Gender variance and male-male sexualities across the global south: *a South African perspective*

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Date: 10 August 2009, APCOM & HIVOS Satellite Meeting at 9th ICAAP, Nusa Dua, Bali, Indonesia

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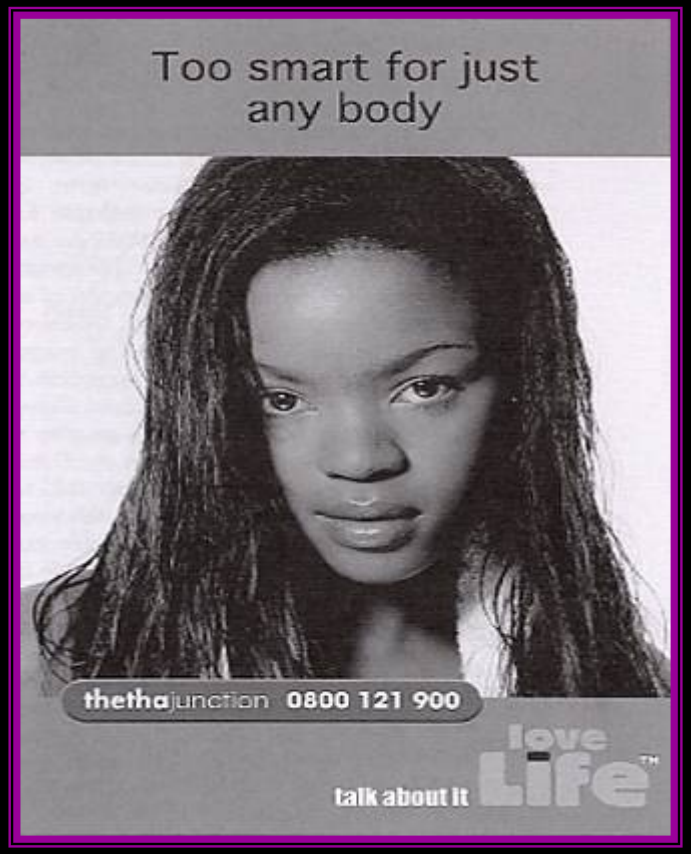
Aims: to provide brief perspectives on:

- The concept "Southern" and the SA context
- The concept "Sexuality"
- Gender variance and male-male sexuality: Some conceptual notes
- The context of Homosexuality in SA
- The Transgender Landscape
- Corrective Rape
- HIV & AIDS
- Some closing comments



Turning to "Southern"

Southern: What are the conditions of possibility?

- A geographical location? A space, place, location? An identity? A culture? A belief system? A shared history? An idea?
- "Southern" is to be understood in its multi-layered and diverse meanings but also in the relation its own complexity?
- It is not a homogeneous or uniform concept, but rather a *discursive* one (shaped by: power, social position, economics, location, etc.)
- I can only truly speak about "South Africa"

Context of post-apartheid South Africa reflects change, transition and transformation

Apartheid and colonialism (nationalist, racially-exclusive, inward-looking) – red zone

to

Democracy (nationalist, racially-inclusive, forward-looking, benefits to accrue from global interaction) – green zone

Turning to "Sexuality"

Some Thinking about sexuality

- **Sexuality makes up a large part of our self-perceived identity**
- **For some people, it is important that sex and sexuality be embedded in contexts of meaning**
- **For some sexuality is fixed; for others it is fluid**
- **For many, sexuality is linked to their identification with a sexual orientation (e.g. being heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, transgendered, transexual)**

Adapted from: Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1994)

Sexuality is historically formed in our culture

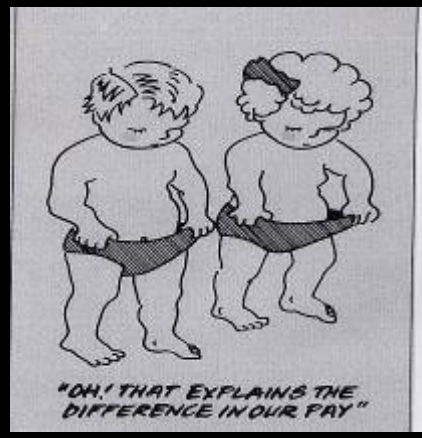
BRINGS TOGETHER A HOST OF POSSIBILITIES

- Sexual difference
- gender identity
- bodily difference
- Reproductive capacities
- Needs
- Desires
- Fantasies
- Power
- Social Movements

