

'Greater Aids risk for men on the margins'

Men who have sex with men face stigma

LUKE FOLB

AHEAD of World Aids Day on December 1, a recent study found that men who had sex with men (MSM) faced significant stigmatisation, which led them to engage in high-risk behaviour.

The study, conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in South Africa and Namibia, found poor mental health and stress caused by high levels of stigma led the group to engage in behaviour that could lead to contracting HIV.

Heidi van Rooyen, executive director HSRC, said the group faced ridicule, which led them to engage in acts such as unprotected sex, having multiple sexual partners and substance abuse.

"This group is left on the margins and (the act of) pushing people who are different away, has real consequences. The types of stress induced, due to marginalisation, leads to behaviours such as hiding things or acting straight, which heightens the HIV risk," she said.

One of the key findings is that health-care facilities do not adequately cater to the needs of the group and this can contribute to negative effects that impact upon them.

Participants in the study felt the need to "act straight" when seeking health-care services and cited experiences with homophobic stigma and



Monanana Mminele reads a pamphlet at the Aids conference on Friday.

PICTURE CINDY WAXA/ANA

discrimination among public health-care services.

"Health-care facilities have strong heterosexual norms and so MSM find it difficult and hostile, and don't receive the necessary care. Sensitising health-care workers to these issues is needed," said Van Rooyen.

The research found that most participants had either an implicit or explicit sexual agreement with their partner. Most described their relationships as monogamous. Fewer were in open relationships and a small minority had female sexual partners alongside their male partner.

Zaynab Essack, research specialist at the HSRC, said society needed an open dialogue about these findings because of the risk factors. "While most are in monogamous relationships,

those who have open relationships with females would not tell (her)... they were also engaging in sex with males. The risk of contracting HIV was higher... and we need to have an open conversation about who we're having sex with."

The study was conducted among 440 participants in two parts. The first was the qualitative research, with focus group discussions with 64 partnered MSM in South Africa and 45 partnered MSM in Namibia. The second part was a survey involving 220 male-male partners, 150 from South Africa and 70 from Namibia.

Lynae Darbes, associate professor at the University of Michigan, said that while the qualitative data sample was small, it was comparable to other studies done in the rest of the world.