

Emic perspectives on the extent to which transactional sex is viewed as sexual exploitation in Central Uganda

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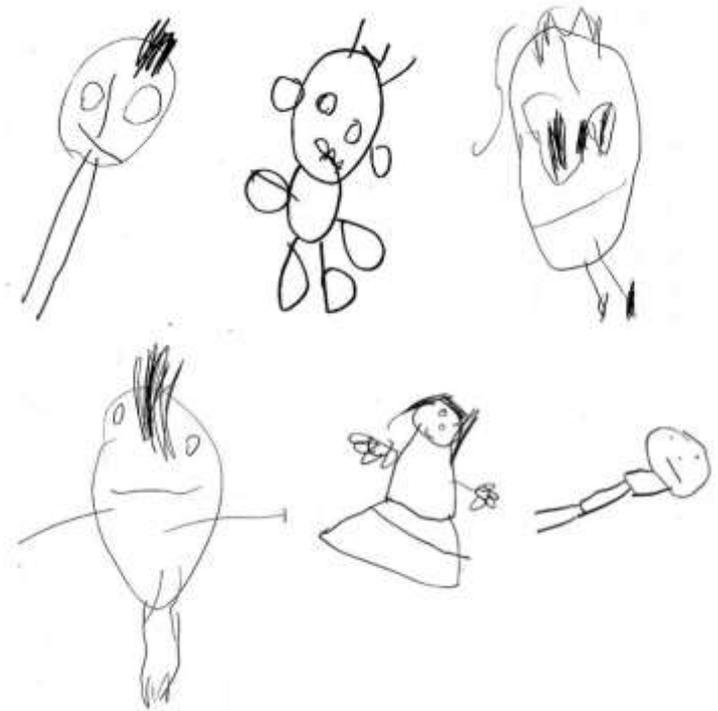
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Background



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Sexual exploitation of children (etic)

- Definitions vary eg in laws and conventions, policy documents and research reports eg from multilaterals, bilaterals or NGOs
- Under age 18
- May take different forms
- May involve a third party
- Involves power differentials (age, gender, intellect, resources etc)
- Can be voluntary and mutually beneficial

Transactional sex

Non-marital, non-commercial sexual encounters or relationships primarily motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material benefit or status

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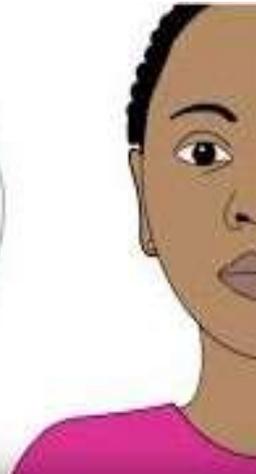


Transactional sex vs sex work (Wamoyi et al 2019)

Transactional sex	Sex work
Implicit negotiation	Explicit negotiation
Exchange may occur before, at the time of, or after sexual encounter	Exchange usually occurs at time of sexual encounter
'Boyfriend' 'girlfriend'	'Client' 'Sex worker'
Often at least some shared emotional intimacy	Often little shared emotional intimacy
Does not self-identify as sex worker	Self-identifies as sex worker

Motivations for entering transactional sex relationships (Stoebenau et al 2016)

- 3 main paradigms
 1. “Vulnerable victim”
 2. Relative deprivation and pursuit of social status
 3. Emotionally intimate relationships
- Recognising different motivations is important for exploring perceptions on extent to which transactional sex is considered exploitative



Research aim

To explore the extent to which local people consider transactional sex to be exploitative and the degree to which emic conceptualisation of exploitation align with etic definitions

Methods



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Sampling and data collection

- Sampling designed to maximise heterogeneity
 - Female and male
 - Children and young people, and adults
 - In and out of school
 - Urban and rural
- Data collection
 - 19 FGDs, 44 IDIs
 - Conducted by trained social scientists using semi-structured topic guides, audio recorded
 - Luganda

Vignette discussion

- Short, stories of AGYW under the age of 18 having sex with men 10 or more years older
- Developed based on literature review and findings of previous research
- Circumstances of the story manipulated and participants asked to reflect on whether they considered it exploitative and why
- Concepts tested: vulnerability through poverty, age, inter-generational sex, power differentials, 'mutually beneficial relationships', AGYW's behaviour

Vignette examples

Age

- Fiona is 17 years old. She is like any other 17 year old in the community. She is the first born and lives at home with her mother, father, and five brothers and sisters. Her mother sells vegetables at the road side and her father is not currently working.
- Fiona is in a relationship with Peter with whom she is having sex. Peter lives in the same community as Fiona.
 - What do you think/how do you feel about this situation? Is it okay? Is it not okay? Why?
- How would you feel if instead of being 17, Fiona was 14 years old while Peter was 25 years old? Would this situation it be okay? Not Okay? Why?
- How about if Peter was 45 years old when Fiona was 17? Would this situation it be okay? Not Okay? Why?
 - Probe: In your view, is Peter taking advantage of Fiona? Would you consider the relationship exploitative?

