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#### Perceptions of anal sex in rural South Africa

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## SHORT REPORT

# Perceptions of anal sex in rural South Africa

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### Abstract

As part of the Microbicides Development Programme, we conducted formative research to explore perceptions of anal sex at a site in rural KwaZulu-Natal. We were interested in the practice of anal sex because of its potential role in HIV transmission. Eleven focus group discussions were conducted with men and women from rural areas and in a semi-urban township. Participants were asked about their knowledge of and attitudes towards anal sex, and its practice in the local population. Findings indicate that in discussion anal sex was confused with other non-traditional sexual practices like vaginal sex 'dog-style' and with oral sex. Discussion of anal sex among those who had heard about it linked it to socially marginal groups and asymmetrical power relations.

### Résumé

Dans le cadre du Programme de Développement des Microbicides, nous avons mené une recherche formative pour explorer les perceptions sur le sexe anal, dans un site du Kwazulu-Natal rural. Nous nous intéressions à cette pratique sexuelle en raison de son rôle potentiel dans la transmission du VIH. Onze discussions de groupes focus ont été menées avec des hommes et des femmes vivant dans des zones rurales et dans un township semi urbain. Les participants ont été interrogés sur leurs connaissances sur le sexe anal et sur leurs attitudes vis-à-vis de cette pratique, et sur sa pratique dans leurs communautés. Les résultats indiquent qu'au cours des discussions le sexe anal a été confondu avec d'autres pratiques sexuelles non traditionnelles telles que le coït vaginal « à la manière des chiens » et le sexe oral. Les discussions sur le sexe anal, parmi ceux des participants qui en avaient entendu parler, ont établi un lien entre cette pratique et des groupes marginaux, ainsi que des relations de pouvoir asymétriques.

### Resumen

Como parte del Programa para el Desarrollo de Microbidas, llevamos a cabo un estudio formativo para analizar cómo se entiende el sexo anal en una zona rural de Kwa Zulu Natal. Nos interesaba especialmente conocer la práctica del sexo anal debido a su importante rol en la transmisión del virus del sida. Se organizaron once charlas de grupos de discusión con hombres y mujeres de áreas rurales y de un municipio semiurbano. Se pidió a los participantes que explicasen qué conocían del sexo anal y qué opinaban de esta práctica en la población local. Los resultados indican que en las charlas se

confundía el sexo anal con otras prácticas sexuales no tradicionales como el sexo vaginal al estilo perrito y con el sexo oral. En la discusión sobre el sexo anal, los que habían oído hablar de esta práctica la vinculaban socialmente a grupos marginales y relaciones de poder asimétrico.

**Keywords:** *Anal sex, perceptions, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa*

## Introduction

This paper discusses findings from recent research on sexual behaviour in KwaZulu-Natal. The aim was to explore understandings of anal sex among a rural Zulu population and the implications for the introduction of a vaginal microbicide as a means of preventing HIV infection among women. The topic of anal sex was of special interest because as yet little is understood of sexual behaviour in the local community. Moreover microbicides developed for vaginal use may not be useful among groups who practice penile-anal sex.

To date, few studies have been conducted in Africa to examine the prevalence of anal sex in the general population. Studies conducted to date in South Africa (Karim and Ramjee 1998, Ramjee and Gouws 2002), Kenya (Katsivo and Muthami 1991, Ferguson and Morris 2003) and Zimbabwe (Wilson *et al.* 1989) have focused on especially vulnerable populations such as sex workers and truck-drivers. Except for the South African study of truck drivers, hardly any anal sex was reported among study participants.

A study among food handlers in Western Kenya found that the prevalence of anal sex was extremely rare in that population: only one (0.4%) out of 250 women interviewed had ever practised anal sex (Katsivo and Muthami 1991). However, a later survey conducted among sex workers in the central province of Kenya in which the wording of the question on anal sex was changed, revealed that 20% of the study participants had practised anal sex (Katsivo and Muthami 1991). A study in South Africa on the prevalence of HIV among truck drivers visiting sex workers in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa in which a total of 391 men were interviewed, indicated that 42% of the men had practised anal sex (Ramjee and Gouws 2002).

