

Abstract

Economic empowerment, HIV risk and AIDS-related stigma appear intricately intertwined for women in Kenya. Their interaction must be understood in order to implement effective economic interventions that also decrease HIV risk and stigma. We conducted a qualitative study amongst women in a rural Kamba-speaking community of southeastern Kenya to pursue whether engagement in an economic empowerment initiative (a basket weaving cooperative) influences women's perspectives and experiences with HIV risk and AIDS-related stigma. We conducted seven women's focus groups: participants in the local basket-weaving cooperative comprised four focus groups and non-participants comprised the remaining three groups. The HIV status of the women was not known. Three dominant themes emerged from the focus groups: empowerment, pervasive vulnerability and unanticipated social paradoxes. Contradictions found in these themes suggest that economic empowerment can become a double-edged sword. Economic empowerment enhanced perceived individual, domestic and social community status. However, this enhancement was not protective of domestic violence and perceived HIV risk. Social perceptions may have paradoxically contributed barriers to HIV testing and treatment putting women at greater HIV risk. In conclusion, economic empowerment initiatives for women in developing countries in the context of the HIV epidemic should be coupled with peer mediated support and HIV-risk education.