"Meanings we give to 'sexuality' are socially organized, which tell us what sex is, what it ought to be, and what it could be"

Jeffrey Weeks

Turning to “Gender variance” and “male-male sexualities”



Gender variance

- Sometimes referred to as Gender Identity Disorder (GID)
- Describes an inconsistency between the physical phenotype and gender identity
- Put simply: self-identification as a man or women
- In heteronormative context: “gender variance” often makes those of us who do not comply to the “gender order” to be perceived as “gender outlaws” (much to do with received notions of masculinity & femininity)

Male-male sexualities

- Erotic orientation and practices between persons of the same biological sex
- Encompasses both behaviour and identity (again a question of *self-identification* and *self-definition*)
- Not fixed but changing and fluid
- Sexual practice might mean a variety of things to the way people classify themselves, interpret their identities through gender roles, or referred to by others …

- *Skesana* (a boy who likes to be fucked)

Lucky: "I would have sex with someone I don't know. I go to a tavern. If someone needs me, I'll take him, but I'll make sure he doesn't know I am gay. My friend Filli taught me: 'If you pick up a man, lift up your legs and hide your cock between your thigh and your body. You can use your saliva for lubrication while he fucks you up the anus'. I can move like a real woman, take him up and down, up and down" (Source: *Defiant Desire*, edited by Cameron & Gevisser, 1994: 165)

- *injonga* (one who proposes and does the fucking)

Linda: "Most gay boys are *skesanas* when they are young. Then you get older, you might change [...] Then you turn to become an injonga. So people change roles when they get older" (Source: *Defiant Desire*, edited by Cameron & Gevisser, 1994: 166)

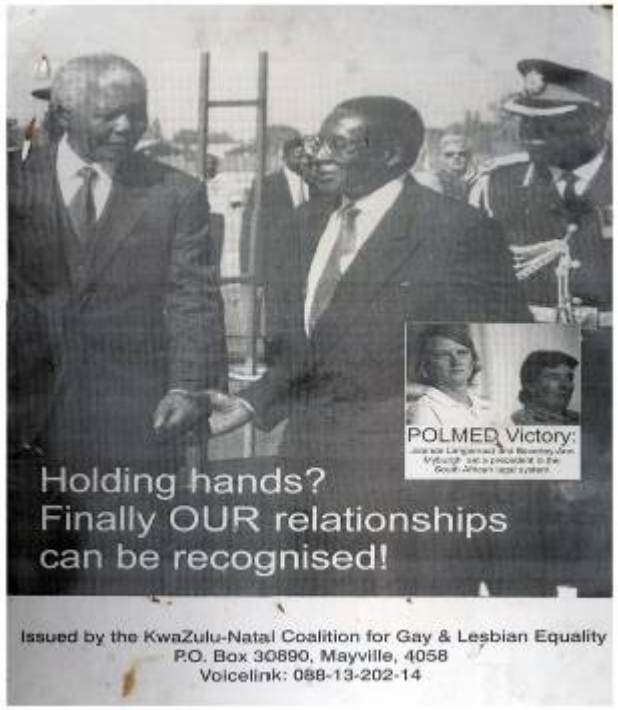
- *Imbube* (some-one who goes fifty-fifty)

Shado: "I was in love with my homeboy when I was young, for about two years. But now, even though I love women I am seeing this white man for about two years. I do not tell people that I love men, but I will not let them say bad things about gays. What I specially love is to be fucked" (Source: *Defiant Desire*, edited by Cameron & Gevisser, 1994: 167-168)

