

ABSTRACT
PARALLEL WORKING SESSION

GENDER

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Gender power and HIV/AIDS: Reflecting on the role of Higher Education in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in and through heterosexual relationships and reproductive health

The millennium development goals address gender equality and women's empowerment in a number of different areas, most of which speak to the way in which gender power relations and normative gender roles facilitate women's disempowerment impacting on their health and well-being and economic, social and personal development. The South African MDGs specifically address the girl child's health and progress in education as well as maternal health and halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases. Arguably women's traditional roles in relation to men, from girlhood to womanhood, together with continued patriarchal power in South African society impacts on all of these areas undermining our success in addressing the goals. In the past ten to fifteen years in South Africa there has been a large amount of work looking at the way in which such roles and power relations impact on girls' and women's ability to assert their sexual rights and safe sexual practices in order to avoid coercive sexual practices, unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, shown to impact in multiple ways on their educational and occupational futures. This paper argues that Higher Educational Institutions not only have a responsibility to produce critical knowledge that informs policy and practice in this area but also needs to 'put our own house in order', so to speak. It has become evident in recent years that higher education institutions reflect broader power relations and injustice in many ways. The recent report by the Ministerial Committee on Progress Towards Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions has highlighted continued practices of racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination and marginalisation on South African campuses. As role models for civil society as well as spaces that develop the leaders for the future, it is not only our scholarship but also the cultural context of our institutions that we need to engage with in order to contribute towards the MDGs with respect to gender equality and women's empowerment. The paper reviews some key aspects of what we know about practices of gender power inequality in the realm of reproductive and sexual health and well-being, with particular reference to recent data from higher educational institutions, and makes some recommendations for South African Higher Education with respect to a critical engagement with gender, sexuality and HIV/AIDS on our campuses and through our scholarship.