

**BEING WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV IN RURAL CHINA:
DISCOURSE, SEXUALITY, AND EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL
AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH**



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ABSTRACT

The latest estimation indicated that at the end of 2007 there were nearly 700,000 people currently living with HIV in China, 40.6% of which were infected through heterosexual contact, and 30.8% of which were women. Relatively high HIV prevalence has gradually spread from the "most-at-risk" groups (injecting drug users and commercial sex workers and their clients) to the general population. In 2007, women accounted for 28.7% of the total reported cases compared with 25% in 2002. The majority of people living with HIV are located in the poor rural areas in China. Sexuality is a fundamental aspect of every individual's quality of life regardless of his/her HIV status. Women living with HIV have the right to a healthy sexual and reproductive life. Very little is known about how medical and social discourses on HIV and women living with HIV in rural China influence HIV-positive women's sexuality and affect their sexual and reproductive health. The main objective of this study is to explore the dominant social and medical discourses on HIV and women living with HIV and the effect of these discourses on HIV-positive women's sexuality and their sexual and reproductive health experiences in rural China.

This is a qualitative study that uses a postmodern feminist perspective to describe and analyze the data. Narrative interview was used as the main research method to collect data from 14 rural women who were at a reproductive age and were living with HIV in rural southern China. Content analysis and discourse analysis was used to analyze the data.

The study found the following examples of social-medical-legal discourse on HIV and women living with HIV: "to inform and protect their sexual partners," "promiscuity," "*hairen* [do harm to others]," "mother-to-child transmission of HIV," and "avoiding re-infection." These statements constructed women's sexual subjectivities, shaped their sexual practices, and had an impact on their sexual and reproductive health. In this study, after receiving an HIV-positive diagnosis, women's sexuality changed variously. Some women chose to stop having sexual activities. Some experienced a loss of sexual desire and pleasure although they were still sexually active. Some women were influenced by the dominant discourse of "to inform and protect sexual partners" and decided to have an HIV-positive sexual partner, while some tried to resist the dominant discourses and negotiate for new sexual partnerships. Some women still continued their sexual life the same as before. Some women experienced pleasurable and enjoyable sex, while some experienced unsafe sex, unwanted sex, unpleasant or painful sex. Some experienced unwanted pregnancy and induced abortion, the risk of re-infection, less access to reproductive health care services, and lack of sexual and reproductive health information. The findings highlighted the need for providing the gender and culturally sensitive sexual and reproductive health care services for women living with HIV in rural China.

KEY WORDS: DISCOURSE/ WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV/ SEXUALITY/
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