In other studies, HIV prevalence has been observed to be higher among women who reported having had anal sex than those who did not — 61% against 43% (Karim and Ramjee 1998). While a study in KwaZulu-Natal (Karim and Ramjee 1998) provides an indication of the existence of the practice, it does not reveal the frequency with which the practice occurred in a given period of time. Our research in rural KwaZulu-Natal aimed to provide insight into women's and men's views about anal sex. The study also allowed for comparison to be made by gender and location of residence (rural versus semi-urban).

The Microbicides Feasibility Study was conducted within a demographic and health surveillance area in northern KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. It is approximately 435 km<sup>2</sup> in size. The population is typical of rural populations in KwaZulu-Natal and, to a lesser extent, of rural African populations elsewhere in South Africa. As of January 2001, the total number of households in the surveillance area numbered 11,314 and these had 88,358 members, 28% of them residing outside of the area (Chimhwete *et al.* 2003).

## Method

Focus group discussions were conducted among men and women in both rural and urban areas (a semi-urban township), separated per sub-category, to explore whether there were differences in perceptions and knowledge of anal sex between these populations. Women

were recruited in the immunization and family planning clinics. We asked for permission to approach women at the clinic from the health authorities, and invited women for the focus group discussions whilst they were in the waiting room.

Men were recruited using snowball technique from the community. Urban male participants were approached at shopping centres on a Saturday because that is where most of them congregate as they catch up on events in their community. We recruited men in the morning and invited them to participate in group discussion on HIV prevention at a specific venue and time, usually within 2 hours.

At the beginning of each focus group, participants were requested to complete an anonymous attribute information sheet which asked about their age, type of sexual partnership, partner residence and employment status. Subsequent discussions took between 1hr 30mins to 2 hours each and were conducted in Zulu by four local Zulu-speaking research assistants (two at a time).

The objective of the focus groups was to gather data on HIV awareness and sexual behaviour including anal sex. Questions asked regarding anal sex were: is the practice of anal sex common in this community? Under what circumstances is it practised? Who does it? Are condoms used? As this was formative enquiry, a draft coital diary designed to be used in the later microbicide feasibility study was also presented to focus group participants and they were to discuss whether the pictures used depicted vaginal sex, anal sex, and condom use. Participants were also asked to provide local terms for different types of sex (vaginal and anal). The question guide was designed in English and translated into Zulu, and then back-translated by an independent certified translation expert.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each section of the text was translated into English below each sub-section of the Zulu transcript for easy quality control. To ensure reliability and validity, the transcribed Zulu texts were given to an independent researcher to translate for verification. All text files were imported into QSR Nud\*ist 6. Transcripts were read by the first two analysts and coded independently. Coding and interpretation of the data was then compared for consistency. There was general agreement on the major themes.

## Findings

### *Among those who reported not having heard about anal sex*

The findings presented in this paper derive from 11 focus groups each comprising seven to 16 participants. Overall, we found it was difficult to encourage respondents to talk about anal sex. In ordinary discourse in isiZulu, people do not speak about 'sex', but rather of *ukwenza ucansi*, *ukuya ocansini* (reference to a traditional straw sleeping mat) or *ukulala ndawonye* (sleeping together). Participants often spoke about 'sex in the front' (*ucansi lwangaphambili*) with reference to vaginal intercourse.

Due to the cultural context, the discussion facilitators did not initially refer to anal sex. Anal sex was initially introduced as 'sex in the back' (*ucansi lwangemuva*). This term was not clearly understood. Although the facilitators were local people, we checked if this was due to confused questioning by them. An analysis of different focus groups conducted by different facilitators showed that there was a general lack of understanding around notions of anal sex among participants. Facilitators eventually used terms considered polite, but which explained the idea of anal sex: 'sex in the place of faeces' (*ucansi embotsheni yendle*).<sup>1</sup> This approach was deemed more culturally appropriate since Zulu lacks the variations of

register possible in English (e.g., urine compared with piss) that permits formal or medical discussion of matters sometimes considered vulgar.

