

AIDS and Male-to-Male Sex in Latin America: Vulnerabilities, strengths and proposed measures

*Perspectives and reflections from the point of view
of public health, social sciences and activism*

*In Appendix: Catalogue of Studies on HIV/AIDS among MSM
in Latin America (1987-2001)*

Carlos F. Cáceres, Mario Pecheny and Veriano Tertó Júnior (Editors)
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*To Herbert Daniel, Francisco Galván, Henry Ardila and Luis Gauthier,
for their vital contribution to the fight against AIDS
and social exclusion in Latin America.*

Foreword

This book is the result of several years of effort. In 1998 UNAIDS funded an initiative to collect information on research on HIV/AIDS in populations of men having sex with men (MSM) in the region. That initiative led to a first meeting of researchers and activists in Lima in 1999. The outcome of this project was a catalogue of research and a directory of researchers, revealing -surprisingly perhaps- that a significant amount of studies had been done during the 1990s in different parts of the region. Therefore, the challenge was -and is- to bring those works together, disseminate them, make good use of their findings, and engage communities, grassroots activists, and decision makers in fruitful dialogue. Accordingly, towards the end of 2000, UNAIDS provided further support for the next stage of the initiative, making it possible to update the catalogue and leading to the publication of this book.

Currently there are more than 1.8 million adults and children living with HIV in Latin America and the Caribbean. As we know, there are considerable differences in terms of propagation of the epidemic and transmission trends both between and within countries in the region. Having said that, it is, nonetheless, necessary to underline that unprotected male-to-male sex is a mode of transmission present in every Latin American country; in fact it is the principal cause of transmission in Mexico, the Andean region, and other regions and countries. Furthermore, it is clear that HIV prevalence in MSM is very high: several different urban centres in the region report a figure of more than 5%. For example, as the 2001 AIDS Epidemic Update (UNAIDS, December) noted, recent seroprevalence studies conducted in Mexico show that a little over 14% of MSM are HIV positive.

In short, the data show that male-to-male sexual transmission of HIV remains a core factor in the spread of the epidemic, particularly bearing in mind the youth of those newly infected with the virus.

AIDS and men who have sex with men - Technical update, published by UNAIDS in May 2000, recalls that «Male-to-male sex exists in most societies. It frequently involves anal sex. Unprotected penetrative anal sex carries a high risk of HIV transmission,

especially for the receptive partner.» However, the document adds, HIV prevention programmes for men who have sex with men (MSM) are hindered by several obstacles. For example, denial that sexual behaviour between men takes place; stigmatisation or criminalization of men who engage in sex with other men; inadequate or unreliable epidemiological information on HIV transmission through male-to-male sex; the difficulty of reaching many of the MSM; inadequate or inappropriate health facilities, including sexually transmitted disease (STD) clinics; lack of interest among donor agencies in supporting and sustaining prevention programmes among men who engage in same-sex behaviour; inexistence of programmes addressing male sex workers; and a lack of focus on the needs of MSM in national AIDS programmes.

The obstacles mentioned are many and varied. Tackling them requires, among other things, comprehensive and reliable information, as well as adequate and meaningful analyses. This book is an effort in that direction. It summarizes research that, despite considerable difficulties, tries to contribute to a more focused and realistic understanding of what the epidemic entails.

Stigmatisation of sexuality, especially homosexuality, is encouraged by the historical tendency to reduce its visibility in society, and it helps, in turn, to perpetuate that invisibility. In connection to this, Awa Coll-Seck, former Director of the Department of Country Support, UNAIDS, and current Minister of Health of Senegal, has said that «men who have sex with men are a vulnerable group and the cultural, sociopolitical and religious factors that lead to the denial of male-to-male sex increase their vulnerability» (Regional consultation on HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean for men who have sex with men, UNAIDS, 1999).

Overcoming the vulnerability factor of social invisibility is a need that must be pursued simultaneously on the individual, social, personal and political levels. As part of that process, another way of encouraging discussion of issues regarded as taboo is to include them in the legitimate agenda for research, production, and socialization of knowledge. The fact that universities, research institutes, and international organizations, in conjunction with communities, encourage research on gay and other MSM is an important step against the invisibility and, therefore, the vulnerability of this population group.

The epidemic continues to spread and responses to it need increasingly to be robust and comprehensive. At UNAIDS our aim is to support initiatives that assume such commitment, and the recently formed Task Force on MSM and HIV/AIDS in Latin America and the Caribbean is an example of this.

