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Gender inequality and the risk of HIV among married couples in North India

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Abstract

This study investigated the distribution and determinants of HIV risks among married couples in North India. Gender inequality emerged as a potential driver of HIV risks in this region. Data collection took place in 2003 in a probability survey of 3,385 couples living in India's most populous state – Uttar Pradesh – and Uttaranchal. Couples' analyses utilizing generalized estimating equations showed that compared with husbands, wives were less knowledgeable about HIV (OR=0.31, 95% CI= 0.27–0.36), more likely to consider themselves at risk for infection (OR=6.86, 95% CI= 4.65–10.13), and less likely to feel that a wife had the right to refuse sex with her husband (OR=0.50, 95% CI= 0.44–0.58). The proportion of husbands reporting non-marital sex in the past year was 7.1% and transactional sex in the past year, 2.2%. Among their wives, 73.4% were unaware of their husbands' non-marital sexual behaviors and only 28.9% of husbands reported condom use during their last non-marital sexual encounter. Logistic regression analyses showed that husbands' alcohol use, husbands' mobility, and urban residence were positively associated with husbands' non-marital sexual behaviors adjusting for other covariates. The data demonstrate that HIV prevention programs among couples in North India should consider both sexual risks and gender inequalities which potentially fuel HIV spread in this region.

Keywords

Gender equality; HIV/AIDS; sexual behavior; India; married couples

The current study investigates gender inequality in the form of gender differences in HIV risk factors among married couples in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Uttaranchal in North India. UP is the country's most populous state where 100,000 people are estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS (Population Census India, 2011). North India accounts for 22% of infections nationally, and HIV rates are rising in the general population (National AIDS

Control Organisation, 2010; Sharma, Rangari, & Singh, 2013). Despite these trends, there remains a dearth of information on the patterns and determinants of HIV risks in North India.

Data and Methods

Data for this research were collected in a probability survey of 3,385 married couples living in UP and Uttaranchal (former Hill district of UP). By design, 75% of the total sample was urban and 25% was rural. Women in selected households were eligible for interview if they were married, living with their spouse, and between the ages of 15–49. Husbands of interviewed wives comprised the men's survey. Data were collected from January to July 2003. Informed consent was obtained from the household head and individuals interviewed. Questionnaires were translated into colloquial Hindi. IRB approval was obtained from Indian Council of Medical Research in India and the Public Health Nursing IRB at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Wives were interviewed in private within the household; husbands were interviewed outside of the house, due to the sensitive nature of their questionnaire. A standard partner history for the last three partners in the past 12 months was used to collect information about sexual behavior among husbands. Wives were not asked about non-marital sexual behavior, because formative qualitative research in this population suggested it would be dangerous to ask them (Bloom, Singh, & Singh, 2003). Wives were asked if their husbands engaged in premarital sex and sex with another partner in the past year. Husbands were classified as mobile if they reported spending at least one night away from home in the past four weeks, or two weeks in the past year.

Descriptive findings are presented on the entire study sample. Chi-squared tests were conducted with Bonferroni correction of *p* value ($p < 0.008$) for multiple comparisons of proportions. Wives' likelihood of reporting HIV factors compared to husbands were estimated using generalized estimating equations (GEE) adjusting for the correlation within paired data and covariates. The associations between covariates and husbands' non-marital sexual behaviors were examined by logistic regression with robust standard errors. Analyses were performed in Stata 10.0 (StataCorp, Texas, USA).

Results

Socio-demographics of the couples sample ($n=3,385$) are shown in Table 1. As expected, wives had much lower levels of education than husbands, with close to half of all wives having no education, as compared with only about a fifth of the husbands. Couples' reports of HIV risk factors are shown in Table 2. Most pairwise comparisons were statistically significant. Understanding how HIV was transmitted was known by fewer wives than husbands, in divergent couples. A larger proportion of wives in divergent couples (8.1%) expressed that they felt at risk for becoming infected with HIV, than husbands (1.4%). Among divergent couples who had heard of STIs, wives (28.5%) were more likely to know one or more symptoms of infection in women than husbands (19.5%), and the opposite was observed for STI symptoms in men—in only 7.9% of divergent couples did the wife report

knowing at least one symptom, compared with 45% of couples where the husband knew. Among couples reporting having an STI symptom in the past year, the proportions of husbands and wives seeking any treatment was not statistically different though wives were more likely to report STI symptoms than husbands. Fewer couples both reported it acceptable for wives to buy condoms (53.0%) than husbands (88.6%). The majority of wives were unaware their husbands had premarital sex (60.7%) and one or more non-marital sexual partner(s) in the past year (73.4%).

