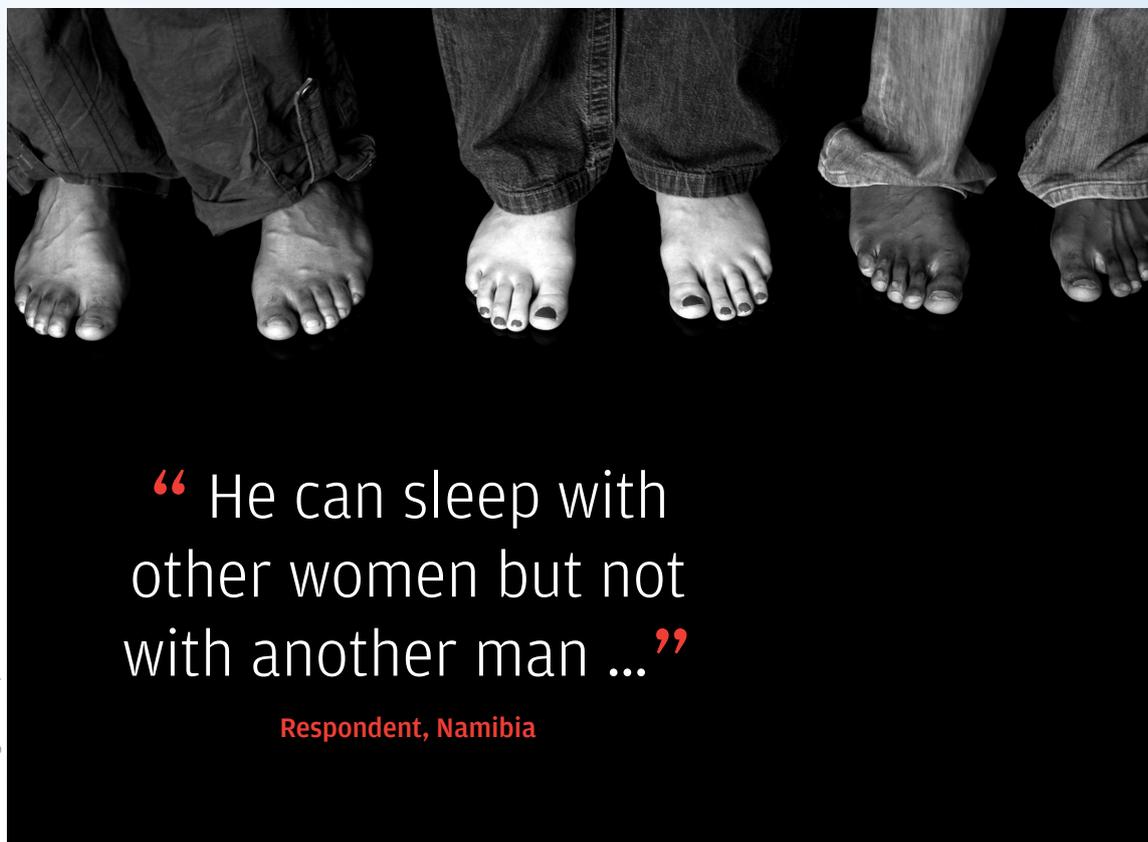


Have the conversation. Tough discussions can lead to reduced risk of HIV



Elske Kritzingher / Independent Contributors / Africa Media Online

“ He can sleep with other women but not with another man .. ”

Respondent, Namibia

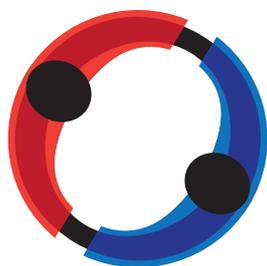
Difficulties in talking about HIV and relationship expectations may hinder the creation of explicit sexual agreements, placing same-sex male couples at higher risk from HIV.

Researchers have undertaken a study with male same-sex couples in South Africa and Namibia to establish the presence and characteristics of their sexual agreements (agreements about sex with outside partners). The study is a first with such couples to be carried out in southern Africa.

18 couples in South Africa and Namibia completed an interview about relationships, including the issue of sexual agreements. The study was undertaken with participants who identify as

gay, bisexual and men having sex with other men (MSM). It explored whether couples had explicit or implicit sexual agreements as well as characteristics of such agreements.

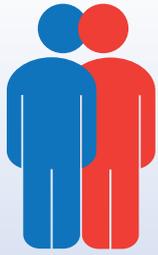
The research showed that the majority of participants have an implicit or explicit sexual agreement with their partner. Implicit (or assumed) sexual agreements were mainly monogamous. In the case of explicit agreements, most were monogamous, with a few describing open



**Together
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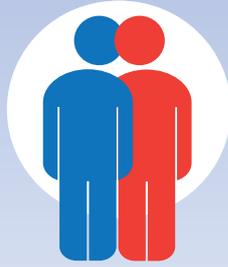
Together Tomorrow is a study exploring the HIV prevention needs of men within same-sex relationships in an attempt to better understand behaviours which could place men at increased risk of HIV. It is a project of the HSRC in collaboration with investigators from the University of California, San Francisco and University of Michigan and in partnership with the Gay and Lesbian Network (South Africa) and Positive Vibes (Namibia).

Common types of sexual agreements



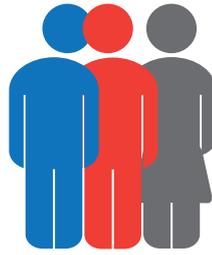
Implicit monogamous

“ Never nooit [never] ... never never never (laughs) ... I would never agree to such things ... ours is probably monogamous if I can put it that way. ”



Explicit monogamous

“ So he knows that I don't believe in sharing it's me or someone else. ”



Explicit open relationship (only with female partners)

“ He can sleep with other women but not with another man. ”

Power and discrepant agreements



The "top" or more dominant partner tends to own the power to negotiate seeking outside partners in sexual agreements.

In some cases, a partner described the terms of their sexual agreement differently to his partner.

Sample: 18 couples completed the relationship interview **Data:** Partners interviewed separately but simultaneously

relationships with female outside partners only.

The formation of and adherence to sexual agreements has been reported to relate to higher levels of trust, communication and commitment within relationships. Couples who make sexual agreements do so for a number of reasons.

Among cited by the participants were HIV prevention, and fostering loving, committed and trusting relationships. However, participants described communicating sexual agreements as difficult.

In some cases, concern about infidelity prompted couples to test for HIV frequently and use condoms more consistently within the relationship, particularly in the context of assumed rather than explicit sexual agreements.

A few participants implied that the more dominant partner was more likely to seek outside partners. In some cases, there were discrepancies in the agreements described where one participant

in a couple noted having an explicit sexual agreement and the other an assumed monogamy. The study seems to suggest that when couples do make explicit sexual agreements, they are typically not in favour of open or non-monogamous relationships. These qualitative findings were supported by the quantitative data with

a larger sample of participants - where 78% reported having monogamous sexual agreements.

The study team suggested that this may also be a reflection of a desire to replicate typical, and socially accepted heterosexual relationships, amidst external stressors such as criminalisation and stigma.

The recommendations of the study include promoting targeted interventions aimed at creating spaces in which couples may gain the necessary trust and skills to discuss and create such agreements.

“ He is my only partner and I'm also his only partner ... ”

Respondent, South Africa