

CHAPTER 5:

Decoding the Meaning and the Way Forward

This chapter discusses findings presented in Chapter four. It also provides recommendations on addressing challenges that undermine the reduction of HIV&AIDS among farm workers that were explored in this study.

The findings revealed that the level of HIV infection among farm workers at Rattray Arnold Research Farm was very high. Data from KII revealed that (42%) adults of the farm population of 380, were living with HIV&AIDS, yet there was underreporting (22%) by farm workers at the farm on their HIV&AIDS status. These findings are higher than the 35% HIV prevalence among farm workers and mine workers reported by WHO (2005), FCTZ (2005), NAC (2005), MoHCW (2007), and IOM (2010). Among the infected, it was worrisome to note that only a paltry (12%) were on ART. This was exacerbated by long distances (20km) which farm workers had to travel to health centres to receive ARVs. Ziningi (2009) also noted that ART is expensive and difficult to get in farms because farm workers' income tended to be low and therefore could not afford the cost of the drugs. The findings revealed that 76% of respondents after being tested did not disclose their HIV status to their partners. However, non-disclosure of HIV status affects access to treatment, hence, more HIV infections to the farm community.

Knowledge about HIV&AIDS was universal in this study. The majority, 98%, had heard of HIV&AIDS. These findings are congruent with those from earlier, national surveys in Zimbabwe as shown in ZDHS (2005/6). While there was widespread knowledge about HIV&AIDS, misconceptions still exist among farm workers regarding modes of HIV&AIDS transmission. About 16% and 9% of respondents reported that kissing and mosquito bites transmit HIV&AIDS, respectively. During FGDs participants also echoed similar sentiments that using the same utensils with an HIV infected person and kissing, transmits HIV&AIDS. However, previous studies by NCFH (2009) had noted relatively lower percentages (32%) of misconceptions. Thus, it should be argued that such misconceptions can disturb contraception because if HIV&AIDS can be transmitted through kissing, mosquito bites and sharing utensils, then people might view contraception as futile.

Although perception of risk is considered to be the first stage towards behavioural change, the association between perception of risk of HIV infection and sexual behaviour remains poorly understood. The findings revealed that 71% of farm workers believed that men should have multiple sexual partners, even when married. It should be argued that farm workers' attitude of having multiple

sexual partners expose them at high risk of HIV infection. It was also interesting to note that more males (84%) than females (57%) perceived having multiple sexual partners as a sign of virility among men. These findings are congruent with those obtained by Farm Worker Justice (2009) that also revealed that sexual masculinity is expressed in virility that is proved by having many sexual partners. Chiororo *et al.* (2002) and Gunda (2008) in their studies established that men perceive sex as an activity that should result in optimal sexual satisfaction for the man. As such, they engage in having multiple sexual partners.

Findings show that stigma regarding HIV&AIDS was moderately low with males attaching less stigma to PLWHA than females. Since at the farm, women attach more stigma than men to PLWHA, men will face a dilemma in disclosing their HIV status to their partners because it may lead to discrimination and exclusion.

The findings revealed that the mean age at first sexual intercourse was 15 years. However, more females (11%) than males (4%) had sex by age 15. This corroborates findings by ZDHS (2005/6) which established that youth initiate sexual activity before age 15. However, Global Health Council (2010) asserts that early sexual practice is associated with a higher propensity to accumulate sexual partners, therefore, increases chances of contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV&AIDS. It was also worrisome to note that girls were having sex before marriage. The majority (72%) of respondents had sex before marriage. The findings revealed that respondents wanted to explore the 'sexuality' while some had sex out of 'curiosity'. Such findings are similar to (Farm Worker Justice, 2009; SARD, 2006).

The results from this study revealed that farm workers at Rattray Arnold Research Farm were having intergenerational sex. A fair proportion (50%) of respondents ever had intergenerational sex with more women (78%) than males (22%) responding in the affirmative. Their argument was that 'sugar daddies' provide material needs while young men are potential husbands in marriages. Similar findings were also noted by FAO (2006), ZHDR (2003), and ZDHS (2005/6). This practice puts young women at high risk of HIV infection as they engage in unprotected sex to gain material things. It was also worrisome to note that some farm workers had engaged in transactional sex. Married women were reportedly engaging in transactional sex for the upkeep of their children. It was also established during FGDs that women were exchanging sex for a 50kg bag of maize, wheat and diesel for the upkeep of their families. It was noted that 24% of respondents had exchanged sex for either cash or kind, a figure which is lower than the 33% that was reported by IOM in 2010. FAO (2006) and Barnett & White (2006) propounded that, transactional sex is common on and near commercial farms, partly due to unequal income earning opportunities for men and women.

The results from this study revealed that farm workers at Rattray Arnold Research Farm had polygamous relationships. About 9% of respondents had polygamous marriages. The percentage of women in polygamous unions in this study is less than the 11% reported by ZDHS (2005/6). However, polygamous unions are also one of the major factors promoting the spread of HIV&AIDS in Africa (ZDHS, 2005/6).

