THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HIV/AIDS IN THE CARIBBEAN

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Introduction

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Caribbean region is second in magnitude in the world, only to that in Sub-Saharan Africa. The primary mode of spread in the region is sexual transmission, and the epidemic has evolved from being a predominantly homosexual one to one having a mosaic of homo/bi-sexual and heterosexual features (CAREC 2004). The Caribbean has the highest incidence of reported AIDS cases in the Americas, with between 350,000 and 590,000 Caribbean people living with HIV/AIDS, indicating a prevalence rate of between 1.9% and 3.1%. This was second only to Africa (7.5% and 8.5%) in 2003. (ibid.)

Haiti and the Dominican Republic are the homelands of more than 79% of the people living with HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean region. There is a national prevalence of at least 1% in 12 countries of the Caribbean basin, and a prevalence of 2% among pregnant women in the Bahamas, Belize, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, Haiti, St. Lucia, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago. (ibid.)

My position here is that these high rates of infection in the region are not due primarily to the ‘immorality’ in behaviour choices of people as is commonly understood within the strongly conservative religious culture of the region but are, instead, a consequence of the nature of the political economy in which we are all involved. It is significant to observe that whereas the Caribbean region is one of the most religious in the world (there are over 104 faith based institutions in Trinidad alone) we are second only to Sub-Saharan Africa in having the highest incidence of HIV in the world. We note that high levels of religious awareness and practice co-exist with a high prevalence of HIV, and therefore assert that the critical relationship lies outside of these two variables.

The political economy of HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean is, I argue, located in the ways in which we have positioned ourselves, or have been inserted, into the world economy over time. It refers to our material existence, the impact of political and economic decision making on our present and future prospects, and the methods by which economic survival is achieved by varying groups of people. My position here is that the spread and the ravages of HIV/AIDS are outcomes of these decisions and processes. The spread of HIV/AIDS is caused by the fundamental decisions large groups of people have to make and the consequential actions which are necessary for survival.

Introduction to the Political Economy of Caribbean Countries

Frantz Fanon (1967), writing on the role of the national bourgeoisie and the relationship between sex and capitalism in ‘developing’
countries had this to say with reference to Latin America:

The national bourgeoisie will be greatly helped on its way towards decadence by the Western bourgeoisie who comes to it as tourists, avid for the exotic, for big game hunting and for casinos. The national bourgeoisie organizes places of rest and relaxation and pleasure resorts to meet the wishes of the Western bourgeoisie. Such activity is given the name of tourism, and for the occasion will be built up as a national industry. (Emphasis added)

He continues:

The casinos of Havana and Mexico, the beaches of Rio, the little Brazilian and Mexican girls, the half-breed thirteen year olds, the ports of Acapulco and Copacabana—all these are the stigma of the deprivation of the national middle class. Because it is bereft of ideas, because it lives to itself and cuts itself off from the people, undermined by its hereditary incapacity to think in terms of the problems of the nation, the national middle class will have nothing better to do than to take on the role of Manager for Western enterprise, and it will, in practice, set up its country as the brothel of Europe. (ibid.)

Fanon was referring to the subordinate ways in which the economies of the recently emerging politically independent, post-colonial countries of the so-called ‘Third World’ were being re-integrated into the world economy (in the 1960s) with the full compliance of the national political and economic leaders of the new ‘independent’ states. Indeed, in the Caribbean region, to a large extent, sex-tourism has emerged as one of the major means of obtaining foreign exchange, and one of the main supports of the national economies.

While HIV/AIDS was first identified in 1981-1982 in San Francisco, California among the middle class, professional, white male, homosexual population, it has spread over the last 20 odd years to poor countries with different cultural and sexual practices, with now very high prevalence rates among the populations. While the white male, middle class, homosexual population in the USA has largely controlled the spread of HIV among itself and/or now LIVE with the HIV virus, because of its availability to research and medical support, poor people of the ‘developing’ world are literally dying from AIDS. Let us look at the larger picture.

In his work on the Global Shift, Peter Dicken (1992) looks, in part, at making a living in the global economy, and asks “where will the jobs come from?” He finds that “we face a desperate employment crisis at the global scale; at the end of 1983 there were approximately 35 million unemployed in the OECD countries, a figure unheard of since the 1930s.” (ibid.)

