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Genital Hygiene Practices of Fishermen Targeted for a Topical Microbicide Intervention against STIs in Kisumu, Kenya

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Abstract

Research on hygiene has been relatively limited in the current era of rigorous observational studies and clinical trials. We set to investigate the perception and practices of genital hygiene among fishermen working on the beaches along Lake Victoria targeted for a topical male microbicide hygiene intervention. We conducted 12 FGDs involving fishermen (n=130), recording the discussions in Dholuo (the local language), transcribing them verbatim, followed by translation into English. Transcripts were double-coded and analyzed using constant comparative analysis. Despite easy access to lake water and recognition of a link may exist between poor genital hygiene and the risk of penile infection and poor sexual relationships, few fishermen regularly washed the genitalia. Factors cited for irregular cleaning of genitals include fear/embarrassment of cleaning their genitalia in public, the traditional Luo beliefs such as washing with soap would reduce the fish catch, and the excessive consumption of alcohol and illicit drugs. Hygienic practices of the fishermen were poor and could contribute to infections including sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Given the fishermen's poor genital hygiene practices, they may benefit from hygienic intervention, including that provided by penile microbicides that can be applied in the privacy of their bedrooms.

Keywords

personal hygiene; practices; fishermen; Lake Victoria; infection prevention; STIs

Introduction

Hygiene, broadly defined, remains important in health today throughout the world. Research on hygiene has been relatively limited in the current era of rigorous observational studies and clinical trials. Even then, the limited research on hygiene has mostly focused on hand hygiene because of the hospital infection control and prevention of diseases such enteric, skin and respiratory infections.¹⁻⁴

Genital hygiene continues to present itself as important in the control and prevention of a wide range of genital infections. Poor genital hygiene, for example, has been associated in observational studies with penile and cervical carcinoma⁵⁻⁹ and with genital ulcer disease and also with HIV infection¹⁰. Genital washing with soap and water by men was associated with decreased incidences of genital ulcer disease as early as in the first and second world wars.¹¹ There are reports from World Wars I and II that military forces with limited access to water in combat zones used a topical microbicide (e.g., the K Packet containing calomel ointment and argyrols) to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs).¹¹

Heterosexual transmission of infectious pathogens such as human papillomavirus (HPV), HSV2, *Treponema pallidum*, or *Haemophilus ducreyi* may occur whether or not the infected partners are symptomatic¹². Good genital hygiene, particularly among uncircumcised men, could potentially interrupt this transmission chain. Enhanced likelihood of uncircumcised men to develop syphilis and chancroid compared to circumcised, for instance, is thought to be associated with poor genital hygiene¹³. Non-circumcised men have been reported to have inferior standards of genital hygiene behavior, as measured by retracting the foreskin and washing of the whole penis, compared with circumcised men¹⁴.

In preparation for a clinical trial to evaluate the efficacy of a genital topical microbicide for prevention of STI/HIV among highly mobile and predominantly non-circumcised fishermen in Kisumu District, we sought to understand the perception and practices of genital hygiene in this population.

Methods

Study design

We conducted 12 focus group discussions (FGDs), each with 8–12 participants. The 32 beaches were divided into three zones based on geographic location, to ensure zonal representation of beaches. In each zone, we conducted 4 FGDs with participants grouped by age, marital status and type of work. These groups included a) fishermen/boat owners less than 28 years old, b) fishermen/boat owners more than 28 years old, c) middlemen (traders who buy fish from fishermen and sell either to other small traders or directly to consumers), and d) transporters (individuals engaged in transportation of fish either to the main roads or to markets). During mapping of the study areas in collaboration with Beach Management Unit officials, we identified potential FDG participants and were invited to attend FGDs by letter indicating the date, time and venue. The FGDs were preceded by intense community mobilization and engagement using both local administration and beach management

structures to prepare the community as the study protocol went through both University of Washington and Kenya Medical Research Institute ethical review approval systems.