- *Isitabane (ufunana nendoda: she looks like a man)*

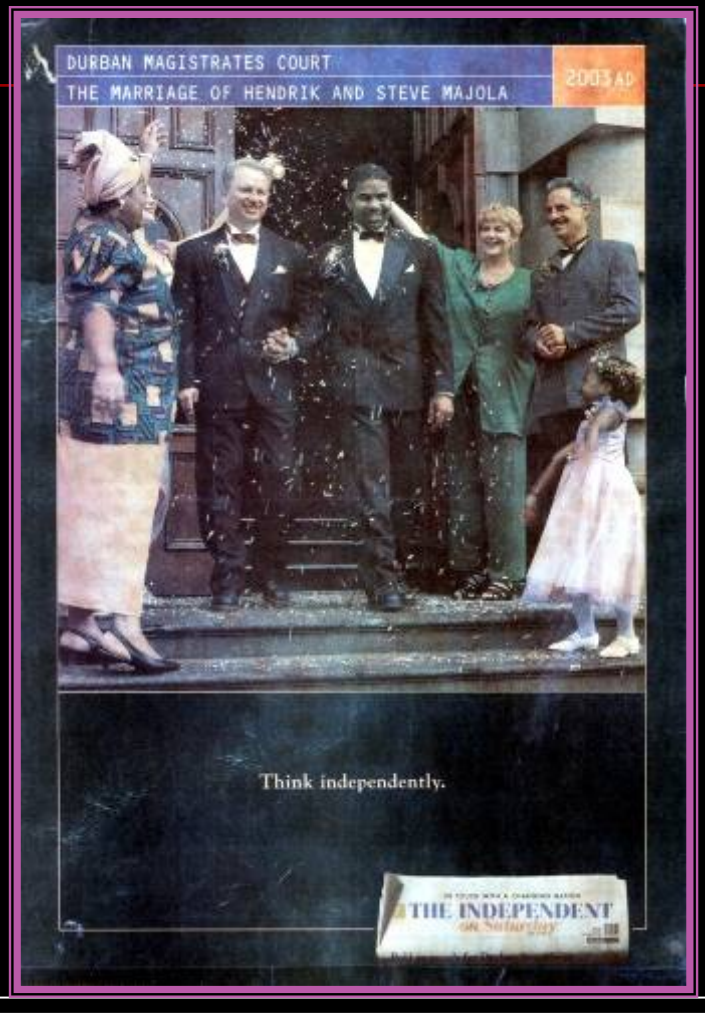
Odelle: "The community is against us.They say it is an abnormal issue. They call us names like *isitabane,* which means *hermaphrodite*"

(Source: Defiant Desire, edited by Cameron & Gevisser, 1994: 168)



Turning to homosexuality

The context of homosexuality



- Criminalisation (policing, prohibition, pathologisation, exclusion): apartheid classification under Christian Nationalism as deviant behaviour
- Legalisation (decriminalisation, inclusion, recognition, citizenship) : access to justice in a constitutional democracy

Turning to the transgender landscape

- Trans issues are increasingly becoming visible (politically) through movement/organisation: GenderdynamiX in SA
- Amendment Act 49 of 2003 enabled people to legally change their sex (but yet to be implemented)
- LGBT organisations pay lip service to needs of Trans issues
- Vocabulary is emerging and being africanised, and self-definition is key. Some people call themselves “transvesti” (similar to travesty to used in Spanish).
- New words are being incoporated: *nakuchus* (referring to females) *sekhuchus* (referring to males). Derived from *kuchus* (word used for gays and lesbians in Uganda).
- Masculine identifying female bodied persons from Uganda, Botswana and Namibia that the West will describe as transman or FTM is being named by African counterparts as TRANSGENDER LESBIANS (to honour their past). Not comfortable to be called HETEROSEXUAL TRANSMEN.
- Gender expressions are very cultural in African context. Including the clothes you wear.
- Problems relate: access to medical services; limited infornmation about medical, legal and mental health for TG and TS people

Turning to "Corrective Rape"

racy. —**cor'rectional** *adj.*

correctitude (kə'rɛktɪˌtjuːd) *n.* the quality of correctness, esp. conscious correctness in behaviour.

corrective (kə'rɛktɪv) *adj.* **1.** tending or intended to correct. ~*n.* **2.** something that tends or is intended to correct. —**cor-'rectively** *adv.*

Correggio (*Italian* kor'reddʒo) *n.* **Antonio Allegri da** (an'tɔːnjo al'leːgri da). 1494–1534, Italian painter, noted for his striking use of perspective and foreshortening.

rape[1] (reɪp) *n.* **1.** the offence of forcing a person, esp. a woman, to submit to sexual intercourse against that person's will. See also **statutory rape.** **2.** the act of despoiling a country in warfare; rapine. **3.** any violation or abuse: *the rape of justice.* **4.** *Archaic.* abduction: *the rape of the Sabine women.* ~*vb.* (*mainly tr.*) **5.** to commit rape upon (a person). **6.** (*also intr.*) to plunder or despoil (a place) in war. **7.** *Archaic.* to carry off by force; abduct. [C14: from Latin *rapere* to seize]

Corrective rape is when men rape women in order to ‘cure’ them of their lesbianism

“They tell me that they will kill me, they will rape me and after raping me I will become a girl. I will become a straight girl.”

