

Risky and protective places and spaces: Sexual engagement among youth in Uganda and Malawi

Introduction

Current interest in the risk and protective factors associated with the sexual and reproductive health of young people in sub-Saharan Africa is an upshot of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. UNAIDS, (2004; 2005) point out that the impact of the pandemic has been particularly profound on the region's youth. Currently, 10 million women and men aged 15–24—roughly one in 14 young adults in the region—live with HIV/AIDS. About half of the 3.0–3.4 million new cases of HIV infection which occurred in this region in 2003 were also among this age-group.

Given these gloomy statistics and in an effort to identify strategies for intervention, a great deal of current research on youth in SSA has sought to understand the factors that expose them to, and protect them from, negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes. As one recent report argues, good knowledge of these factors is key to understanding the progression of the epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa. Clarifying young people's risk and protective behaviours, which are generally not monitored by surveillance systems that track HIV/AIDS levels and trends, is thus critical to the success of efforts aiming to provide health information and services to them (Bankole, et al 2006).

The bulk of existing research on young people's risk and protective factors has focused on factors in their social and cultural environments (Jessor, et al 1995; Crosnoe et al, 2002, Halpern et al 2000; Jones and Perkins, 2006; Richardson et al., 1998). Attention has particularly concentrated on the role of schools, churches and other contexts that put young under the watchful eyes of adults and cultural gatekeepers (Feldman, 2003). For instance, Nnko et al (2001) addressed the critical protective role of the school environment (as both a physical entity and a site for academic and intellectual

engagement). There are also studies on how young people behave when they are left unsupervised. Fortenberry et al (2006) show that the after-school activities of unsupervised young people provide them opportunities for risky and deviant behaviours and suggest that adult supervision be increased after school hours, since most sexual activity among adolescents occur in the evening and at night when adult supervision is minimal (Blinn-Pike, 1999; Kaaya et al., 1998). Other studies have interrogated the role of religious activities and settings, such as church attendance, as predictors of adolescent sexual activity. The common refrain has been that religious contexts and activities provide protection against the onset of early sexual activity among young people. Scholars (such as Lammers, et al., 2000; Miller et al 1997, Forste and Haas, 2002, Meier, 2003) have thus shown that very religious youth are less likely to have sex compared to their counterparts who are less religious. They regard religion and participation in religious activities as factors that protect youth from risky practices, including early sexual initiation.

In the available literature however, questions about risk and protective spaces have been largely asked and answered without input from and recourse to youth themselves. As a result, we know very little about young people's own relationships with, and views and understandings of, these presumably protective spaces in the context of sexual behaviour. Adolescent narratives surrounding risk and protection offer a unique and necessarily critical peep into what they believe and do (Eyre, et al., 2001), and could be salient for programs aiming to shield them from negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes. In this paper, we describe a study that informs thinking on risks and protective factors by privileging the voices and views of Malawian and Ugandan young people on risky and protective spaces. Our study interrogates the ways youth engage, relate with, and view those contexts and activities that are traditionally seen as protective of their sexual health. The research described here approaches young people as agentive individuals who adapt social situations to suit their own needs, highlighting how presumed protective spaces sometimes actually provide youth with critical resources and opportunities to engage in risky practices and behaviours.

The current study draws from social ecology to examine the effects of multiple levels of influence within the social environment as well as social and individual factors that predispose adolescents to early sexual onset (Cubbin et al, 2005; Raneri & Wiemann 2007). Understanding circumstances that affect adolescents' sexual behaviour and the contexts within which they make sexual decisions is important to help inform policies and programs geared toward reducing the risk of early sexual behaviour for young people. Focusing on those who have had sex, the processes leading up to sexual activity, and the views of the young people themselves, can help program planners to develop interventions that effectively address the needs of young people and reduce sexual risk-taking.