Gender differences observed in pairwise analyses (Table 2) are reinforced in GEE models estimating the likelihood of wives reporting HIV risk factors as compared to husbands controlling for socio-demographics (Table 3). For example, wives had an estimated odds of more than six times that of their husbands of reporting that they felt at risk for HIV (OR=6.86, 95% CI=4.65–10.13), but were less likely to feel that a wife can refuse sex from her husband for any reason (OR=0.50, 95% CI=0.44–0.58).

Husbands' self-reports of five types of non-marital sexual activity are shown in Table 4, and logistic regressions modeling the likelihood of these behaviors by socio-demographic characteristics are shown in Table 5. Overall, almost a quarter of all husbands (24.2%) reported that they had premarital sex. Any non-marital sexual activity during the past year was reported by 7.1% of husbands, with 2.4% reporting having more than one non-marital partner and 2.2% engaging in transactional sex. Husbands residing in urban areas were more likely to report non-marital sex, particularly transactional sex (OR=4.56, 95% CI=1.42–14.67). Husbands with higher economic status were less likely to report premarital sex; however economic status was not associated with other non-marital sexual behaviors. Important differentials in recent non-marital sexual activity were observed for husbands who used alcohol during the past two weeks and for those who were mobile. Husbands using alcohol were more likely to report multiple sexual partners (OR=4.66, 95% CI=3.49–6.23) and transactional sex (OR=2.43, 95% CI=1.51–3.92). Mobile husbands estimated odds of reporting transactional sex was over two times higher than those who had not spent nights away from home (OR=2.50, 95% CI=1.53–4.08). Husbands reported a very low rate of condom use at the last non-marital sex. Condom use was not associated with husbands' education, economic status, and area of residence.

Discussion

Study findings indicate that gender inequalities, in the form of differentials between husbands and wives, are pervasive in North India and may be associated with HIV factors concurring with studies in other countries (UNAIDS, 2010). Gender differences observed in husbands' and wives' knowledge of HIV reflect the insufficient progress made in raising HIV awareness in India. The high proportion of wives in the study who were unaware of STIs and symptomology, particularly for men, shows additional knowledge deficits that prevent women from potentially minimizing their HIV risk. The data also demonstrate women's barriers to negotiating safe sex even in the context of marriage. Couples reported it more acceptable for married men to buy condoms than married women, and wives were less likely to report a wife could refuse sex with her husband.

The magnitude of premarital sex shown in these data is notable, given research demonstrating that in societies with conservative sexual norms, premarital sex by men is often with high-risk partners (Wellings et al., 2006). Studies in India show premarital sex is associated with transactional sex, low condom use, and extramarital sex (Hawkes & Santhya, 2005; Jejeebhoy, 1998; Kumar, Dandona, Kumar, & Dandona, 2011; Schensul et al., 2007).

The prevalence of extramarital partners and transactional sex reported by husbands in this study are more pronounced than suggested by national data sources and were comparable to India's high prevalence states. As shown in other studies, higher disclosure rates of sensitive information such as non-marital sexual behaviors may have occurred due to the HIV focus of this study (Ellsberg, Heise, Pena, Agurto, & Winkvist, 2001). India's national population-based survey, the NFHS-3, found 1.4% of currently married men reported extramarital sex and 0.5% reported paid sex in the past year, but in Andhra Pradesh, South India, a high prevalence state, 5.8% of married and unmarried men reported recent risky sex (International Institute for Population Sciences and Macro International, 2007). The higher rates of extramarital sex observed in this study are significant since India's HIV testing and research efforts are primarily focused in the South despite increasing HIV prevalence observed in the North (National AIDS Control Organisation, 2010).