Zakhe, 23, Soweto.

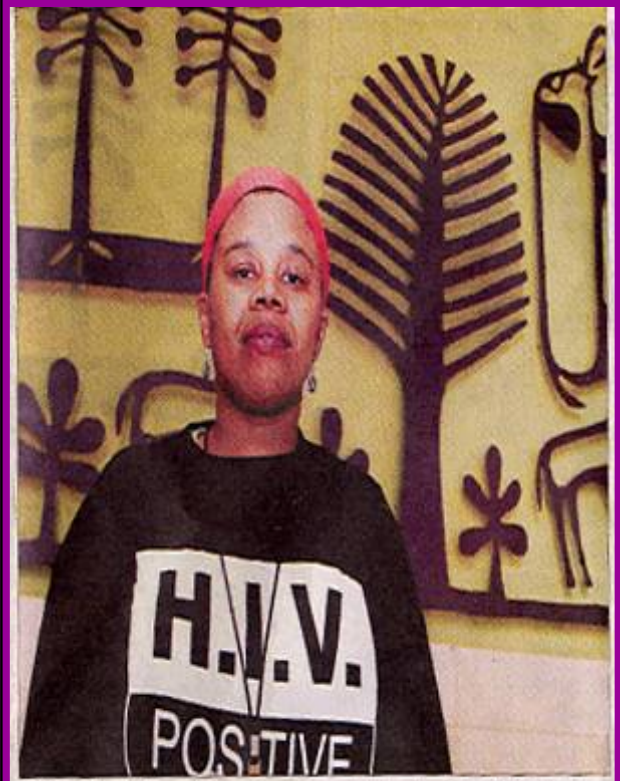
“This guy he wanted to go out with my girlfriend so one day he picked me up with a crew of his gangster friends, they took me off the street and to an abandoned place where they beat me with a spanner and did whatever they wanted… All the time they were telling me this is what happens when a woman pretends to be a man.”

Tshidi, 31, Cape Town.

These cases raise questions about:

- **Why is it happening?**
- Increasing culture of misogyny and violence
- Homophobia is connected to beliefs, attitudes and prejudice
- **Failures of or weaknesses in the criminal justice system**
- **Vulnerabilities to HIV & AIDS**

Turning to “HIV & AIDS”



Sipho Mthathi is candid about sexism and tokenism. Photo: David Harrison

What we discover in SA?

- Research focus on heterosexual transmission
- More important: very *little* is known about MSM and HIV/AIDS (incl. impact of gender variance)
- Before it became a generalized epidemic, the epidemic started in South Africa as a gay epidemic (we have to some extent, moved beyond GRID)
- Homosexuality seemed to have disappeared from the epidemiological picture in SA
- Also: the role of homosexual transmission in the overall epidemic is unclear.

CONSEQUENCE OF A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

- Lack of political support and resources for prevention targeted at MSM
- Current limited prevention efforts are not evidence-based,
- Nothing is known about effectiveness of current prevention efforts

What is needed: Research that brings about *change*, has an *impact* on a variety of levels, and can be used by LGBT organisations

- Policy makers
- Community in general
- Health care workers
- LGBT community
- Same-sex Sexuality & TG/TS Practicing People

Research should acknowledge that the organisation and expression of Same-Sex Sexuality is in *flux*; use of labels change, self-understandings change, research is part of that & contributes to it:

- The usefulness of the MSM concept might change
- It has become an identity descriptor
- We have to be careful: we might be using the same words but not necessarily mean the same thing

Strong need for constant reflection upon what we are doing:

- Why do we ask which questions?
- What is the context in which we work?
- What could the consequences be of the outcomes of these studies?

