females [5]. Michel Sidibé the Executive Director of UNAIDS, the organization which essentially co-ordinates the global response to HIV/AIDS said, "This epidemic unfortunately remains an epidemic of women" [6]. It is true that the prevalence (proportion of cases) of HIV is higher in females (14.4%) than in males (9.9%), according to the comprehensive 2012 South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence and Behaviour Survey [7]. According to this survey 71.5% and 59.0% of females and males respectively above 15 years of age had ever been tested for HIV; males are less likely to be aware of their HIV status.

There is virtually no doubt or discussion that anti-retroviral therapy has turned around the course of the HIV epidemic for the better; in fact those who start therapy early enough have an almost normal life expectancy [8]. According to the before-mentioned survey, 25.7% and 34.7% of males and females respectively living with HIV were on anti-retroviral therapy. Clearly males are (very) disadvantaged with respect to being on anti-retroviral therapy.

Turning to a specific South African population that has been closely monitored and followed up over time [9]. As expected, in this population, we find that the prevalence of HIV is higher in females than in males [10]. However, in this very population it is males who die more from HIV/AIDS and pulmonary tuberculosis (related to HIV infection) [11].

Clearly males are vulnerable when it comes to HIV/AIDS and this vulnerability is not just confined to South Africa or to HIV/AIDS [3,12].

Coming back to the core questions. Is it entirely true that females mainly bear HIV’s brunt? No. Is it true that largely people fail to recognize and act if inequality affects males? Yes.

Why should the situation be like this? Perhaps another illustration is apt.

In May 2014 Solange Knowles (a prominent American entertainer) physically attacked her brother-in-law, Jay Z (one of the world’s most successful entertainers) [13]. Solange was not arrested and did not have to appear in court. Had it been the other way round - Jay Z physically attacking Solange - most likely, Jay Z’s career would have been (severely) impaired.

Males have been said to have poor health seeking behavior compared to females [14] although this is very debatable [15]. Even if we accept that males do not seek health care as much as females, we cannot blame males for the HIV/AIDS situation they find themselves in just as we cannot blame females for their position in society. In conclusion, addressing the substantial anti-retroviral therapy gap in males does not only benefit them but it can also help limit HIV’s spread because those on adequate treatment are less likely to transmit the virus to their sexual partner(s) [16].

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