

CARING MASCULINITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF HIV SERODISCORDANT RELATIONSHIPS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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Background: Globally, HIV discourses frequently position men as the ‘problem’ and the reason for women and girls’ HIV acquisition, including in Papua New Guinea (PNG) where men’s behaviours are often (and problematically) blamed for the transmission of HIV. Less attention has been paid to the positive role men can and do play in reducing HIV vulnerability or in the care and support of women with HIV.

Methods: Findings are drawn from a longitudinal study of the socio-cultural aspects of HIV biomedicine among couples and polygynous spouses in serodiscordant relationships in PNG. Interviews with 51 men, women and transgender women were conducted in Mt. Hagen and Port Moresby in 2017, with follow-up interviews in 2018-19. We focus on a subset of 15 participants (six HIV-negative men and nine HIV-positive women) in heterosexual monogamous or polygynous serodiscordant relationships.

Results: Findings detail that some HIV-negative men in heterosexual relationships are resisting locally specific hegemonic masculine norms and gender hierarchies such as male authority, violence and sexual prowess in favour of more caring, respectful ways of being a man as they seek to support their HIV-positive wives. Caring masculinities took on the form of both emotional and tangible support, including protecting HIV-positive women’s reputations by concealing her status from others, relationship commitment, assisting with the collection of treatment re-fills, and supporting treatment adherence, managing travel logistics and costs, and taking on childcare and household chores. Through the provision of this support, some men assist HIV positive female partners to manage HIV, and more broadly live happier and safer lives.

Conclusion: A more complex picture of men’s responses to HIV-positive women than is currently being portrayed in PNG is urgently needed and one which demonstrates opportunities for engaging men in new ways around their roles and responsibilities in HIV prevention and treatment.

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