National Strategic Plan for HIV/AIDS

- "Biologically men who practice receptive anal intercourse have an elevated risk for HIV infection."
- "MSM practices are also more likely to occur in particular institutional settings such as prisons, often underpinned by coercion and violence."
- "MSM behaviours are wide-ranging and include bisexuality, and the HIV epidemic among MSM and the heterosexual HIV epidemic are thus interconnected."

HIV & AIDS and STI
STRATEGIC PLAN FOR SOUTH AFRICA
2007-2011

April 2007

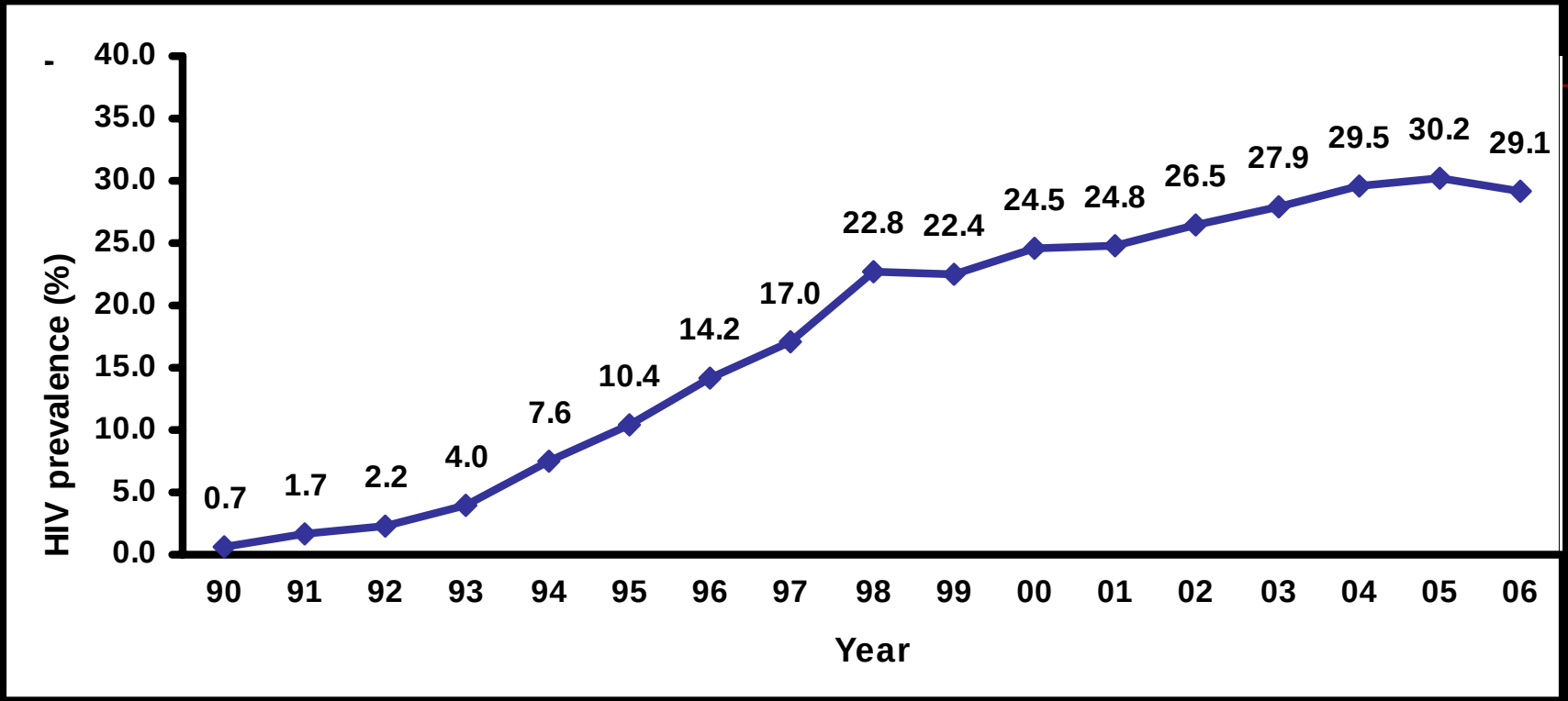
History

- In the early years of the HIV epidemic (1980s):
  - Most cases of HIV infection/AIDS in SA were among MSM
  - Gay activists in SA played an important role in drawing attention to the HIV epidemic, mobilising support for PLWHAs, and developing some of the earliest HIV prevention initiatives
- Since the generalised HIV epidemic began to unfold in SA in the late 80s/early 90s, attention has shifted away from MSM and has become focused on heterosexual transmission of HIV and prevention of mother-to-child transmission