Context

In both Malawi and Uganda, a high percentage of adolescents engage in risky sexual behaviour with little knowledge on how to protect themselves against sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. The Protecting the Next Generation (PNG) study carried out in four African countries, including Malawi and Uganda by the Guttmacher Institute and its partners from 2003 to 2004, found that in Malawi, 60% of 15-19 year old males and 37% of females in the same age group had had sex (Munthali, 2006a). In Uganda, although males and females in the 15-19 age groups were equally likely to have had sex, among younger adolescents, males in the 12-14 year age group were twice as likely to have had sex compared to females in the same age group. In this age group, 15% of the adolescent male had had sex compared to 8% of the adolescent females (Neema et al, 2006). For both males and females in the 15-19 age groups in Uganda, 48% had already had sex.

Given the high proportion of adolescents involved in sexual activity, Malawi has one of the highest HIV prevalence and in Uganda where good progress has been made in reducing the spread of HIV, PNG results show results for ever sex even among the very young teens. Although both countries have borne a heavy burden of HIV they are at different stages of the epidemic where in Uganda prevalence is declining whilst it is still very high in Malawi. Given the high incidents of adolescents involved in sexual activity,

it is necessary to explore the contexts in which sexual activity occurs giving young people themselves the opportunity to talk about how protective factors impact on sexual behaviour.

Methodology and Data sources

The study draws upon Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-depth Interviews (IDIs) conducted in Malawi and Uganda in 2003 as part of the PNG study. This paper focuses exclusively on data from Uganda and Malawi – two of the 4 countries in which this study was conducted. Other countries involved in the study were Ghana and Burkina Faso. We focus on Uganda and Malawi because out of the four countries, both are the most affected by HIV/AIDS and the PNG study shows that these two countries have the highest proportion of sexually active adolescents

The paper relies on a total of 17 FGDs and 205, 102 from Malawi and 105 from Uganda. Out of these IDIs 93 adolescents reported having sex with 42 from Malawi and 51 from Uganda. Out of the 93 adolescents who had ever had sex in the IDIs, 80 were in school at the time of sexual debut or their partners were in school. Only 3 adolescents from Malawi and 10 from Uganda together with their partners were not in school at the time of sexual debut.

The sample age range for this study was 12-19 with FGD and IDI respondents being stratified according to age, sex, school status and place of residence. The number of participants per focus group discussion ranged from eight participants to twelve participants. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in the local languages of each country and then translated into English. The in-depth interviews asked questions on puberty and socialization, where adolescents get reproductive health information, what sexual experience they had if any, perceptions of risk as well as individual future aspirations. FGD guides focused on the following six themes: (1), activities that adolescents engaged in during their free time; (2), knowledge of sexually transmitted infections; (3), where youth go for health services, if ever they do; (4), perceptions and management of risk associated with sexual activities; (5), where adolescents get

information on sexual and reproductive health; and lastly (6), who the adolescents communicated with about problems related to sexual and reproductive health.

The FGD and IDI data were analyzed via a two-tiered process as described by Miles & Huberman (1994). Initially, first-level coding (was conducted by reading over the interview and group discussion transcripts, identifying key themes that emerged, and summarizing segments of data. Themes related to the adolescent sexual activity and the contexts in which it occurs were subsequently isolated for further investigation. Pattern coding (ibid.) of these particular themes then followed by conducting close and repeated readings of the transcripts in order to discover patterns within the themes of interest. The themes and patterns generated through this process were subjected to repeated cross-checking and comparison with other transcripts in the data set to ensure their empirical grounding. The results were then written up thematically, along the lines provided by the validated pattern codes, and are presented below.

Results

Sexual Opportunities

The School

A large body of research suggests that if adolescents are kept in school, their chances of engaging in sexual activities and other socially unapproved activities are limited. Although this may be the case in some contexts, PNG data from Malawi and Uganda indicate that in the absence of proper monitoring, schools themselves can provide opportunities for sexual activity among students who are away from the prying eyes of parents and other community members. Munthali et al (2006b:37-38) note that in Malawi, adolescents who had had sexual relationships ‘usually met those partners at school or in their community’. When young people are in school, opportunities for parental monitoring are limited. The presumption is often that teachers will shoulder

