“It's COVID's fault!”: How has COVID-19 affected the SRHR of women living with HIV in East and Southern Africa?

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OBJECTIVES

To explore sexual and reproductive health and rights how COVID-19 has affected (SRHR) of women and girls living with HIV in East and Southern Africa

METHODS

We conducted collaborative research in October 2020 on the effects of COVID-19 lockdown on the SRHR of women and girls living with HIV with 30 women across 10 countries of East and Southern Africa. We used a cascade interview approach.

RESULTS

The ongoing chronic but largely invisible pandemics of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) violations, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and mental health challenges have worsened through COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Respondents identified gaps including income; food security; funds for their ongoing volunteer distribution of medication, contraceptives, support and other vital services unrecognised by governments or NGOs (when employed community health workers were withdrawn); funds for VAW reduction or mitigation services; gendered digital access (smartphones and airtime). Further challenges including increased incest from family members, and other SRHR violations; and lack of law enforcement or legal redress. These have combined to increase women’s and girls’ vulnerabilities to (other) STIs, unplanned pregnancies; and onward HIV transmissions.

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID pandemic presents a critical opportunity for FIGO to embrace a syndemic approach to girls’ and women’s lifelong SRH care, by addressing the pandemics of SRHR violations, violence against women and girls, and mental health, as well as HIV and COVID-19 themselves. This is because all these conditions separately and together, and exacerbated by each other, contribute significantly to the global burden of SRH disease.

• Why a syndemic approach?
• Why ‘collaborative research’?
• What can be done to improve women’s SRHR and gender equity to prepare for future pandemics?

FURTHER READING

https://tinyurl.com/SalamanderTrustCOVIDEffects

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