Epidemiology of HIV in South Africa

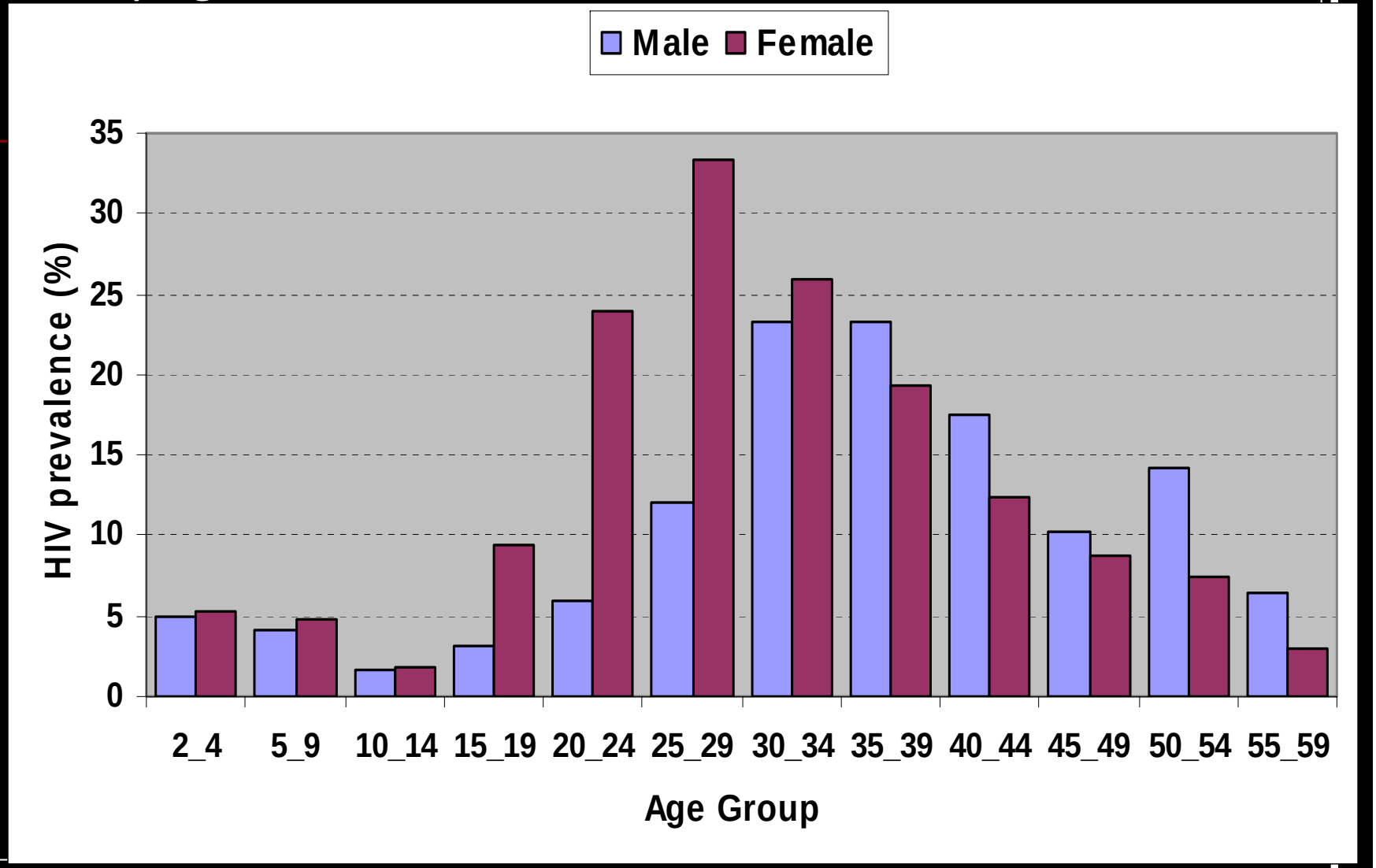
- Currently there is ongoing monitoring of the HIV epidemic in South Africa by means of:
  - Surveys of pregnant women attending antenatal clinics every year (Dept of Health) (1990 - >)
  - National household surveys every 3 years (HSRC) (2002, 2005, 2008)

