

Being an adolescent girl in DRC

Conflicting bodies: adolescents about their changing bodies, sexuality, parents and gender relations in a context of violence and conflict.

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Girls in North Kivu are highly exposed to different forms of SGBV

Adolescent girls living in conflict areas are at risk of sexual violence and exploitation and have increased risk of STDs, HIV/Aids, unsafe abortions, undesired pregnancies and run higher risks of violence. (I. Mwapu, Hilhorst, D., Mashanda, M., Bahananga, M., Mugenzi, M., 2016)

SGBV is committed by family and community members (Liebling et al, 2012, Bartels 2014, IMAGES 2012)

Girls face social exclusion and stigmatization with a high impact on mental health outcomes (Verelst, 2014, Maisha 2017)

Research questions

- How do adolescent girls, living in context of conflict affected communities in North Kivu, perceive this period of “becoming” adult women?
- How do they look at their own bodies and sexuality?
- How do parents and educators, affected by consequences of war and conflict, guide their children towards adulthood?
- What are the implications of those dynamics in building local relevant interventions and what are the main challenges?

Methodology

- Data base driven: qualitative studies and ethnographic research on adolescents girls and sexuality between 2011-2014 in DRC; ISL and HEAL AFRICA
- Focused study 2015: Qualitative research with 136 participants:
 - Boys and girls between 14-19, 32 parents/6 teachers in Goma and Sake
 - HEAL AFRICA & ISL: 6 Congolese researchers

Body in conflict: Psychological and physical changes

The bodily changes are experienced as **an uncontrollable force** that they describe as “natural”; the body takes it over and you have no agency, no control.

Girls start **experimenting sexual acts with other girls** and experiment with masturbation.

“ **Sentimental needs**”: increased desire to love and be loved. They love to talk about their bodies and love hugs.

The environment is perceived as “uncontrollable”: **SGBV is in every corner of our society**”

Cultural taboos on sexuality

- Sex education, by aunts, uncles, grandmothers, pastors and teachers **is limited to intimate hygiene and warnings of dangers (rape) and “sin”**
- Girls have **no/limited knowledge about biological/sexual bodies**: menstruation cycle, pregnancies etc.
- Parents do **not talk about sex**: “not encourage them”: girls fear punishment
- Girls struggle with **“sexual desire” as uncontrollable natural force** of body and cultural norms/parents.
- **Sexual relations are forbidden** under 18 years: fear to talk about abuse, fear to be accused, fear for reprisals

Why girls have sexual relations despite taboos

- **Sex to prove her love** to the boy in the hope of a lasting relationship.
- **Popular health myths:** prevent menstrual pain, prevent complications that may arise after marriage as infertility or frigidity or childbirth.
- **Confusion** about "unknown" sentiments in body, changing body and different interest of boys/male.
- **More than 50% reported sexual exploitation:** sex in exchange for goods or money with UN peacekeepers, local soldiers, foreign men in NGO's, Sugar daddies: Congolese men with money.

Sexual violence is everywhere:

Sexual violence according to girls:

Forcing sex or touching a girl in sexual ways ***without her consent***

- Rape by uniformed men and armed groups
- Parents who force girls to have sex for money to pay school fees or family.
- Male teachers who force girls to have sex
- Male family members, community members, religious leaders who force girls to have sex.

Transactional sex, sexual exploitation NOT perceived as sexual violence

"The bad behaviors of girls who are seducing their teachers and others for material interests," (girls, boys and parents)

Sexual relations with UN peace keepers, "white men in NGO's", Sugar daddies are consensual.

Sexual taboos, poverty and sexual exploitation

Parents

- **Encourage sexual relations with boy to force a marriage** and get dowry.
- Early marriage **to prevent her of being raped** and then facing lower bride wealth.
- Encouraging girls into prostitution/sexual exploitation **to contribute to family** income or school fees.

Girls

- Girls seek ways **out of poverty**: hoping for rich partner
- **Ambition**; to pay school fees and/or help family
- **Lack of agency** over their changing bodies: body takes it over
- **Power inequality** and rigid gender norms: *girls want boys to marry and boys want sex*

Conclusions

- **Lack of agency over their changing bodies**, contribute to various forms of sexual abuse
- **Cultural taboos regarding sexuality, poverty and economic consequences of conflict** lead to high risks for girls getting involved in **sexual exploitation and sexual abuse**
- Most girls in this study are engaged in sexual exploitation or transactional sex; they do **NOT see it as sexual violence**.
- **Conflicting perceptions on victimhood-perpetrator discourse** among local population versus INGO/UN; risk to do harm. (disempowerment girls agency, local conflicts, using SGBV laws for other interests)

Recommendations

1. Comprehensive sexuality education **including parents and teachers and boys.**
2. **Interventions on girls agency (She decides)**, should be built on local dynamics and perceptions (coping, victimhood versus choice- less decisions, etc)
3. Further research on and work with men and boys, as **“consumers” of sexual exploitation and abuse of girls/women.**
4. Further research on dynamics between Women rights **frameworks and local narratives/realities of SEA** to prevent other conflicts, abuse and **Do harm.**