

Sexual health of adolescent girls and young women in Central Uganda: exploring perceived coercive aspects of transactional sex

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract: Adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in Uganda are at risk of early sexual debut, unwanted pregnancy, violence, and disproportionately high HIV infection rates, driven in part by transactional sex. This paper examines the extent to which AGYW's participation in transactional sex is perceived to be coerced. We conducted 19 focus group discussions and 44 in-depth interviews using semi-structured tools. Interviews were audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using a thematic analysis. While AGYW did not necessarily use the language of coercion, their narratives describe a number of coercive aspects in their relationships. First, coercion by force as a result of "de-toothing" a man (whereby they received money or resources but did not wish to provide sex as "obligated" under the implicit "terms" of the relationships). Second, they described the coercive role that receiving resources played in their decision to have sex in the face of men's verbal insistence. Finally, they discussed having sex as a result of coercive economic circumstances including poverty, and because of peer pressure to uphold modern lifestyles. Support for income-generation activities, microfinance and social protection programmes may help reduce AGYW's vulnerability to sexual coercion in transactional sex relationships. Targeting gender norms that contribute to unequal power dynamics and social expectations that obligate AGYW to provide sex in return for resources, critically assessing the meaning of consensual sex, and normative interventions building on parents' efforts to ascertain the source of their daughters' resources may also reduce AGYW's vulnerability to coercion. DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2019.1700770

Keywords: sexual health, adolescent girls and young women, transactional sex, coercion, Uganda

Introduction

Sexual health, as defined by the World Health Organization, is "a state of physical, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the

possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence".¹ The importance of adolescent sexual health is widely recognised, including in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015.²

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