Prevalence of HIV infection among women attending ANCs in South Africa, 1990 - 2006



Source: Department of Health

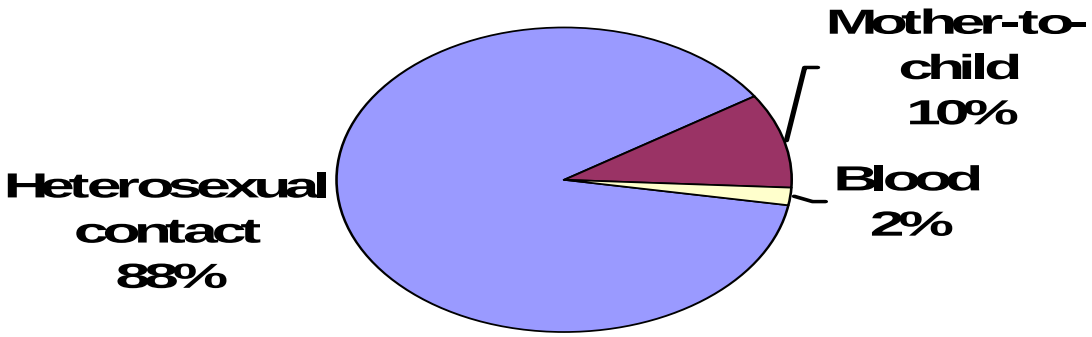
Prevalence of HIV Infection in South Africa by Age and Gender, 2005



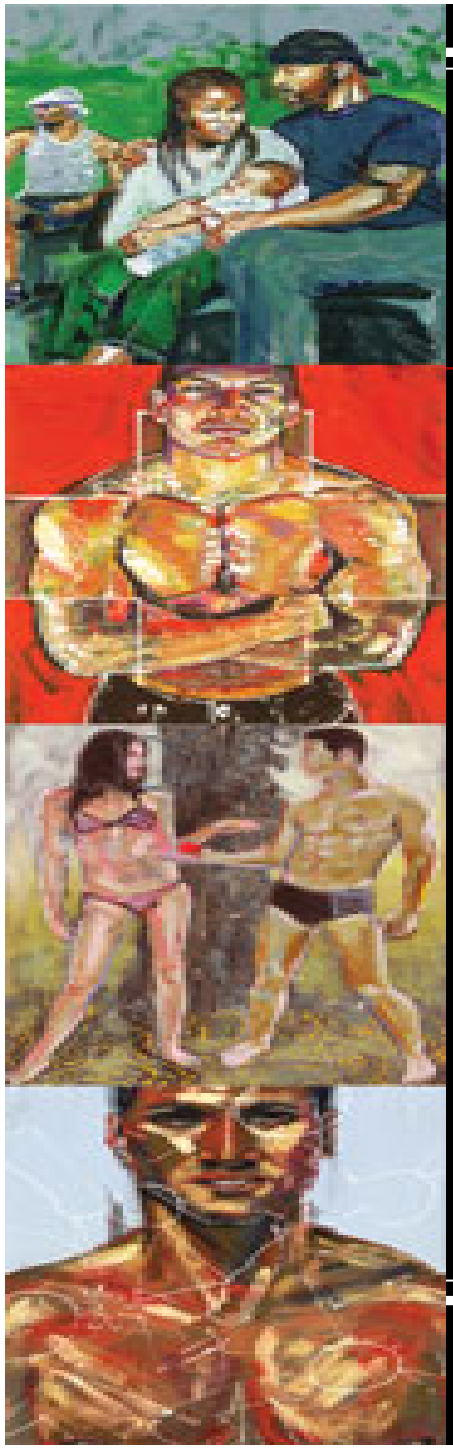
Source: SA National Household Survey 2005

HIV Transmission Mechanisms, Southern Africa

Source: The Policy Project. October 2001. HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa: Background, Projections, Impacts, and Interventions

