Gender, Domestic Violence, and HIV/AIDS

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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”
Margaret Mead

Abstract:
This paper discusses the issues facing American women in recent history and the fight that has taken place in order for them to gain rights and equality. In recent history, American women were not granted the same rights as men and were viewed as the lesser sex. The women have struggled over the past century to change this perception with a great deal of success. Despite this fact, inequality still exists within the United States culture. Domestic violence particularly remains a pervasive problem, specifically violence against women. This fact shows that women have not yet reached a level of equality and are still being dominated by their male partners.

Women’s subordination can be directly linked to the increasing number of women becoming infected with HIV/AIDS, especially within Africa. The disparities between genders remain extremely prevalent within third world countries. Namibia, specifically, is still in the process of addressing gender inequality. The process that the United States went through, and specifically the women on the forefront of the fight, can be used as a model for Namibian women in their struggle for change. Altering the view of women, and empowering them with rights and self-esteem could potentially have a direct positive influence on the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Gaining Rights Historically in America
In 1848, Elizabeth Stanton expressed her dissatisfaction with the few rights women in America had. She was at tea with a few friends and the conversation took off as each woman voiced similar opinions. Two days later, the small group held a convention to discuss the civil, social, and religious conditions and rights of women. Elizabeth Stanton used the Declaration of Independence to write the “Declaration of Sentiments” which gave 18 examples of how women were not treated equally. This convention was a success and led to many more in states all over the U.S. Soon the consequences began as the media bashed these women, their beliefs, and ideas. While some women removed their names from the Sentiment due to embarrassment, the overwhelming majority stood strong for what they believed in. A few of the leaders in the movement traveled the country spreading their message and eliciting support. Finally, 72 years later women in the United States won the right to vote.

These pioneers fought a long, hard battle to win rights for women, never giving up as struggles came their way. They knew earning the right to vote would lead them to be able to change other laws and obtain more equality. Even when they did gain the right to vote and other privileges, large parts of society still felt women were inadequate, and rejected them and their ideas. However, women all over the U.S. stood up for what they believed in and kept their heads held high. It is an accomplishment to change laws, but an enormous victory to change society’s opinions and cultural beliefs. They knew their daughters and their daughters’ daughters would benefit from their efforts so they continued to persevere.

The Persistence of the Problem
Currently in the U.S. we are still fighting these battles. While women are considered equal and have
gained many rights, there is still discrimination not only in the law, but in daily interactions among women and men. Middle-aged white male politicians are dictating to a woman whether or not she can have an abortion. But these are our bodies and our decisions, so women all over the U.S. keep fighting to have the right to chose. Many men believe they are the “King” and women should obey them. They feel a women’s place is in the home. Women are overcoming these beliefs as more and more become working professionals and gain high status positions in the public sphere. Simply walking into a bar many women may be slapped on the “butt.” This is not a pick up line and no one has the right to touch another person’s body. Women that tell these men to back off are working towards gaining respect for all females. Changing a country’s policies and beliefs is not easy, but possible with a lot of time and perseverance. One person can change the world by sharing their ideas and working to make a difference and elicit change.

**Domestic Violence in the U.S.**

While women in the United States have gained substantial rights and opportunities in the recent decades, inequality among the genders is still very prevalent. The American culture continues to promote patriarchy in many ways and this perpetuates the subordination of women. Many of the current problems that still exist can be paralleled with those prevalent within the African countries, specifically Namibia.

One major issue surrounding women within both the United States and Namibia is the problem of violence. Abuse against women is still extremely common and only feeds into the tradition of male dominance. These issues regarding women’s rights and equality have an important and substantial impact on the continuing spread of HIV/AIDS. Because women are still refused rights and seen as inferior to men, they are more likely to be mistreated, at both the political and personal level. Women need to be given power and control over themselves and their bodies in order to stop the spread of this pandemic. If women are given the authority that they deserve, men, including their husbands, will not be able to make decisions for women regarding sexual practices.