Study population

The study involved individuals working in the fishing industry on the 32 beaches along Lake Victoria in Kisumu District where the fishermen population approximates 20,000. Kisumu District is predominantly occupied Luo people who traditional do not practice male circumcision and as such we expect that most of the FGD participants were uncircumcised men. Inclusion criteria to participate in FGDs was a) symptomatically healthy men, b) over 18 years old, c) must have been working in the fishing industry for at least 3 months, and d) who are sexually active (have had sex in the last 2 weeks). Of 144 participants invited for the 12 FGDs, 14 did not come for the discussions. The total number of FGDs conducted was determined by the saturation points of the issues we sought to clarify.

Data collection

On arrival potential participants were asked individually in the language of their choice - either English or Dholuo (local language) to consent to participate, and were given time to ask questions. The consent obtained included permission for audio-taping the discussions. Participants completed a registration slip eliciting demographic and socio-economic details. Discussions were moderated using a predetermined question guide and recorded using a voice-activated digital recorder. The guidelines for discussion focused on normative male genital hygiene practices, the timing of genital hygiene practices and their frequency, perceived obstacles to these practices, and their relationship to sexual behaviors. We posed questions such as a) describe men's bathing habits, b) How do men clean their genital area? c) How do women feel about men cleaning their genitals? d) How do the bathing habits of men affect their sex life? Do men get more or less sex when they are clean? e) What do men do after sex?

A note-taker and an observer assisted the moderator to ensure involvement of all participants in discussions. During FGDs, we encouraged participants to share common concerns around selected themes, and individuals were not referred to by name. Data were downloaded to a computer and copied onto a CD for verbatim transcription and translation into English for discussion conducted in Dholuo. Soft copies were stored in password-protected zipped files.

Data analysis

For the quantitative data that we collected from the 130 FGD participants about their demographic and socio-economic attributes before the start of the discussion, we analyzed using simple descriptive statistics. The transcripts from the discussions were coded by two analysts where one did manually and another using Atlas.Ti (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH) that also helped in sorting data by themes. The two analysts then compared resultant codes to assess the extent to which the variables were coded in the same way to minimize the potential effect of having personal opinion on the data. The intercoder reliability calculations using Cohen's kappa based on 12 FGD transcripts coded resulted in a reliability coefficient of 0.80. We defined poor genital hygiene as skipping or not washing the whole penis that include retracting the foreskin and cleaning the sub-prepuce. We

analyzed interview transcripts by constant comparative analysis which is a method of inductive analysis derived from grounded theory in which one piece of data, for instance, one interview or one statement or one theme, is taken and compared to all other pieces of data that are either similar or different to identify what makes the piece of data different and/or similar to other pieces of data^{15,16}. In our case, for example we took an interview transcript with transporters and compared with interviews with middlemen and boat owners/fishermen to determine what is similar or different and why.

Results

Socio-economic characteristics of the participants

The average age of the 130 participants was 30 (Range: 18–60) with 62% having completed at least 5 years of primary education (Table 1). Seventy percent were married, with 20% in polygamous unions. All were Christian, with African-formed Christian churches (independent churches) accounting for 40% of church affiliations. The main source of income for 64% of participants was fishing; 12% of participants had bicycle taxis (*Bodaboda*) and were hired to transport fish to the market or to the main road. A tenth (12%) had small businesses serving the fishermen, and 9% were predominantly farmers. The median monthly income was \$57 US.

The fishermen were highly migratory, moving as determined by the pattern and season of the fish catch. They reported fall into two main categories defined by the time they fish. Night fishermen tend to specialize in catching *Rastrineobola argentea* (sardines) locally known as ‘omena’ while day fishermen concentrate on catching either *Lates niloticus* (Nile perch) or *Oreochromis niloticus* (Tilapia). Due to their migratory nature, most of them lived in shared rented houses commonly called ‘abila,’ although some, especially those working at night, simply erected makeshift structures under trees to sleep during the day.