When participants finally understood the question, the reaction was often one of shock:

*Hhawu! Hhawu!* [all laughing] We don't know this sex. (Rural women)

In some cases, the participants shook their heads, frowned, and shifted their chairs. Participants in one focus group with rural women said that the discussion had become heavy (*kuyasinda*), which suggested it was difficult. In the group of urban men, one participant threatened to leave, while another shook his head in disbelief and asked 'Where?!'.

Participants in these groups indicated that they neither knew nor had heard of anal sex. To ascertain the reaction and responses of the participants, the facilitator often had to repeat the question. The spontaneity of one-word answers, from a group of ten participants that had not met before nor knew what they had been invited to discuss, suggests that the concept was either not known or very difficult to talk about in this society.

The concept of anal sex was confused with vaginal sex in four out of 11 groups, with oral sex in four out of 11, and with vaginal fingering in one out of 11 focus group discussions. The initial reactions to the introduction of the concept of anal sex were varied across groups. Although rural men had heard of people who performed 'sex in the mouth' (*ucansi emlonyeni*), sex in the 'faeces area' (*imbobo yendle*) was new to them. Semi-urban men asked for clarification about whether by 'sex in the back' (*ucansi lwangemuwa*) the facilitator meant 'dog-style' or 'blow job' (both terms participants' words).

P10: Let me say I am breastfeeding, the child is crying on this side my partner is hurrying [laughter]. (Urban women)

Others: *Hhawu* never! But the right one and important one is on the front ... No! Never! Not where the faeces come [from]! ... He can turn to the back [but] not in the hole of faeces! No, no, I didn't hear very well. (Urban women)

P11: Oh it happens that a woman can know more than what I know for sex. Perhaps it's my first time seeing her and she teaches me many different styles that I did not know. Perhaps I knew that when I'm with a girl she should sleep facing up then I will get on top of her, and she will change me to doing 'dog style', you see ... It means, that it is that thing that a woman kneels like this [demonstrating] like dogs you see, and I enter at the back and push you see, that thing. (Rural men)

P9: No! You go straight to the *enkomeni* [vagina], leaving the rectum. (Rural men)<sup>2</sup>

Participants in the rural men's group all spoke up and corrected themselves indicating that they had misunderstood and that what they were referring to was sex in the 'right place', but coming from the back. They emphasized that even when they had sex from the back, it was always in the 'normal' place (vagina):

P7: ... Even the children have children [give birth] ... They also go that route of the older people [vaginal sex]. (Rural men)

In the rural women's discussion group, all ten participants simultaneously claimed that anal sex did not exist. There was also an unwillingness to comment due to lack of knowledge of its existence. Three men's groups did not fit into this pattern however. In each of them at least one person in these groups had heard about anal sex.

Participants in eight out of the 11 focus group discussions indicated that anal sex was not practised in the community at all. Responses in the discussions ranged from the view that anal sex was not common to the view that they had never heard of the concept or of the practice.

P1: I have never seen it. (Rural women)

P2: *Hhayi* [refusing] I am saying that is not done. It is not done! (Rural men)

Once the concept of anal sex was understood by groups, they stated that they found it unacceptable. Rural men in particular described its unacceptability using strong language and metaphors as illustrated below:

P8: ...this community has not reached to that standard; it is still doing the real one. Even when the son has said you come that side [meaning at the back] you still *shaya enkomeni* [push into the cow-have vaginal sex]. That means the community is not spoiled ... That is how this community is getting destroyed to this extent. Like sheep, truly, if one has crossed the road the other sheep go the same way, all will cross even if there's a car coming. If one falls into a hole, others will also fall because they know that they have to cross here. That is why our community is getting destroyed like this because it goes there, it goes there. (Rural men)

The analogy of sheep crossing of the road here refers to adaptation to social change and suggests that when change begins the whole community later adopts it. If the change is destructive, then everyone will develop problems because they just follow what other members do without questioning. The destruction likely refers to the havoc wrought by the HIV epidemic.