Results



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A word on exploitation....

- No direct translation of the word 'exploitation' in Luganda
- Instead concepts of 'fair/unfair' and 'taking advantage' used to access community members' perceptions of exploitation or exploitative situations
- Synonyms used by participants to describe exploitation included 'using' 'misleading' 'force (also used to describe sexual assault) 'unfair sex' and 'wrong sex'

Sex with minor or misleading naïve or immature girl

- Condemned by most participants

“It breaks my heart to find a man as old as I am at 50 with a girl of 16. It is very bad and it greatly impacts on that girl’s life. It is like loading six tonnes on a truck whose maximum recommended load is one tonne” (FGD Adult Men, Masaka).

- Recognised as illegal and deserving of punishment
- Views also shaped by extent to which pressure, deception or manipulation was thought to feature
- A few participants more accepting if minor appeared physically mature
- *I don’t see that as bad because we are told that in African traditional societies, a girl would be married-off by the age of 14 or younger...these days for us to marry, you look at her size and not so much her age. If she is 14 and tall and has good size, then the person who is 25 [can] marry [her]” (FGD in-school boys aged 14+, Kampala).*
- Some recognition of difference between physical and emotional maturity



Lack of consent or inability to refuse

- Power differentials eg teacher/student and domestic worker

It might be the final year like S4 or S6 [academic years in which national exams are taken] and he asks her to be in a relationship with him. He might threaten her that “if you refuse I will accuse you of an offence and you will be expelled. Remember, it is the final year” (FGD young men aged 18-24, Kampala).

- Power differentials not always seen as exploitative eg when relationships presented opportunities eg better grades, additional tutoring, snacks etc

- AGYW blamed and condemned for ‘pursuing’ their teachers/ wanting to become ‘2nd wife’



Pre-existing status of the girl and men's intention for relationship

- More condemned where girl was thought to already be 'living a good life' or where her future prospects were promising
- Also condemned where men were perceived to have sinister motives in order to ruin her life

In most cases such men who have interest in young girls have an objective, there is no way that a 30-year-old man can be attracted to a 14-year-old girl. He might have diseases like gonorrhoea which he wants to spread to her so that she also suffers (FGD young women aged 18-24, Masaka).

- Sexual relationship with minor more accepted when men's intentions viewed as noble or where they 'did the right thing'
- AGYW blamed and condemned for 'pursuing' their teachers/employer

AGYW's position of vulnerability

- Characterised to arise out of individual or household poverty or desire to complete education
- Vulnerability elicited mixed responses with relation to extent to which sexual relationships were perceived to be exploitative, wrong or unfair
- Women more empathetic of AGYW's situation
- *Most of the time... poverty greatly affects families. Remember we only have a single meal, once we eat lunch, then we are done, that affects us. If I was Fiona I would have wanted to eat supper or a sumbusa [samosa] or even the bread that we see at the neighbour's place. So if Fiona gets Peter who is capable of giving her 5000/= (\$1.30), this can do a lot for her. This kind of situation makes it easy for her to get into a relationship with Peter. (FGD Adult women, Kampala).*

AGYW's perceived agency

- Choice and thus 'responsibility' for any negative outcomes
"...they should sit her down and counsel her...because at 14 years she feels that she has to taste everything or it might be the peer pressure at school that is disturbing her so she needs to be beaten and counselled so that she comes back to line". (FGD in-school boys aged 14+,Masaka).
- Reflected a general sentiment among some participants that some AGYW went 'too far' in using sex to get what they want
- Here men sometimes characterised as 'hapless victims who were enticed by women's sexuality' and were themselves vulnerable to exploitation
- Less sympathy to the charge of exploitation where AGYW perceived to be motivated by greed



Benefits of transactional sex

- Important to note that some AGYW did not themselves feel that transactional sex relationships were necessarily unfair – emphasised benefits:

“These days young girls like older men because they have already made their money, when she tells the man that my parents have not given me money for juice the man will give her 30,000 shillings (\$7.86) of which she will spend 15,000 (\$3.93) and keep the balance” (FGD 18-24-year-old-young women, Masaka).

- Some however recognised that while entering transactional sex relationships was an agentive choice, once in the relationship, this agency was constrained
- Implications on decision when/whether to have sex, condom negotiation, timing of sex etc



Implications

- By etic definitions, transactional sex is considered exploitation when it involves a minor
- Shares some similarities with emic perspectives on wrong or unfair sex eg that in theory sex with a minor is wrong and should attract punishment
- In practice sex with a minor in the context of TS not always considered wrong
 - Mitigating factors
 - Reality for AGYW given structural constraints
- Exploitation should not be defined in a vacuum – needs to be interpreted against a backdrop of social norms and structural realities that shape the context
- Potential to improve the design and targeting of interventions that build on existing social norms which are protective against sexual exploitation

Thank you

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