Genital hygiene and sexual relationships

Fishermen recognized that traditionally the Luo community that they belong to does not practice male circumcision and that required them to pay more attention in cleaning their genitals during bath time (Quote 1). They observed that although they may be required to pay more attention when cleaning their genitals by retracting the foreskin and cleaning under the prepuce, some are unable do this for a number of reasons including feeling embarrassed washing their genitalia in public (Quote 2), pain if the penis has lesions (Quote 3) and laziness (Quote 4), lack of time (Quote 5), lack of knowledge on how to clean (Quote 6) carefree attitude towards cleaning genitalia (Quote 7) and a popular belief that washing with soap diminishes ones success in catching fish (Quote 8). The percentage cover of the glans by the foreskin was also reported as an issue in genital hygiene with people with naturally retracted or shorter foreskin finding it easy to clean their penis compared to the others (Quote 9).

However, others felt that bathing process is incomplete if one finished without paying attention and washing the genitalia (Quote 10). The fishermen expressed concern that those

among them who bathe using water in a bucket were probably not able to clean their genitals properly, unlike those who bath in the lake and therefore have plenty of water.

Some commented that it is mostly single men who do not bathe and by extension wash their genitalia as frequently as they should (Quote 11). Even though they recognized that they are expected to bathe and clean their genitals every day and after each sexual encounter, some report going for several days without bathing (Quotes 12, 13). However, fishermen agree that their female partners have a right to raise concerns about their hygiene, although they recognized that it requires a lot of effort and courage from the female partners. They report that some women fear the consequence of raising such concerns with their male partners' hygiene (Quotes 14, 15).

Several fishermen stated that women engaged in transactional sexual relationships with men would not voice any concerns, unlike those in a spousal or regular relationship (Quote 16). Once a woman is given fish at a reduced price, she automatically loses her rights, so she would not comment on the men's poor hygiene (Quotes 17–18). If it is a spouse with whose rights to speak is protected, then she will be free to advice on genital hygiene (Quote 19). However, these fishermen believed that some women were not bothered by their partners' hygiene because they considered the men adults who do not need to be reminded to do something whose value and consequences they should understand well (Quote 20).

Some fishermen believed that the vagina cleans a man's penis during sexual intercourse, and further stated that the vagina is always clean and that is why it has the capacity to clean the penis (Quote 21). Others reported that hygiene not only refreshes the body, it enhances love and sex between couples. They believed that love diminishes when one is dirty, and the offended partner usually brings up excuses for not engaging in sexual interactions (Quote 22). Fishermen reported that the net effect of poor genital hygiene to be bad odour, diseases and loosing respect in the community (Quote 23). They, however, acknowledge that there might be a relationship between poor hygiene and infections especially for uncircumcised men who might naturally accumulate germs in the sub-prepuce especially after sexual contacts (Quote 24).

Discussion

This study aimed to understand the genital hygiene-related perceptions and practices of Lake Victoria fishermen in preparing for a trial of topical penile microbicide use for preventing STI infections, including HIV. We found that despite easy access to lake water and men acknowledging that a link may exist between poor genital hygiene and the risk of penile infection and poor sexual relationships, few men regularly washed the genitalia. Factors cited for poor genital hygiene include fear/embarrassment of washing their genitalia in public, the traditional Luo beliefs such as washing with soap would reduce the fish catch, and the excessive consumption of alcohol and illicit drugs. Given the fishermen's poor genital hygiene practices, they may benefit from hygienic intervention, including that provided by penile microbicides that can be applied in the privacy of their bedrooms.

Fishermen's poor genital hygiene despite their ample access to lake water, contracts findings in literature that cite lack of access to water as a barrier to good personal care, including genital hygiene.^{17–19} In this community of fishermen, poor genital hygiene probably could be explained by various individual perceptions and practices which may need to be targeted for change since poor genital hygiene, especially among the uncircumcised, provides suitable environment for easy infection by the pathogens that may be trapped in the sub-prepuce. The belief that washing with soap would reduce fish catch seems to be a mere psychological link between the slipperiness of soap in water and fish making it hard to 'catch' which could be corrected over time through education. A topical male microbicide that can be applied on the genitalia at the comfort of an individual's bedroom can assist the fishermen whose poor genital hygiene are reasons such this belief.