While farm workers were having multiple sexual partners and polygamous relationships, it was surprising to note that condoms use was extremely low. The majority, 77% of respondents, reported having unprotected sex. Females were more likely (82%) than males (73%) to have unprotected sex. This figure is higher than the 30% (9% females and 51% males) reported in ZDHS (2005/6). Previous studies have also noted relatively lower prevalence of contraceptive use among both married and unmarried respondents (Chiororo *et al.*, 2002; MoHCW, 2007; Gunda, 2008). It was also noted that low condom use was also exacerbated by a 'false sense of trust' of their regular partners, a situation which exposes both men and women to HIV&AIDS. While condoms offer dual protection, the issue of acceptability and accessibility at the farm hindered their use. The majority (80%) of respondents reported scarcity of condoms at the farm. Results from the study revealed that condoms were obtained from Nyaure, Domboshawa and St Joseph clinics. All these clinics are roughly 20 km away from the farm. Conversely, male respondents argued that they did not use condoms in marital unions because condoms are associated with infidelity and lack of trust.

The findings revealed that HIV&AIDS was a serious problem. Key informant interviews revealed that 158 adults and 35 children out of 380 people at the farm were living with HIV&AIDS. Furthermore, 30 deaths have occurred at the farm due to AIDS in the past one year and the farm had lost 15 workers who occupied critical positions due to AIDS related sickness in the past one year. Results also revealed that the farm had lost productivity because of workers' absenteeism due to illness. The Farm Manager remarked that some employees' who were ill forced themselves to come to work due to fear of losing their job. However, these employees' performance was poor because they were not able to carry out more demanding farm duties such as weeding. Rugalema *et al.* (1999) cited in FAO (2006) states that AIDS related morbidity affect productivity in the commercial agriculture due to absenteeism, loss of skills and decline in available labour. Findings from the study revealed that more women had been absent from work caring for the sick or attending funerals. According to Basset & Mhloyi (1991), FAO (1995), Ncube (1998), and FAO (2006) HIV&AIDS epidemic was reported to be a heavier toll on women because they are care givers and are also involved in general household decision making and planning.

The study noted that the level of HIV infection among farm workers at Rattray Arnold Research farm was very high (42%). High levels of HIV&AIDS were exacerbated by different factors such as early sexual practices, premarital sex, intergenerational and transactional sex, having multiple sexual partners, polygamy and low condom use. Knowledge about HIV&AIDS was almost universal in both male and female respondents. The association between perception of risk of HIV infection and sexual behaviour remains poorly understood at the farm. The findings revealed that contraceptive use was very low at the farm. A false sense of trust affected the use of contraceptives in extramarital affairs. Availability, accessibility and affordability negatively impacted on contraceptive use. It was also noted that Rattray Arnold Research Farm was heavily affected by HIV&AIDS. Skills were lost due to HIV&AIDS morbidity and mortality at the farm.

The findings from the study support the need for a multi-sectorial approach to HIV&AIDS infection among farm workers. Given that Zimbabweans back bone is agriculture, it is necessary to implement a full range of interventions. The following are recommendations provided based on findings from the study:

The government through NGOs should avail free condoms to farm workers and make sure that farm workers are educated on correct and consistent use of condoms.

The government through NGOs should establish HIV support services such as treatment and care in farming communities. These established support services will ensure that health issues pertaining to HIV&AIDS are adequately addressed in the farming community.

The government and NGOs through Home Based Health Care Officers and Peer Educators should ensure that risk sexual practices are highlighted to farm workers. This can be done by engaging both married and unmarried farm workers in programmes that highlight the benefits of adopting safe sexual practices and behaviour to both men and women.

Promote delays in the onset of sexual activity among adolescents. The government and NGOs should carry out campaign programmes in farming communities that educate adolescents on the negative impacts of early sexual debut and premarital marriages.

The government should implement effective HIV&AIDS programmes in farming communities that provides farm workers with accurate information. It should also

establish a vibrant policy that addresses the plight of the farming community on issues pertaining to HIV&AIDS.

The study highlights a critical public health issue at the Rattray Arnold Research Farm, where the HIV infection rate among farm workers is alarmingly high at 42%. This prevalence significantly surpasses previous regional reports and underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions. Despite universal knowledge of HIV&AIDS among the workforce, misconceptions about transmission and a range of high-risk behaviours, including early sexual initiation, multiple sexual partners, intergenerational and transactional sex, and low condom use, contribute to the ongoing epidemic. While HIV & AIDS awareness is widespread, practical measures to prevent and manage the infection remain insufficient. The low uptake of antiretroviral therapy (ART), combined with barriers such as long distances to health facilities and high costs, exacerbates the situation. Additionally, the practice of non-disclosure of HIV status among partners and the stigmatization of people living with HIV&AIDS further hinder effective intervention and treatment. Systemic issues such as inadequate access to contraceptives, low condom use, and the economic and social challenges faced by farm workers, which compound their vulnerability to HIV&AIDS were identified. The high level of absenteeism and loss of productivity due to HIV&AIDS-related illnesses further impacts the farm's operations, highlighting the broader economic consequences of the epidemic.

To address these challenges, a multi-sectoral approach is essential. Recommendations include the provision of free condoms and education on their correct use, the establishment of accessible HIV support services, and comprehensive educational programs targeting safe sexual practices and risk reduction. Additionally, promoting delays in sexual activity among adolescents and implementing robust HIV&AIDS policies tailored to the farming community are crucial steps toward mitigating the epidemic's impact. By adopting these recommendations, stakeholders can help improve the health and economic well-being of farm workers, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and productive agricultural sector in Zimbabwe.