

HIV elimination – what should we be doing for women and girls?
A view from the field

- *Nduku Kilonzo, PhD, Executive Director, Liverpool VCT (LVCT)*

Liverpool VCT focuses on linking people to care after testing, with comprehensive follow-up.

Addressing women's vulnerabilities more appropriately:

- The focus is often on “vulnerable populations,” rather than on vulnerabilities faced by women generally. There is a need to examine those vulnerabilities and design services that respond in a meaningful way.
- As an example of a missed opportunity to better understand women's vulnerabilities, Dr. Kilonzo described the Modes of Transmission Study (done in 2009) which did not disaggregate any data by gender.
- Dr. Kilonzo pointed out that even the term “Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission,” is problematic, because it isolates women (rather than looking at couples) and pushes the focus to prevention during pregnancy, labor and delivery. This overlooks opportunities for HIV prevention before pregnancy even occurs (i.e. through family planning). A more accurate, comprehensive perspective is “prevention of vertical transmission.”
- Dr. Kilonzo presented female genital mutilation as an area of vulnerability for women and HIV risk. According to anecdotal evidence, in communities where both men and women are circumcised, the two practices are sometimes conflated and the evidence showing that male circumcision can reduce HIV risk is being used to justify the continuation of FGM. This has not been extensively documented, but illustrates the consideration that must be given to all HIV prevention messages and programs.
- Dr. Kilonzo expressed the hope that the issue of GBV will someday have a “home,” the way that HIV has a home in official, governmental organizations such as the National AIDS Commission. Without a single, official organization, the response to GBV exists across separate, poorly linked sectors.

Other points:

- As to the question of whether VCT programs can work as HIV prevention, Dr. Kilonzo pointed out that although no VCT models have been shown to be effective for HIV prevention, none of the evaluated VCT models included comprehensive follow up after testing and provision of targeted information. These are critical components of comprehensive VCT programs, and without a study looking at the effectiveness of such programs, the question of whether VCT is an HIV prevention strategy has not been answered.
- While research and evidence is clearly important, Dr. Kilonzo pointed out that there is also a danger to turning all service delivery programs into research. This shifts the focus away from service provision (and towards data collection) and also stifles the introduction of innovative approaches or programs that seek to break out of the accepted box.