In four out of the 11 discussion groups, three with men, noted that '[the anus] is not made for that'. A participant in a focus group of urban men categorically stated that, 'this part [of the body] was made to remove maize meal [staple food] not to do other things' (P5 laughing continuously).

#### *Among those who were uncertain*

Five out of the 11 groups claimed not to know for sure whether anal sex existed in the community. Three out of the five groups were rural. Importantly, in Zulu saying *angazi* (I do not know) may suggest either that they did not understand the concept or that they could not say for certain that anal sex did not exist because it was difficult to know what people did in private. Participants also discussed the view that if the practice existed elsewhere, one could not be certain that anal sex did not exist in their own community.

#### *Among those who had heard of anal sex*

Once participants had understood what was being referred to by anal sex, they gave examples of people they thought might practise it. Generally, the discussion suggested that the practice was associated with 'other' groups such as prisoners (four out of 11 groups), White people (four out of 11), Indians (one out of 11) and people who live elsewhere (four out of 11 groups). A few participants in two out of the 11 groups did mention the existence of anal sex in the community.

According to one urban men's focus group, anal sex was practiced when the female partner could not have vaginal intercourse during menstruation, but this was not a common

practice. '...When you propose sex she just tells you that she has period pains. By that time it is in your nerves to have sex with her, so you are forced to enter in the back' (P7: urban men). Although this example reveals some knowledge of the practice of anal sex, it was only reported in men's focus group discussions.

In four out of 11 discussions, anal sex was mentioned among prisoners. Three of these focus groups were composed of men from the semi-urban areas and the other rural women.

P10: ...You find that *I-outie* [a guy] is *bambana* [has a relationship] with another man, obviously for this person, the hole is at the back ... When you discover his background, you will find that he has been in jail, and others take the styles from overseas and they end up gay ... I once heard ... from another brother saying he does his girlfriend here ... He is someone who grew up in jail ... He does not do the story in the front [vaginal sex].... (urban men)

There was consensus among some of the men's and the women's discussion groups that anal sex only took place among men who had sex with other men, and was not performed with women. Rural men went further in saying that having anal sex with one's wife was similar to treating her like a prostitute. Male participants indicated that men who had served time in prison sometimes practiced anal sex with their girlfriends because they had become used to it.

Anal sex was mentioned with reference to white people in two out of the eleven groups with urban-based women. Women in the semi-urban area argued that Whites might use anal sex as a means of preventing pregnancy. They also gave an example of a woman on whom anal sex was forced by her Indian partner. This was a case of coercion as the individual referred to did not like it but tolerated it.

In five out of the 11 discussion groups, the media (books, cassettes, movies and television) was mentioned as one of the avenues through which participants had heard about anal sex.

P8: We also watch cassettes ...

P3: Blue movie cassettes. (Rural men)

P3: If you watched *Yizo Yizo* [a local drama series on TV] it is something that is really happening but we are scared to talk about it. (Urban men)<sup>3</sup>

The focus groups which mentioned knowledge of anal sex through the media were located in both urban and rural areas; the groups were mainly male except for one conducted with urban women. The power of the media as an avenue for learning about anal sex points to the subtle but profound manner in which it may influence sexual behaviour even in rural communities often out of the reach of other forms of communication. For example, the television drama series mentioned in one focus group, *Yizo Yizo*, is popular among teenagers (up to 3 million viewers) but it has been heavily criticized by conservatives in South Africa for featuring sex scenes, including rape and anal sex between men in prison.

