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Understanding transactional sex among young women in South Africa : a study based in KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga provinces

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Abstract

Background: There is wealth of research that suggests that young heterosexual women are at an increased vulnerability for HIV through engagement in transactional sex. Transactional sex in young women in Sub-Saharan Africa, including South Africa, is rife and financial constraints are a major driver. Quantitative studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa suggest that young women that are involved in transactional sex are nearly two or more than three times vulnerable to HIV. The young women are involved in transactional sex with older men in order to access financial needs for survival as well as for purposes of consumerism. Transactional sex is not often understood, and at times it is conflated with sex work. This thesis seeks to add to scientific understanding of transactional sex in the field of health. The goals of this thesis are to explore the participants' understanding of transactional sex. The thesis also seeks to explore a link between transactional sex and father absence for young women. This thesis fills the gaps identified in the studies of transactional sex. Wherein, there is very little research that has investigated the discourses that shape the practice of transactional sex.

The **study aim** was to deepen scientific understanding of transactional sex in South Africa through examination of the discourses and structural financial constraints that influence transactional sex among young women. The specific objectives of this study were:

i. To explore the discourses that shapes the participants' understanding and their involvement in transactional sex.
ii. To analyse the participants' understanding of transactional sex in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), Mpumalanga (MP) and the Eastern Cape (EC) provinces.
iii. To demonstrate the likely link between transactional sex and income poverty related to father absence.
iv. To describe a probable link between transactional sex and vulnerability to HIV infection.

Research methods: To meet objective (i) qualitative interview data were collected in three South African provinces which are KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga using focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). Invitation for participation by key informants (KIs) was sent to older men and women who are stakeholders of the communities studied. The KIs were invited from the social services sector such as the Police, Social Development, Health, Justice and Community-based leaders of faith, healers

and youth leaders. For FGDs, participants were invited through meetings that are conducted in the communities and also through the distribution of fliers using facilitators in the communities that were selected as study sites. All participants for this study comprised both females and males above the age of 18 years. Trained field officers conducted FGDs which were gender-matched as well as KIIs. The FGDs varied in length with an average of above one hour each. KIIs were an average of 45 minutes long each. For all the interviews, isiZulu, siSwati and Xhosa were used, accordingly, to suit the participants' local languages. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. After the interviews, the audio records were transcribed and saved in Microsoft word documents which were kept in password protected folders. I later read and coded the data then analysed it using thematic analysis for organising the codes in respective themes. I then used critical discourse analysis for an in-depth analysis of the themes. To meet objective number (ii) and (iii), in addition to text data, I conducted a comprehensive literature review. I present the literature review in Chapter 2 of this thesis. I also used the literature review to interpret the findings of the empirical study in Chapter 4.

Findings and discussion: Heteronormative perceptions, Christian religion and African traditional culture as well as safe sex public health interventions are major discourses that appeared to influence the way in which transactional sex was perceived. The gender discourse owed to the consensual perception that transactional sex only happened between young women and older men. This was clear in the research findings. The main findings were; (i) participants' understanding of transactional sex, (ii) the link between transactional sex and vulnerability to HIV, and (iii) probable relationship between transactional sex and father absence. The participants understood transactional sex as a source of income driven especially by perceived high rates of unemployment and poverty in the study sites. Young women were viewed as receivers of financial and material benefits yet givers of sex to men. The flip side of the same coin was that, men were viewed as the givers of material and financial benefits, and receivers of sex.

The discourses found also demonstrated that transactional sex was fuelled by young women and their families' financial needs. The financial constraints that young women and their families face could be influenced by the absence of the father who is supposedly a provider. Consumerist society that promotes extensive consumption of goods and services also appeared to be influential in the practice of transactional sex particularly for the young women.

Conclusion: Transactional sex is not a new phenomenon in the study sites. It has been practiced in a several ways, were the community elders were in control of the transactions that were involved in different sexual intercourses that happened historically. The community elders facilitated financial transactions for sex in the forms of punishment when a man had sex with a young woman outside marriage. This punishment was identified as a payment for damage that the man would have caused. The man could also pay *lobola* as a form of compensation for the woman that he would have married. Overtime, the practice of these transactions has changed. The young women now consciously get involved in transactional sex so that they can directly receive money and gifts from the men that they give sex to. The change in the practice of transactions and sex reflects the change in the socio-economic conditions where there is a high need for consumerism which is constructed within the context of modernity. Consumerism emerges together with capitalism, which is a relatively new economic model in South Africa. Capitalism requires one to be employed so that they can have access to economic benefits. However, the rate of unemployment challenges the young women and deprives them of accessing the modern materials for consumerism. This influences the young women to consciously adopt the practice of transactional sex.

It is this move by young women to decide adopting transactional sex that raises various panics among the elders of the community and the perpetuation of the discourses that transactional sex is an immoral and unacceptable practice. The panic has also become evident in the safe sex public health interventions where transactional sex is perceived as a dangerous practice among young women ad it should not be accepted. The interjection of the discourses of morality in transactional sex obstructs studies to clearly understand the discourses that influence its practice. These obstructions also limit knowledge that could be discovered by research and hence reduces the possibilities for interventions.

Recommendations: Based on the findings from this study, it is recommended that research should increase focus on the effects of father absence to the practice of transactional sex. The studies in transactional sex also need to include samples of the at risk groups such as the LGBTI community. Transactional sex needs to be studied among young men as receivers of the financial and material benefits, as suggested in this study.

Transactional sex is happening in the communities studied. It is therefore, recommended that public health interventions should encourage the practice of safe sex to

prevent the spread of HIV. The long term interventions should address the structural factors which are; assisting young women to attain education which will make them employable so that they will be able to get sustainable incomes.

The practice of transactional sex in KZN, MP and EC are tangled and shaped by the communities' overarching discourses concerning sex and transactions. The overarching discourses make the practice of transactional sex to happen in a secretive manner particularly among young women. It is recommended that more studies need to be done among the overarching discourses of sex and transactions in these communities. It is important to extensively understand the overarching discourses and their effects through research because this will further unearth the hidden risks that come with the secretive practices of transactional sex.

Key words: Consumerism, Father Absence, HIV, South Africa, modernization, transactional sex, young women.