Introduction

HIV prevalence and incidence in Uganda are no longer falling and are on the rise in several sub-populations. A substantial proportion of new HIV infections (43%) are occurring in long-term relationships (Wabwire-Mangen et al., 2009). We report qualitative findings from a longitudinal study examining risk factors for HIV infection among couples in long-term partnerships.

Methods

In 1991/1992 the MRC/UVRI Uganda Research Unit on AIDS conducted an ethnographic study of 27 households selected from three villages.

The study households were selected to represent different wealth groups and types of family composition. Some household members were HIV-infected (unknown to interviewers); but reported high risk behaviour or known HIV-infection were not selection criterion.

Over a period of one year interviewers paid monthly visits to the study households to record changes in different aspects of the household’s daily life such as composition, mobility and social networks. This study was repeated in 2006/2007 using the same methods.

Results

Data are available from 26 households (approximately 150 sexually active people across the study period). Over 16 years, marital instability affected nearly all the couples in these 26 households, and across the generations and for both household heads and other household members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship History of Household Heads</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long term relationship or marriage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman – never married</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Widow – single long-term relationship (husband monogamous)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widows – single long-term relationship (husband polygamous)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce or more separation</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfaithfulness of partners was frequently reported and often given as the reason for marital breakdown.

Monica, now in her 50s, recalled that she had a humble beginning with her husband when they married when she was in her 20s, they lived in poverty for some time. When her husband made some money he started spending it on other women. Whenever Monica tried to ask for support, the man would tell her that he did not have money or else would beat her. So she decided to leave him.

As a justification for seeking a new partner, women often reported the need for better economic support for their children and themselves.

Nanfuka is 35 years old. She had her first pregnancy when she was 17 and second a few years later while still living in her parents’ house. She said the father of the children would not give her support because he had other partners. A few years later she went to live with a hard-working man who supported her and bought milk and sugar for the children.

Both men and women also justified having additional partners because of a desire to have more children, and this was also the reason given for not using condoms in extra marital relationships.

Madina, after seven normal deliveries, started experiencing miscarriages, so her husband decided to marry another wife. She could not tolerate the situation and decided to separate from him.

The availability of anti-retroviral therapy in the community since 2004 was said by some of our older respondents to have fuelled sexual disinhibition, but we found no direct evidence of this among the study households.

Conclusion

High rates of marital/relationship instability have persisted over the last two decades in this population. Economic reasons and the desire for additional children encourages partner change or additional long-term relationships, posing a major challenge for HIV prevention.

Reference


Acknowledgements

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