

Are the World AIDS Conferences guilty of gender bias?

Evidence from trends in the monitoring of WAC scientific discourse from 1989 to 2012

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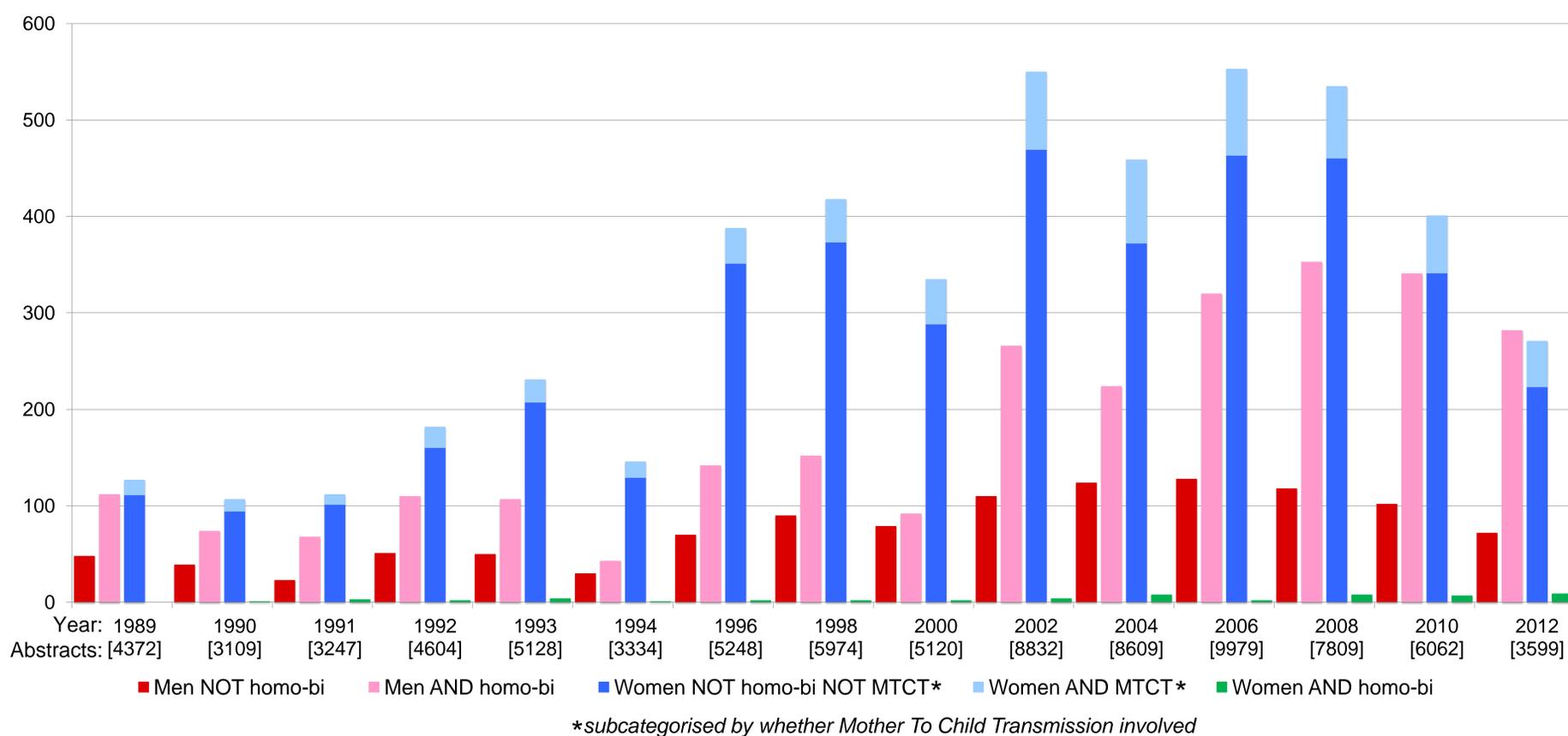
Background

The issue of gender is acknowledged as a key issue for the AIDS epidemic. World AIDS Conferences (WAC) have constituted a major discursive space for the epidemic. We sought to establish the balance regarding gender in the AIDS scientific discourse by following its development in the published proceedings of WAC. Fifteen successive WAC 1989-2012 served to establish a "barometer" of scientific interest in heterosexual and homo/bisexual men and women throughout the epidemic. It was hypothesised that, as in other domains of Sexual and Reproductive Health, heterosexual men would be "forgotten" partners [1]

Method

Abstracts from each conference were entered in electronic form into an Access database. Queries were created to generate five categories of interest and to monitor their annual frequency. All abstract titles including the term "men" or "women" were identified. Collections of synonyms were systematically and iteratively developed in order to classify further abstracts according to whether they included terms referring to "homo/bisexual" or "heterosexual". Reference to "Mother to Child Transmission" (MTCT) was also flagged to permit more detailed analysis of the women categories.

Categories generated from queries: distribution of number of abstracts by gender and sexual orientation at each conference [indicating overall number of abstracts accepted at conference that year]



Results

Abstract titles including "men", but without additional reference to "homo-bisexual" (i.e. referring to men in general and/or to heterosexual men) consistently appear between 2.6 and 5.5 times less often (average 4.2) than the equivalent category for women; the latter being overall the most frequent category. Excluding abstracts on women and MTCT has little impact on this difference: men still appear between 2.3 and 5 times less often (average 3.6). Abstracts including reference to both "men" and "homo-bisexual" emerge as the second-most frequent category; presence of the equivalent category for women is minimal.

Conclusions

The hypothesised absence of heterosexual men in the AIDS discourse was confirmed. Although the relative presence of homo-bisexual men and homo-bisexual women as a focal subject may be explained by gross differences in HIV prevalence in these populations, such an explanation may not be advanced in the case of heterosexual men and women. This imbalance also has implications for the planning and conduct of HIV prevention.

[1] Spencer B. La femme sans sexualité et l'homme irresponsable. Sexologos 2009;35:(17-19).

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