## Discussion

As indicated earlier, existing literature on anal sex seems to focus on relatively discrete populations such as truck drivers in South Africa and informal sector women in urban Kenya. The focus in this paper is the general population in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South

Africa. The purpose of this paper was to examine people's perceptions of anal sex events and practices; it is important to stress that we cannot infer actual behaviour from a study such as this.

Findings suggest anal sex is perceived as being rare in the general population, and that it is felt to be unacceptable. There was often confusion between the terms used for anal sex and descriptions of other sexual practices such as vaginal sex, dog-style and oral sex. Participants reported that they did not know anal sex. This lack of knowledge can be interpreted in at least three ways: the first, not having heard of the concept; the second, not being willing to comment on something they did not understand; and the third, of not commenting because of lack of certainty about whether the practice existed or not.

In some of the men's focus groups, participants insisted that they there was no need for a husband to practice anal sex with his wife when he could *shaya enkomeni* ('penetrate the cow' or have vaginal sex). Reference to cattle here is important because they play a central role in Zulu culture. A prospective husband must still give a bride price in form of cattle (or cash equivalent) to the father or head of household of his future wife. Cattle are used for ploughing, supplying milk and meat, and are a token of wealth. They are also slaughtered in sacrificial offerings to a family's ancestral spirits.

Groups identified as practicing anal sex were considered 'outsiders' to the community and included, prisoners, men who have sex with men, Whites and Indians. Anal sex was regarded as something that occurs 'out there' not in the community, practiced by 'others' not by 'us'. Anal sex appears to be practiced on less powerful groups by the powerful, for example by men on women, by the Indian man on the African woman, by stronger prisoners on juvenile and vulnerable inmates. As such, it is seen as a form of sexual coercion, in some ways equivalent to rape.

In the context of the HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is becoming less taboo to talk about sex in a research context (Green *et al.* 2001, Watkins 2004). Watkins (2004) has shown how in the context of AIDS, people in a rural area in Malawi now talk more openly about sex, and its dangers. They do so to friends as well as strangers, by the roadside, by the shops and any place where conversations about AIDS might begin. There is evidence of a similar culture emerging in this study population. In discussions in this study, participants felt relatively free to talk about sexual relations, even volunteering personal experiences in a group discussion, evidence that they did not consider the issues discussed as taboo. Furthermore, transcripts reveal participants discussing sexual topics among themselves with the facilitator only interrupting to probe for clarity of meaning.

The terms referring to anal sex and vaginal sex that were elicited in the course of the group discussions were later used in the data collection instruments (a questionnaire and draft coital diary) used in collecting sexual behaviour of the participants enrolled in the Microbicides Feasibility Study. As a result of the focus groups, we were able to employ terms which were clear and acceptable to participants.

Since participants in the vaginal microbicide trial are women (although focus group discussions also included men), it is a concern that they may not accurately report anal sex in the clinical trial, especially when coerced into it. Separate studies in the USA have found low levels of agreement among couples about what happened during sex, especially where it was not penile-vaginal sexual intercourse. Brody and Potterat (2003) contend that both homosexual and heterosexual anal intercourse may be more prevalent in Africa than has traditionally been believed, but that accurate reporting is affected by the view that anal sex is an inappropriate and unacceptable practice.

Given the above issues, it is important for microbicide trials to develop innovative ways of collecting reliable information on 'socially unacceptable' practices such as anal sex. Such data will help to accurately measure the effectiveness of vaginal microbicides for STI/HIV prevention among women in sub-Saharan Africa.

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### Notes

1. May not make sense in English but this represents the attempts to conceptualize an idea not known in this community. The bracketed terms in italics are used for referring to the anus in Zulu language.
2. *Enkomeni* translates as 'in the cow'. In Zulu the euphemism for vagina is a cow, derived from the cattle which are the bride price (*malobolo*).
3. A television series (1, 2, 3) shown by the South African Broadcasting Corporation since 2001 featuring experiences of Black teenagers at school and in the community more generally. The main character, Zakes is a gangster turned good guy. *Yizo yizo* means 'the way it is' in Zulu.

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