Limitations of these data are that they were collected in 2003, not capturing the current state of the HIV epidemic in North India. However as far as we are aware, no HIV focused study of this magnitude has been conducted in North India despite increasing HIV prevalence. Therefore irrespective of the study period, the data give a comprehensive picture of contextual factors related to HIV in North India, some not previously reported, and inform future areas of research. Another limitation was the collection of extramarital sexual behavior from husbands only, not wives, and limited information collected on husbands' sex acts and partners. Study strengths are that the data are from a large population-based sample and couples-based analyses were employed building on emergent research on HIV and couples in India (Arora et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2012).

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Percentage Distribution of Couples Interviewed by Selected Socioeconomic Characteristics by Region of Residence, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal—2003

Table 1

Characteristics	Bundelkhand (n = 681)		Central (n = 670)		Region Eastern (n = 683)		Western (n = 677)		Uttaranchal (n = 674)		Total (n = 3385 couples)	
	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives
Education in years												
0	16.6	46.7	24.0	44.2	21.8	44.5	33.8	59.4	13.7	34.7	22.0	45.9
Up to 8	25.3	28.8	24.3	21.2	28.1	27.7	22.9	18.6	28.6	26.6	25.8	24.6
8 to 12	33.2	15.4	27.0	17.5	31.5	20.6	29.1	11.4	40.2	23.1	32.2	17.6
12+	24.9	9.1	24.7	17.1	18.6	7.2	14.2	10.6	17.5	15.6	20.0	11.9
Age of respondent												
15–24	9.4	25.0	8.8	22.4	7.8	22.3	8.8	23.5	5.9	16.0	8.2	21.8
25–29	19.2	23.3	14.8	19.4	17.7	21.8	18.2	21.5	12.3	23.7	16.4	22.0
30–39	41.6	36.7	36.6	39.0	38.6	38.8	38.7	37.1	38.3	37.4	38.8	37.8
40+	29.8	15.0	39.8	19.2	35.9	17.1	34.3	17.9	43.5	22.9	36.6	18.4
Household standard of living index												
Low		24.7		27.2		15.4		19.8		16.9		20.8
Middle		52.0		42.5		62.8		53.6		48.1		51.8
High		23.3		30.3		21.8		26.6		35.0		27.4

Table 2

Comparison of couples that diverge and converge on reported HIV risk factors and wives' awareness of husbands' non-marital sexual behavior, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal—2003 (n=3385 couples)

HIV risks	Convergent Couples		Divergent Couples		Wives aware of husbands' sexual behavior		Wives unaware of husbands' sexual behavior	
	Both No	Both Yes	Wife only Yes	Husband only Yes	%	%	%	%
HIV-related knowledge and attitudes								
Has heard of HIV/AIDS	15.4	54.4	3.4	26.9				
Knew chances of infection could be reduced	5.1	60.8	8.8	25.4				
Knew healthy looking people could be infected	8.7 ^a	54.4	10.9 ^a	26.1				
Considered themselves at risk for HIV infection	90.4	0.1	8.1	1.4				
Knowledge about condoms and STIs								
Heard of condoms	1.0	83.4	0.7	14.9				
Heard of STIs	52.3	12.7 ^a	14.7 ^a	20.2				
Knew 1+ symptoms of STIs in women	14.6 ^a	37.4	28.5	19.5 ^a				
Knew 1+ symptoms of STIs in men	23.7 ^a	23.4 ^a	7.9	45.0				
Considered themselves at risk for STIs	78.4	1.2 ^a	18.6	1.9 ^a				
Husbands' non-marital sexual behavior								
Husband engaged in premarital sex	-	-	-	-		39.3 ^e	60.7 ^e	
Husband had 1+ non-marital sexual partner(s) in past year	-	-	-	-		26.6 ^f	73.4 ^f	
Reported STI symptoms and treatment-seeking behavior								
Had discharge/ulcer in the past year	67.9	2.6 ^a	26.6	3.0 ^a				
Sought any advice/treatment	18.0 ^{a,b}	43.8	19.1 ^{a,c}	19.1 ^{b,c}				
Sought advice/treatment in clinic/hospital	10.3 ^{a,b}	53.8 ^d	25.6 ^{a,c,d}	10.3 ^{b,c}				
Sexual Norms								
Wives can refuse sex with husband	4.1	65.9	8.3	21.7				
Acceptable for married women to buy condoms	10.3	53.0	17.1 ^a	19.7 ^a				

HIV risks	Convergent Couples		Divergent Couples		Wives aware of husbands' sexual behavior	Wives unaware of husbands' sexual behavior
	Both No	Both Yes	Wife only Yes	Husband only Yes		
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Acceptable for married man to buy condoms	0.7	88.6	5.8 ^a	4.9 ^a		

^{a,b,c,d} Denote pairwise comparisons not significant with Bonferroni correction of *p value*. All other pairwise comparisons were significant at *P*<0.008;

^{e,f} Pairwise comparison between wives aware and unaware of husbands' non-marital sexual behavior were significant *P*<0.001.