This situation occurred in the advanced industrial capitalist countries, where he found that the persons least exposed to unemployment were men between 25-54 years of age with a good education or good training. This leaves a large number of people who are vulnerable to unemployment: women, males with lower education levels, youth, older workers and minorities (emphases added). Many of the same forces operating in these industrial countries are more profoundly evident in ‘developing’ countries today (Laurie et. al., 1995).
Part of the cause of the universal unemployment is 'global restructuring'; an aspect of which is the growth of new technologies. It is generally agreed that the effect of the process of innovations through technological improvement is to increase labour productivity, which permits the same or an increased volume of output from the same or even smaller numbers of workers. In this context, it is the manual workers, rather than the professional, technical and supervisory workers, whose numbers have been reduced most of all. Globalization has therefore produced growing unemployment among the manual and unskilled workers in the headquarters of capitalism. The situation is certainly much more intense in poor countries.

Structural Adjustment and Globalization Strategy

From a neo-liberal perspective, structural adjustment assumes that an economy will be more efficient, healthy and productive in the long run if market forces operate, and products and services are not subsidized, or heavily protected by governments. Modern attempts to improve aggregate indicators such as GNP in ‘developing’ countries are understood as Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs). This represents a complex of policies introduced after the decline in the economies of industrial countries, particularly the USA, following the effects of the strategies of OPEC on the distribution of world resources (Girvan 1984; Todaro 1989; Freiden 1991).

These policies, created in the early 1980s, were articulated through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and came into effect for ‘developing’ countries when they attempted to obtain international loans. These countries were literally forced to abide by the criteria of Structural Adjustment Policies, which resulted in concessions to foreign investors, economic and trade liberalization, production for export, currency devaluation, curbs on consumption through increases in the prices of goods and services, reductions in government employment and government spending, personal income depreciation and increases in consumption tax (Cornia et al 1987; UNDP 1990, 1991).

In summary, these SAPs contributed to drastic increases in unemployment, lowering of standards of living and higher costs of consumption for ordinary people. They represent an intensification or exacerbation of pre-existing conditions under colonialism and neo-colonialism, and they strengthened and sustained the reinforcement of the determinants of HIV spread through sex tourism and commercial sex work.

Some analyses indicate that structural adjustment is a deliberate scheme for the perpetuation of export dependency, unfavourable interest rates, fluctuating terms of trade, and the reproduction of the existing conditions of global inequalities (Roddick 1988). Many Caribbean authors (Freiden 1991; Cornia et al 1987; La Guerre 1994; Pantin 1989) point to the relationship between the Structural Adjustment Programmes enforced by the World Bank and the IMF which have exacerbated poverty and unemployment among working people in poor countries, and which have stimulated a search for new survival strategies at both the community and national levels. Other analysts have noted that structural adjustment has deepened and widened poverty (Phillips 1993) and has contributed to the increased feminization of poverty (Reddock 1984).

Poor women in the Caribbean have developed a number of strategies to cope with
the economic situation, some of which are increased entry into the labour force, expansion of the range of informal sector activity, diversification of survival strategies of households, and international migration. Men have engaged in new forms of hustling including that within the drug trade, and informal sector work, including the development of 'romance tourism' (Kempadoo and Mellom 1999).

At the national level of governments and economic actors, off-shore banking, money laundering, drug trafficking, sex tourism, informal commercial trading, information processing and export manufacturing are some of the activities in which national governments are engaged to attract foreign exchange, sustain their economies and service their debt. Sex tourism is but one aspect of a package of strategies, which has enlarged and deepened to cope with the existing harsh economic realities in peripheral capitalist countries.

Sex Tourism in the Caribbean

While Fanon had not specifically mentioned Caribbean countries among his list of countries which engage in sex tourism as an industry, a study by Kempadoo and Mellom (1999), on the Sex Trade in the Caribbean, clearly outlines the extent to which we are engaged in this form of income earning activity.

In defining sex work, Kempadoo claims that

...in the majority of cases, men and women define sex work as more lucrative than other jobs, and in such cases less demanding and less hazardous to their well-being. Sex work or prostitution is represented in sex worker discourse as an alternate to

... the women were hired for a period of three months and were contracted to cook, perform household tasks and provide sexual services to the local gold miners, who worked for the same foreman or ‘boss’. ... By the end of the three months, each woman was paid a fixed salary of 100 grams of gold. For the sexual services of a woman, the boss automatically deducted 10 percent of the gold miner’s total earnings at the end of his contract... the boss ensured himself a profitable investment. When ever the gold business hits a slow week the men would continue to have sex on credit, because they only had to pay for the sexual services at the end of their contract. (ibid.)
Sex as an Integral Aspect of Economic Exchange

Sex as a form of economic activity is not confined to prostitution. Sex is also involved in a range of negotiations as exchange for various economic and other valuable assets. Transactional sex, as it is called, is common among young people, even those in the school system (Allen 2000; Phillips 2003). Sex for money is also reported as a source of extra and needed income for persons in occupations related to the hotel and entertainment industries, the construction industry (National AIDS Committees), the mining industry (Red Thread of Guyana) (CAREC 2000), or other ‘opportunity sex’, and some of these sources of income involve migration.