The American culture continues to endorse the subordination of women through many of its cultural practices. Many of these ideas which encourage male dominance also increase the acceptance and justification of violence against women. Throughout history, men have been given the right to control women and have exercised whatever means they felt necessary to achieve this domination. Women were viewed as the property of their father and then husband; a woman was required to obey his command and the husband was permitted, even encouraged, to punish her for misbehavior whether in the form of a beating, torture, or death. In our Western culture, women are socialized to be caretakers and to be attentive to other’s needs. As such, they are considered to be the “weaker sex” due to their emotional sensitivity and vulnerability; thereby, furthering the notion of male superiority. Men, on the other hand, are taught to always be in control of the situation, to express their frustrations, and to mask their other emotions (Browne, 1987). The use of power and control in the form of sexual, emotional, or physical violence is central to the perpetuation of female abuse. Asserting power over women allows men to establish “male control and dominance” not only in relationships, but also in the beliefs and structures of society (Wallace, 2005). Men interact with women forcefully and coercively in all aspects of life, which oppresses women by restricting their involvement in relationships and society.

There are many theories as to why men feel that violence against women is justified. Resource theory, according to Fox, Benson, DeMaris, and Van Wyk (2002), states that shortages in resources may be cause violence, especially if there is an imbalance of resources between the partners. Fox et al. (2002) says that male to female violence is found more frequently in relationships if the man earns more than the woman. This dynamic increases her vulnerability, and she is more likely to accept violence as justification for her lesser contribution. The Fox et al. (2002) study also finds that violence is more frequent in households with less income relative to their needs, which typically results in a lot of debt and unstable or shrinking income.

**Media Influences**

The media also contributes to the idea of male dominance within American society. Because every person is continuously susceptible to media messages, the gender roles portrayed by the media become accepted. The
media itself is an outward reflection of our culture’s values and beliefs. The media defines clear patriarchal. For example, single parents are rarely seen on television; most war video games feature a violent man; women’s magazines feature thin cover models in bikinis; rap songs all over the radio characterize women as “hoes” and “bitches”. These examples show how the media has shaped our society’s views of patriarchy. Many forms of media today glamorize rape, murder, and other crimes against women (Gerdes, 173). At the same time men are seen as the most powerful and aggressive people in the culture (Cuklanz, 2000). Consider the forms of media which are popular for women- soap operas, magazines, and romance novels. All of these elements are telling women how to behave and be right for a man. Popular men’s media includes sports, video games, violent movies- teaching men how to be in control and in power (Van Zoonen, 1994). “…some feminists charge media with maintaining sex role stereotypes… other feminists add that media and pornographic media… instigate men into aggressive and violent acts against women… others incorporate insights from psychoanalysis and theories of ideology to support their claim that media contribute to overall acceptance of the dominant ideology” (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 105). Men and young boys are influenced by the aggression seen in the media, and girls are influenced by the media’s portrayal of women’s roles (Van Zoonen, 1994). While violence in media may lead to further violent behavior, the patriarchal society should be blamed for our culture’s thought processes.

Role of Culture

In addition to media messages that encourage male dominance, the issue can also be attributed to a universal lack of responsibility. Many comment, “It is not a male’s fault they are chauvinistic, if that is what they are taught.” When men gather together there is often a great deal of women bashing. Not to mention there are places that encourage men to disrespect women, such as strip clubs and fraternity parties. In these situations, diffusion of responsibility often influences actions. “When accused of gang rape, several fraternity boys pleaded not guilty, lied to a grand jury, and refused to cooperate with police. It was evident someone in their frat committed the rapes because the fraternities symbol was left on the girl’s thigh. The fraternity ended up being banned from campus, but only for a mere five years” (Adler & Adler, 2003). Institutions and organizations like these need to be encouraged to stop disrespecting women. The only way for this to occur is for women to stop frequenting them and stand up for themselves if they do enter a place where they are disrespected. In today’s society individuals need to earn respect. Women have every right to respect and will receive it, but they must fight for this “privilege” of respect. Women should not and cannot allow men to control and disrespect them. Every negative event or sexist remark a woman accepts causes the female sex to take a step back in our movement for equality.