Table 3

Adjusted odds ratios from GEE models of the likelihood of couples reporting various HIV risks, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal—2003 (n=3385 couples)

HIV risks	Wives	Husbands
	OR 95%CI	
HIV-related knowledge and attitudes		
Has heard of HIV/AIDS	0.311 *** (0.267 – 0.361)	Ref
Knew chances of infection could be reduced	0.539 *** (0.461 – 0.630)	Ref
Knew healthy looking people could be infected	0.653 *** (0.566 – 0.754)	Ref
Considered themselves at risk for HIV infection	6.864 *** (4.651 – 10.13)	Ref
Knowledge about condoms and STIs		
Heard of condoms	0.106 *** (0.0791 – 0.143)	Ref
Heard of STIs	1.107 (0.982 – 1.247)	Ref
Knew 1+ symptoms of STIs in women	1.849 *** (1.503 – 2.275)	Ref
Knew 1+ symptoms of STIs in men	0.164 *** (0.132 – 0.203)	Ref
Considered themselves at risk for STIs	8.045 *** (5.432 – 11.91)	Ref
Reported STI symptoms and treatment-seeking behavior		
Had discharge/ulcer in the past year	6.526 *** (5.498 – 7.747)	Ref
Sought any advice/treatment	1.422 * (1.015 – 1.991)	Ref
Sought advice/treatment in clinic/hospital	3.253 *** (1.921 – 5.507)	Ref
Sexual Norms		
Wives can refuse sex with husband	0.501 *** (0.436 – 0.577)	Ref
Acceptable for married women to buy condoms	1.149 * (1.017 – 1.298)	Ref
Acceptable for married man to buy condoms	1.601 *** (1.276 – 2.008)	Ref

* P<0.05

** P<0.01

*** P<0.001;

Controlling for age, education, region, area of residence, standard of living, husbands' mobility, husbands' recent alcohol use

Table 4

Proportion of husbands reporting non-marital sexual behavior, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal—2003 (n=3385 husbands)

	Engaged in pre-marital sex	Had 1+ non-marital sexual partner(s) in past year	Had 2+ non-marital sexual partners in past year	Transactional sex at least once in past year	Used condom during last non-marital sex ¹
Residence					
Urban	24.4	7.5	2.4	2.8	31.0
Rural	23.8	6.2	2.4	1.0	23.9
Education in years					
0	30.8	10.4	3.9	3.5	22.1
Up to 8	27.7	8.1	2.9	2.6	19.7
8 to 12	23.0	6.1	2.0	1.6	36.4
12+	14.4	3.7	0.6	1.0	56.0
Age					
15–24	30.4	9.4	1.8	1.1	19.2
25–29	25.3	7.6	2.9	2.9	28.6
30–39	25.3	8.5	3.1	2.7	32.7
40+	20.3	4.2	1.2	1.2	25.0
Used alcohol in past two weeks					
Yes	34.1	12.3	5.5	4.1	25.2
No	20.3	5.0	1.1	1.4	32.5
Mobile²					
Yes	27.7	10.1	3.0	4.3	36.2
No	23.6	6.6	2.3	1.8	27.1
Household standard of living index					
Low	31.2	8.0	2.7	2.4	16.1
Middle	25.0	7.9	2.9	2.2	28.3
High	17.4	4.9	1.1	1.9	46.7
Total	24.2	7.1	2.4	2.2	28.9

¹ Among husbands with 1+ non-marital partners in the past year (n=239 husbands);² Denotes at least one night spent away from home in the past 4 weeks, or 2+ weeks in the past year.