Although our reason for assessing the genital hygiene of fishermen was based on the hypothesis that this could prevent STI/HIV infection among uncircumcised men with intact foreskin that is linked to inferior genital hygiene¹⁴, studies have come up with contradictory findings on the role of genital hygiene in STI especially HIV prevention^{10,14,20,21}. While an observational cohort study in Rakai, Uganda²¹ show that consistent washing has no beneficial effect in averting HIV acquisition, a case control study of men recruited in Nairobi and another one among uncircumcised men in Durban found that genital hygiene was, in fact, associated with reduced risk of HIV infection^{10,22}. The Durban study which used subpreputial penile wetness as a proxy measure of genital hygiene found that men with subpreputial penile wetness more than twice increased risk of HIV acquisition compared to the men without. These studies, though limited in diversity, points to the role of accumulated dirt in the sub-prepuce of uncircumcised men in STI/HIV infections.

In contrast, Makumbi and colleagues²¹ found that HIV incidence was significantly increased if the washing occurred in the first 3 minutes post-coital. However, information from the Rakai cohort was not collected on how the cleansing was done or whether or not soap was used. Further, the study focused on genital washing after sex rather than as an everyday habit. It may be that washing after sex, if it was done with a towel or cloth, potentiates HIV transmission from female genital secretions through well-defined lacerations/abrasions caused by sexual trauma as a result of cleaning with a piece of clothes. We may need additional studies to validate the findings of the Rakai study and other studies that look at genital hygiene and HIV infections.

The main limitation of this study as is with other qualitative studies is that the findings are more illustrative and hardly generalizable.²³ Also, the quotations of the fisherman may have been affected by their participation in FGDs. Because of the group nature of focus groups, men may only report what is socially acceptable (social desirability bias) and not their own behavior if it deviates from what others said. However, our approach to sampling a range of fishermen to participate does enhance generalizability somewhat.

Overall, fishermen had poor genital hygiene. Availability of a topical male microbicide that could be applied at the comfort of men's bedroom might help prevent the effects associated with poor hygiene. It would be possible to reinforce beliefs that genital hygiene could reduce

STI risk, particularly in uncircumcised men thereby promoting the use of a topical microbicide that is not believed to reduce the catching of fish.

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Table 1

Socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of focus group discussion (FGD) participants

Variable	Freq	Percent
<i>Level of education</i>		
No education	2	1.5
Lower primary	1	0.8
Upper primary	81	62.3
Lower secondary	10	7.7
Upper secondary	33	25.4
College	3	2.3
<i>Marital status</i>		
Married	91	70.0
Single	39	30.0
<i>Denomination (religion)</i>		
Independent churches	52	40.0
Protestants	44	34.0
Catholics	34	26.0
<i>Main occupation</i>		
Fishing	83	63.8
Farming	11	8.5
Bicycle taxi	15	11.5
Small business	16	12.3
Statistics Kshs US\$	Kshs	US\$
<i>Income per month</i>		
Average	7500	107.0
Mode	3000	43.0
Median	4000	57.0

Table 2:

Verbatim quotes from FGD participants

Quote#	FGD#	Participant category	Quote
Genital washing			
1	9	Unmarried under 28 years	As you know most of us Luos are not circumcised so the foreskin at the tip of the penis is still there. We need to retract it back slowly then clean it well, rinse it well with water. But in some few cases you find yourself bathing without cleaning there.
2	2	Married over 28 years	There are people who do not bathe if they find many people. They simply leave. They despise their penis and fear that people will laugh at them if they are small in size
3	6	Married over 28 years	You may find that if water comes into contact with penis if it has cracks, then it can be very painful just like methylated spirit. So cleaning it may be a real difficulty.
4	5	Unmarried under 28 years	... There are some lazy people who can even take 2–3 days without washing their penis. There was a time I bathed near someone who was washing his penis. There was a smell and I could easily tell that this man takes 3–4 days before washing his penis. He goes and sleeps with a woman and does not wash it, the 2 nd day again he sleeps with a woman, and doesn't wash.
5	6	Married over 28 years	A fisherman has no time, my friend. We could be chasing business so bathing is just for something like two minutes. The duck style. So I don't think the majority clean it [the penis]
6	3	Middlemen	Sometimes you forget, you are so busy or something else, or sometimes someone does not know that this skin is supposed to be pulled back and cleaned properly with soap and left until it dries well
7	3	Middlemen	... it depends on the way one takes care of himself and how much time he takes with the body. If you are someone who ensures that there is no dirt or smell near you life then when you are bathing you have to pull back the foreskin and clean the inside then you can put on your underwear
8	6	Married over 28 years	Some people believe and say that if you touch soap you will not catch fish when you go fishing. Such people don't take bath because of such beliefs, or if they do they only dip themselves in water then come out without touching soap or washing sponge.
9	1	Unmarried under 28 years	There are people with the fore skin but for others the fore skin is naturally missing so cleaning is not an issue. But for those with the skin it can be forgotten
10	2	Married over 28 years	If you bathe and forget to touch that place then you will just feel like you have never bathed and you will have to bathe again
Genital hygiene and sexual relationship			
11	4	Transporters	Men, just as he went for work, mostly single men are seriously dirty because at times he feels he is going for a hard job, he says its even cold let me just wash my legs, I will bathe tomorrow
12	6	Married over 28 years	In the nature of man, if one comes back from prostitution (sleeping with a woman), then he should take bath, yet, others still don't do that. You find that other people go with women and take even two days before taking bath.
13	12	Transporter	Whether you get a lady or not, it is important to wash well all your private parts [genital area] especially those who are not circumcised and the skin is folded in the fore skin then you must take time to wash the tip of your penis well
14	1	Unmarried under 28 years	Now when she feels that my body is being sticky then she will ask if I ever bathed... Anyway, they don't usually ask. They also fear being reprimanded and it doesn't come into their mind.
15	7	Middlemen	A man is always seen to be powerful before a woman such that when a woman tries to ask him about issues concerning bathing and hygiene, he will be tough and just get into a woman without a woman questioning his hygiene.
16	6	Married over 28 years	Women don't bother with the cleanliness of that thing (penis) because after taking bath she prepares for other sexual partners. So they walk away with good money in their pockets
17	7	Middlemen	She is on your pay roll, so she does not care about the nature of your body hygiene.
18	5	Unmarried under 28 years	... There are those who like money and those who like personal hygiene. But most of them [women] like money. Its money they want from you mostly. They do not care whether you are clean or not

Quote#	FGD#	Participant category	Quote
19	8	Transporter	You will also realize that if your penis is dirty and you are free enough she [wife] will tell you that today you are not clean.
20	1	Unmarried under 28 years	Now when she feels that my body is being sticky then she will ask if I ever bathed. Then I will tell her, "my girl I skipped taking bath". Anyway, they don't usually ask...They know these are old [mature] people who should be bathing.
21	4	Transporters	But once you have played [had sexual intercourse] even if your penis was dirty, it comes out very clean...that thing (vagina) is clean always and very sweet to the penis
22	4	Transporters	Love diminishes when you are dirty but when you are clean then her love is high...Bathing enhances strength and if one bathes then he is changed he feels good and this can cause something. Women like those who are always clean, it implies you have money and can take good care of her. If you don't dress neatly then there is nothing she can do with you
<i>Cleanliness and infections</i>			
23	2	Married over 28 years	They can contract different kinds of diseases if they don't take good care of their body. Like the private parts [genital area] can produce bad smell if they are not washed.
24	6	Married over 28yrs	We don't bathe regularly especially us who are not circumcised. That is the reason we get infected a lot because dirt accumulates around our private parts.