‘Transactional Sex’ in the School Systems of the Caribbean

Research in Caribbean schools (Allen 2000) indicate, and recent studies in Montserrat (Phillips 2006) confirm, that there is a very serious and intense activity involving school girls and working men for the exchange of sex for a range of ‘items’ including money, phone cards, school books, food, car rides or jewelry. Girls actually ask schoolboys who approach them for sex, what they have to offer, and if the boys’ offerings are unacceptable, they are refused in preference to older, adult males.

The socio-economic backgrounds of these girls and boys are, in very many cases, in the low skilled, manual occupation households, and the vast majority is located in poor female-headed households. In some of these homes, there is indication that mothers are barely able to provide basic subsistence for their families and expect the children to bring in income from any source to help in family support. The dynamic of this scenario among very young people in school has given rise to serious gender feuds between girls and boys, and to boys turning to even younger girls (in the Forms 1s and 2s of High School and even in the primary schools), offering them small sums of money (25 cents for example) and sweets (candy) in return for sexual touching and sexual stimulation. There is some evidence of the use of force in these sexual relations among very young people, in addition to the use of force for sex perpetrated by adults on young persons, particularly girls.

Although these young people in Secondary Schools showed a relatively good knowledge of HIV spread, transmission and prevention, there was very low condom use, reportedly because of cost, embarrassment (in places where condoms can be obtained free of charge), and distaste for condoms because they dulled the pleasure of sex. There was also some indication among the girls that their offerings for condom-less sex (from working men) was of higher monetary value than that for sex with condoms (Phillips 2000).

The role of sex tourism, migration, prostitution and transactional sex in the lives of people and the economies of the Caribbean indicates that whether it is the sex trade in the Netherlands Antilles, characterized as permissive but seen on the one hand as a necessary evil and on the other as a way of making a living, or the largely foreign trade in St. Maarten, the women saw this as their best chance of taking care of their families (Kempadoo and Mellom 1999). The men, on the other hand, who engaged in sex work on the beaches of Barbados or Tobago, viewed it as a means of getting ahead in life, and possibly an opportunity to be taken out of the island into a better standard of living abroad by female tourists.
In Antigua, the ‘houses of entertainment’ are serviced by government, whose health officers ensure that the women and men, largely foreigners, are routinely medically tested, treated and provided with condoms.

Whether in the elite forms of sex work in Belize, or in the ‘survival sex’ of the streets, women tended to share common characteristics. These include becoming involved in sex work in their teens, having little knowledge of their legal rights, a tendency towards economic marginalization, exposure to physical violence, the risk of increased exposure to the HIV virus through sex partners insisting on unsafe sex practices, and heightened social marginalization due to their mode of living (Kempadoo and Mellom 1999).

**Sex, HIV and Poverty**

It is evident that sex as a form of economic exchange is increasingly being viewed as a means of economic survival by persons who perceive no other hope in the existing state of affairs. Providing sex for money is not a new phenomenon, but the commodification of sex is both encouraged (by the media) and seen as a real option by increasing numbers of people and institutions.

In this context, sex as a commodity is part of a wider mosaic of commodities created, marketed and used by people, companies and governments, as a means of earning income. Sex work is engaged in as a career or as part-time work by school girls and boys, employed women, as well as married women and men (CAREC 2000). These factors in the Caribbean, coupled with the traditional practice of serial sex partners (of poor dependent women) and the obvious converse - multiple sexual partners of men, promote the spread of HIV. In addition, low condom usage and the reluctance to promote condom use, cultural and religious taboos contrasting with social norms that promote sex (such as the carnivals), and the overt discrimination against persons living with HIV/AIDS, are some of the cultural and social influences that drive the epidemic.

These, as well as the lack of access to relevant health care for large sections of our populations, the absence of standards of care, treatment and support for persons with the HIV, encourage the spread of the disease. The judgmental attitudes, denial and fear exhibited by persons in authority – religious leaders, health care workers, employers, etc. – all contribute to the rapid increase in the spread of HIV that is evident among Caribbean peoples. But the bottom line is that, for an increasingly large number of people, in the context of the effects of globalization and structural adjustment, sex is the only commodity they have to exchange for economic survival in a fully globalized world. Sex is their only hope but, in most of the peripheral capitalist world, for many, this hope literally converts to death!
References