Table 5

Adjusted odds ratios from logistic regression models using robust variance estimators of the likelihood of husbands reporting non-marital sexual behavior, by socio-demographic characteristics, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal—2003 (n=3385 husbands)

Characteristics	Engaged in premarital sex	Had 1+ non-marital sexual partner(s) in past year	Had 2+ non-marital sexual partners in past year	Transactional sex at least once in past year	Used condom during last non-marital sex [†]
	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)
Age					
15–24	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
25–29	0.778 (0.557 – 1.086)	0.782 (0.517 – 1.183)	1.681 (0.664 – 4.255)	2.956 (0.679 – 12.88)	1.788 (0.431 – 7.426)
30–39	0.782* (0.615 – 0.994)	0.86 (0.591 – 1.253)	1.752 (0.883 – 3.476)	2.601 (0.513 – 13.18)	1.664 (0.582 – 4.763)
40+	0.631*** (0.501 – 0.795)	0.431*** (0.313 – 0.593)	0.742 (0.288 – 1.907)	1.193 (0.227 – 6.277)	1.052 (0.457 – 2.420)
Education in years					
0	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Up to 8	0.907 (0.702 – 1.172)	0.714 (0.494 – 1.033)	0.663 (0.439 – 1.001)	0.601 (0.325 – 1.111)	0.82 (0.340 – 1.979)
8 to 12	0.806 (0.619 – 1.049)	0.565* (0.355 – 0.898)	0.504 (0.181.382)	0.361* (0.160 – 0.813)	1.57 (0.726 – 3.393)
12+	0.529** (0.350 – 0.798)	0.364*** (0.210 – 0.631)	0.204** (0.0620 – 0.670)	0.207** (0.0652 – 0.657)	2.705 (0.741 – 9.875)
Used alcohol in past two weeks	1.834*** (1.561 – 2.155)	2.484*** (1.983 – 3.110)	4.664*** (3.489 – 6.234)	2.432*** (1.508 – 3.924)	0.764 (0.378 – 1.546)
Mobile²	1.364*** (1.135 – 1.640)	1.697*** (1.300 – 2.216)	1.395 (0.689 – 2.825)	2.499*** (1.531 – 4.080)	1.533 (0.651 – 3.609)
Household standard of living					
Low	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Middle	0.647*** (0.508 – 0.825)	1.058 (0.620 – 1.808)	1.344 (0.593 – 3.044)	0.555 (0.253 – 1.216)	2.235 (0.842 – 5.935)
High	0.461*** (0.354 – 0.600)	0.81 (0.465 – 1.411)	0.778 (0.293 – 2.067)	0.616 (0.182 – 2.080)	3.85 (0.677 – 21.88)
Residence					
Rural	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Urban	1.526** (1.170 – 1.990)	1.429** (1.108 – 1.842)	1.07 (0.609 – 1.878)	4.555* (1.415 – 14.66)	0.891 (0.333 – 2.381)
Region					
Uttaranchal	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Western	1.360* (1.002 – 1.846)	1.102 (0.789 – 1.539)	1.009 (0.449 – 2.271)	0.475 (0.203 – 1.116)	0.424*** (0.280 – 0.643)

Characteristics	Engaged in premarital sex	Had 1+ non-marital sexual partner(s) in past year	Had 2+ non-marital sexual partners in past year	Transactional sex at least once in past year	Used condom during last non-marital sex ^I
	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)
Eastern	0.805 (0.593 – 1.093)	0.786* (0.620 – 0.995)	0.408** (0.225 – 0.741)	0.329* (0.139 – 0.779)	0.440** (0.263 – 0.736)
Central	0.927 (0.746 – 1.152)	1.398* (1.028 – 1.900)	0.823 (0.529 – 1.281)	0.635 (0.309 – 1.305)	0.96 (0.525 – 1.757)
Bundelkhand	0.988 (0.718 – 1.358)	1.003 (0.821 – 1.225)	0.828 (0.487 – 1.407)	0.411 (0.168 – 1.005)	0.286*** (0.146 – 0.561)

* P<0.05

** P<0.01

*** P<0.001;

^I Among husbands with 1+ non-marital partners in the past year (n=239 husbands);² Denotes if husband spent at least one night away from home in the past 4 weeks, or 2+ weeks in the past year.