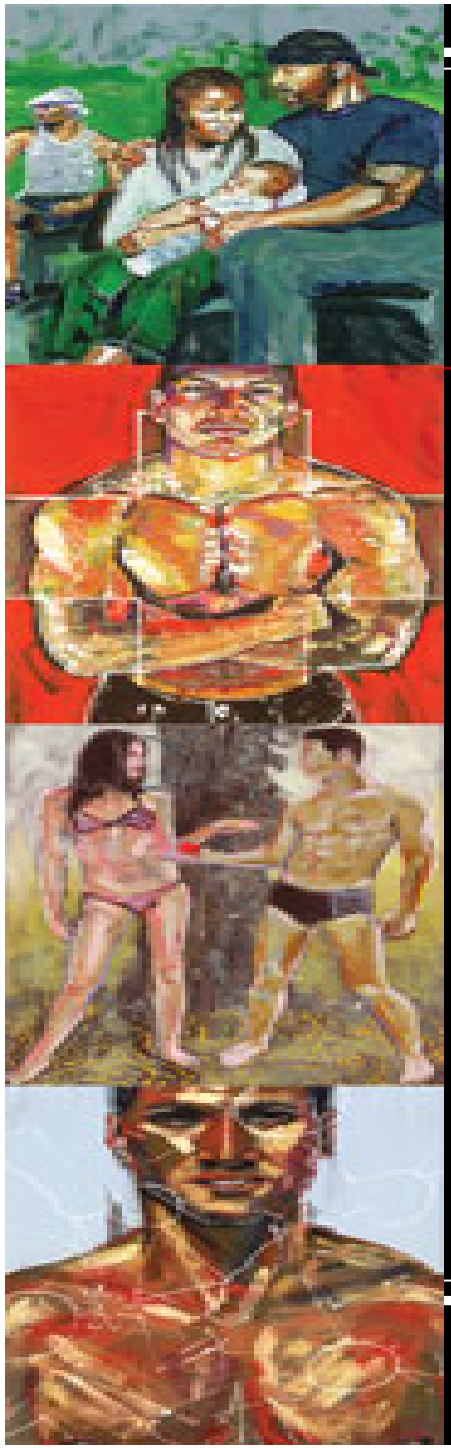


Some closing comments



Implications for Prevention

- MSM require active HIV prevention interventions
- Supporting coming out of LGBT persons and LGBT community-building might contribute to HIV testing, timely care if needed, and prevention of further transmission
- Interventions that increase sensitivity of health care workers to sexual health needs of same-sex practicing people
- Understanding of diverse forms of sexual expression



Research Implications

- Evidence based interventions require increased understanding of:
  - Substance use & sexual behaviours
  - Psychosocial risk factors, including effects of poverty and unemployment
  - Barriers to prevention and treatment
  - Ongoing MSM seroprevalence research utilizing appropriate sampling methods
- Incorporate treatment access into research studies

- Sexuality, while it is expected to be about pleasure and celebration is also about pain and suffering
- We still have much to unlearn about received ideas about masculinity and femininity
- Normalising homosexuality (and gender variance) does not resolve the problem of stigma, prejudice and persecution that still persists, usually reinforced by religious and cultural intolerance
- The post-apartheid context *not only sexualises* our *citizenship* but also *politicizes our sexuality* (through identity movements, violence, disease)
- Sexuality is almost always about negotiating a range of social forces
- South African sexualities suggest both the possibility of hope and desire, but also reflects the realities of lived experience (sometimes painful)

SOME ONGOING CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICA

- Heterosexual epidemic targets heterosexual HIV prevention and treatment.
- Heteronormative context and patriarchal power (including institutionalised religions and cultural traditions)
- Redressing human rights violations (discrimination, hate crimes, poverty)
- MSM identities:
  - "gay" vs. other identities
  - Reaching less visible MSM for research and intervention

Where to from here ?

- Research is of crucial importance: without understanding the problems and its determinants, without knowledge about how to effectively address these problems, prevention is going to fail
- Collaboration and inputs from stakeholders is key to success with any research directed to impact on behaviour change.
- Learning by doing comparative studies (perhaps in the “global South”)
- Research-driven advocacy is also key to build values of equality, dignity, respect and tolerance in a human rights-framework

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