More than 20 years have passed since the outbreak of the epidemic. If there is one thing we have learned it is that the only way to act effectively against the propagation of the virus and to improve the quality of life of people living with HIV/AIDS is to adopt a more realistic perspective in our work, so that population groups and communities where the epidemic resides are targeted within a framework of absolute respect for their rights. We hope that this book can contribute to this shared undertaking.

Dr. Pedro Chequer
UNAIDS

Acknowledgements

This book is the result of several years of effort in Latin America which, happily, are set to continue. This initiative is aimed, first, at combining the perspectives of theory and research (from the fields of public health and the social sciences) with those of practice and activism in discussions on action needed to more effectively confront the HIV/AIDS epidemic among gay and other 'men who have sex with men' (MSM). Second, it seeks to make this dialogue of views and lessons learned available to those officials and authorities of the State and cooperation agencies who are responsible for decision making on health programs, policies and spending; as well as, naturally, to sectors more traditionally interested in such discussions, namely researchers, activists, and health professionals.

The *Research Network on Sexualities and HIV/AIDS in Latin America*, responsible for this effort, is a collective of social scientists and public health researchers who have worked in the areas of sexuality, sexual health, and HIV/AIDS in permanent contact with community-based organizations; as well as activists, who, having worked in gay organizations or in AIDS services organizations, have forged links with researchers, either by collaborating with them, or commenting on, disseminating, or using their research findings. The group is committed to the task on the basis of a shared experience of initiatives to confront the epidemic at various levels, and conceives research as a way to address people's needs. In this view, research must respond to the problems of individuals and communities, and its findings must be placed within their reach, since it is utilization which makes research a legitimate endeavour.

In a region where MSM have been so severely affected by the epidemic, recognition is owed to the decision of UNAIDS to address a potentially sensitive issue and support, since 1998, a series of initiatives designed to enhance both the participation of the region's civil society actors involved in work on AIDS with this population (academics, activists, and health staff), and to encourage the resolve of policy makers and health program directors in the implementation of measures aimed at controlling the epidemic in the region.

With respect to this network, we thank the initial invitation of Werasit Sittitrai for our initial steps (1998-1999), followed by the valuable help of Calle Almedal and Luiz Loures to start the second phase (2001-2002), which in subsequent phases was supported by Pedro Chequer and Mario Pecheny. Mario is also a member of this network, besides his role as UNAIDS consultant for the Task Force on MSM and HIV/AIDS in Latin America (of which this network is one of the constituents). Additionally, through the timely mediation of Paloma Cuchi, the English version of this book was made possible by a grant from the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation (AECI) and the Spanish Ministry of Health.

Others who have played an invaluable role in bringing this project to a successful conclusion and to whom we are sincerely grateful are: Percy Fernández Dávila, who helped in organization and communications, and translated the original version of the research catalogue into Spanish; Julio Cuadros, who designed the program that enables easy access to the regional research catalogue (on CD-ROM); Jesús Martínez, who helped with style correction and editing in the original Spanish version; Gaby Cáceres, who helped in communications; Simon Walter, who translated this book and the updated catalogue into English; Ana Maria Rosasco, Pablo Anamaría, Rubén Mayorga, Manuel Zozaya, Antonio de Moya, Rodrigo Vargas and Henry Ardila, who collaborated in the preparation of the first version of the catalogue; and the member NGOs of ASICAL – Equidad (Ecuador), SIGLA (Argentina), LCLCS (Colombia) and LetraEse (México) – which helped to update the catalogue. The english version of this book was made possible by a grant the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation (AECI) and the Ministry of Health of Sapin. We want to thank Paloma Cuchi (PAHO/UNAIDS) for her support of this collaboration (February, 2003).

Finally, we must of course pay tribute to Henry Ardila, the physician and activist who founded the Colombian League against AIDS. He was the pioneer of community-based work on AIDS in his country and for many years the leading civil-society spokesman in dealings with the government. At the regional level he participated in the first stage of the research network project with UNAIDS, and later played a very active role in the creation and initial activities of ASICAL. Through these lines we would like the possible users of this book to learn about the contributions of Henry and other campaigners who are no longer with us, such as Herbert Daniel from Brazil, Francisco Galván from Mexico, and Luis Gauthier from Chile, who have been so valuable for the articulation of an adequate response to the AIDS epidemic in MSM in Latin America and the Caribbean (and, on a more general level, to the campaign for sexual rights and against the exclusion of those who are 'different'). The memory of their legacy must reaffirm our loyalty to a tradition which was written with tenacity, generosity, and commitment.

Lima, May 2002

Carlos F. Cáceres

Research Network on Sexualities and HIV/AIDS in Latin America

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