Sociocultural and Economic Antecedents of Adolescent Sexual Decision-Making in Rural Uganda


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Background

- Despite the Ugandan Government's intensive campaign to increase the spread of HIV/AIDS, it remains a major contributor to morbidity and mortality. (UNAIDS, 2008)
- Young people constitute 33% of Uganda's population, but 50% of its HIV/AIDS cases. (Bakeera-Kitaka et al, 2009)
- HIV infection programs need to address sexual identity building in this population. (Bensley et al, 2004; Beaulieu et al, 2007)

This study was designed to examine and identify the socio-cultural beliefs and economic forces shaping adolescent sexual decision-making and HIV-associated risk behaviors in a rural Ugandan community.

Methods

Study Design:
- This cross-sectional study was conducted in Mbarara, Uganda.
- In-depth semi-structured interviews were performed with 48 adolescents and 15 key informants.

Sampling:
- Purposeful sampling was used to create a study sample.

Recruitment:
- Adolescents were recruited from 5 area schools.

Data Collection:
- In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants in their language of choice.

Data Analysis and Development of a Conceptual Model:
- An inductive approach to category construction and interpretation resulted in a conceptual framework depicting factors influencing youth's decisions about sexual behavior and HIV prevention. (Ware et al, 2006)

Result:

Method

(Information and Knowledge about AIDS
- Promotions on sexually transmitted diseases are available to youth.
- Educational messaging on HIV included: modes of transmission, prevention, and deconstructing myths.
- Participants appeared to have an accurate and thorough understanding of HIV/AIDS, and discussed many ways to prevent transmission.

First and foremost you should avoid having sex. Secondly, you should avoid sharing things meant for the people whether intoxicated or not. You can also go and get the test. You go in the hospital with your partner and if one of you is HIV positive, then you can find a way on how should they prevent themselves from acquiring HIV... if they are a wife and husband and they go for a test and they find that one of them is infected, they can advise them to use a condom.

(2) Influences on Sexual Behavior and Decision Making

- Resource-scarcity, manifesting as a desire for luxury items, provided an avenue for sexual coercion of adolescent girls by older boys or men with access to money.
- Peer pressure often left girls at the center of a cultural divide between forces driving sexual activity and cultural norms emphasizing chastity and avoidance of pregnancy.

My sister was my best friend and me, I used to primary school. We were [had] holiday at home and she came telling us that they have their friends who are boys, and they get it used and they, and they also feel like they love them. If she goes to see him, she feels like she have sex with them... Sometimes when you see she love him, they are like, you feel like you going there... and the other heart [feels like if you] go there, you [will] get pregnant or something.

- Prevailing conservative religious beliefs and traditions, emphasized negative consequences of pre-marital sex:
  1. Pregnancy and unwanted stigma resulting in lost opportunities for higher education, income, and career.
  2. Disappearance from parents and other respected elders
  3. Exclusion from the community at large

- Despite this, youth described high levels of sexual activity.

(3) Barriers to Condom Use

- Condoms were considered an unacceptable option for STI prevention. Barriers included:
  1. Purchasing a condom was generally associated with deep shame:
    - They think that one they go there, they will ask them why they are buying them so that they will think that she goes there and they
  2. Condom use was highly stigmatized and considered "bad manners":
    - "You are not supposed to use it. Like her husbands and wife where you find one is infected and the other one is not infected... I think these ones to avoid a person because they have to make sure that they don't eat the other one.

- Myths surrounding condom use were widely discussed and often considered to be true by many interviewees:

- Interviewees described an "audible" figure, or a traditional "Senga," who were seen as trustworthy and considered to be an important source of information on sex for youth.

- The modern equivalent of peer and adult educators were viewed in a more formal light than traditional sangas.

(4) Sanctions on Talking about Sex

- Participants reported a "culture of silence" surrounding discussions relating to sex between adolescents and parents:

  - This was often a matter of a parent like the left his child a left about sex. These days, some of the parents do, but they are very few. Traditionally, those are more thing that you will never think that your moth will tell you about sex.

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- The modern equivalent of peer and adult educators were viewed in a more formal light than traditional sangas.

Conclusions

- Sociocultural and economic influences were prominent in Ugandan adolescents' conceptualization of sexual behavior and decision making, despite a strong educational foundation in HIV transmission.

- These influences were often conflicting: Conservative cultural and religious beliefs, prescribing sex before marriage, ran counter to social influences such as peer pressure to have sex and keep relationship, and economic influences promoting sex to obtain luxury items.

- Girls were at particular risk for sexual exploitation in a setting of resource scarcity where virginity is highly valued, and can be bartered for marriage.

- Decline of traditional Senga has left a void that adolescents seem anxious to fill with opportunities for dialogue with elders about sexuality.

- Girls and boys must negotiate a complex, conflicting constellation of influences and motives when making decisions about whether to engage in sex. Interventions must take this into account.

Conceptual Framework

Sociocultural Influences
- Conservative religious beliefs
- Peer pressure
- Fear of pregnancy
- Stigmatization of condom use

Economic Influences
- Resource scarcity
- Desire for luxury items
- Sexual compensation by girls as “Sugar Daddies”

Information and Knowledge
- Effective educational messaging
- Understanding of STI transmission and prevention
- Culture of silence

References and Acknowledgements


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Thank you for your interest in this presentation. Please note that analyses included herein are preliminary. More recent, finalized analyses may be available by contacting CIPHR for further information.