Gaining Rights in Namibia- Recommendations

In order to gain full rights and respect, women all over the world need to stand up for what they believe in and fight for equality within their country. Namibia, Africa should follow the example of the American women who fought so hard to gain equality and rights. Banning together as Elizabeth Stanton and her friends did is a great model of how to begin a successful movement. Arguing sexist beliefs and not tolerating sexist behavior will be hard, however it will lead others to follow the example and stand up for themselves. It will take time and perseverance to change a country’s beliefs about gender, however it is not impossible.

Cultural beliefs and traditions can be followed without harming and hurting women and their rights. One example of this is polygamy. It is becoming less common in African countries, especially capital cities within the countries. By enough women standing up and saying “No, I love you, but I do not want you to be with anyone else or I will not be with you”, men will eventually learn to respect their wives and be monogamous. It has been shown that polygamy leads to the transmission of HIV. Women can address this and other issues that are involved with polygamy and are harmful to them.

Responses found Successful in the US

Using the United States as an illustration would be helpful for the Namibian women. One area where American women have especially triumphed is regarding the educational opportunities for women.
Although there remain disparities between the salaries of men and women still, the number of women going
to college today exceeds that of men. With this trend, the equality regarding pay will eventually be forced to
reconcile itself. Because of education, women are capable of handling jobs that in the past have been reserved
strictly for men. In school, women gain confidence and a respect for themselves and realize their potential
and capabilities. All of these characteristics lead to increased self esteem which will directly contribute to how
women are treated by men. If their view of themselves improves, the possibility that they will begin to stand
up for themselves improves as well. By getting more girls and women in school it also shows that women are
valued within the culture and are not only seen as sexual objects or mothers at home taking care of children.

The issue of violence against women must also be addressed. This is still a horrible problem within
the United States, but we are beginning to make changes which will hopefully tackle the issue. The U.S. gov-
ernment has established laws that protect women against abuse. For example, restraining orders are freely
available for women with abusive partners and the police are required to get involved if violence is reported
within a home. Previously, the issue was perceived as a problem in the home that the family needs to address
individually. When this view was more prevalent, women would suffer their entire lives without any care,
support, or protection because others felt it just wasn’t their place. Luckily this perception is changing and
the government is addressing the issue.

Also, many non-profit organizations have sprouted to contribute to the fight against female abuse.
These organizations are an invaluable resource and have made massive strides in helping abused women gain
more of a voice in our culture. These organizations provide aid for the woman and are a place of support.
Many offer shelters for women who need an immediate escape from their abusive home. They deal directly
with the issues that are facing this population and work towards improving the life of these victims. Namibia
should take these examples from the United States to combat the presence of violence against women. By
taking a strong stance against the violence, a message is also being sent that the subordination of women is
no longer acceptable.

**Effect of the Spread of AIDS**

AIDS today can be described as a women’s issue, with the number of infections among women
growing dramatically. Cultural norms promoting male dominance serve to continue the subordination of
women, which directly affects the continuing spread of the disease among this gender. In order for women to
address this issue they must first begin to improve their overall situation within the country and work
towards gaining more rights and equality. Many of these patriarchic practices are not promoted by the gov-
ernment but are instead ingrained within the cultural values and beliefs. These ideas need to be addressed at
the base level by re-teaching both men and women about gender roles and the need for equality. Until these
embedded cultural norms are altered, the problems surrounding women and AIDS can not be addressed and
combated. Women in the modern world deserve to be respected and treated as equals by their male counter-
parts, especially when it has such a large influence over the possibility of life and death.

**References**


and resources theories. Journal of Marriage and Family, 64(3), 793-808.