these monitoring responsibilities. Parents and teachers are often secure in the presumed knowledge that schools are insulated against risky behaviour. Yet, teachers in schools in developing countries are often overworked with huge classes of students (Kadzamira, 2006). In Malawi the teacher/ student ratio was estimated to be 1:87 in the 1992 education survey and according to Chimombo et al (2000) in 2000 overcrowding was still the norm in Malawian schools. In Uganda in 2000 the official pupil teacher ratio was 63 and the ratio was even worse for some primary schools that had a teacher pupil ratio of 150 (Elwana, 2000). Overcrowding in schools may make close monitoring difficult to achieve. As a result of the lack of proper monitoring of students in school, opportunities abound for adolescents to engage in sexual activity at school. Also because school is unquestioningly regarded as protective, monitoring is relaxed, chances of being discovered (at least from the perspective of study participants) are slim.

In both study countries, participants pointed out that they could make arrangements to have sexual encounters at the back of classrooms after all the other students have left for home. For example, when asked where adolescents meet to have sexual intercourse, a female respondent in an FGD of 14-19 year old rural girls attending school in Uganda said, “When you are in class and other students go home, you remain behind and go to a corner of the classroom and [have] sex.”

Thus, it can be argued that the effect of the school environment on curbing sexual activity may be dependent on other factors such as the nature of the school itself (see also Mensch, et al, 2001), as well as the motivation of the individual teenager to be sexually abstinent or not.

On being asked about where they meet their sexual partners, a male adolescent in school in Uganda explained:

P1 (Participant 1): We have our ‘ghettos’ (small rooms rented by young men so that they can live near their school). You find you have a friend – fellow boy at school having a room he rents somewhere in a cover (meaning a hidden place). When you get time, you take there your babe and you do it and come back to school.

When she was asked about the first time she had sex a respondent said:

R (Respondent): It was during the school holidays. I told people at home that I was going to see my sister and I went to meet with him. I waited for him at school. We left together we went together to where he took me. He did not take me to his father's home because he was also still controlled by the parents. So we just went to his friends place and that is where it happened (Rural female out of school in Uganda)

This indicates that schools do not provide either the physical or mental protection against early sex simply because they are schools. The protective effect of schools against adolescents participating in risky behaviours including early sex depends on the school environment. Schools can, in fact, offer students the opportunity to meet and begin to engage with potential sexual partners. If school authorities do not monitor students' activities and movements closely, some schools can actually become a conducive setting for adolescent sexual activities to flourish.

Adolescents in this study also took the opportunity to deliver love letters and discuss when and where to meet for sex on their way to and from school. Students also had their own language to discuss and make appointments for sexual escapades at school without teachers' knowledge:

P5: There is a school I joined, but they used words like 'Get me my drink.' They would say, 'Go and bring my drink.' It confused many people, including teachers. Teachers could not click [understand], but it meant, 'Go and get me my girlfriend.' I can even say it when I'm with my parent, like telling my brother. For you, you will not understand, but for him, he will understand (15-19 year old boys in school, urban Uganda)

To reduce the amount of unsupervised time between boys and girls, some parents prefer to send their children to boarding schools. The assumption is often that if young people spend their time in enclosed environments with structured activities, their likelihood of engaging in risky behaviour is dramatically reduced and students may even perform better at school as there are no distractions. Contrary to this belief, Weinberg (1967 in Kahane 1988:212) indicates that the relative isolation of boarding schools does not guarantee that students are insulated from negative external influences. He claims that 'students remain in contact with neighbors, friends and parents and have ample

opportunity to learn about the “corrupt” society’. Indeed, boarding schools can be argued to offer more liberties, to a certain extent, than other kinds of schools. Some female participants pointed out, for instance, the boarding school setting presents unique opportunities for the adolescent to spend unmonitored time with his/her intimate partner:

P6: You have a boyfriend, he comes to your school and pretends that he is your uncle and that he has come to collect you to go for burial because you have lost a relative say from Kampala. And also when you (the girl) see the boy - you cry out loud and ask for permission to go and bury. Then you go to Ibanda town and enjoy and afterwards you go back to school. (Adolescent girls in school Uganda)

It was also agreed that girls that attended single-sex boarding schools were easy targets for sex by male adolescents. What was usually pointed out was that these girls were typically overly-excited to interact with boys and therefore willing to do anything with them, including have sex, compared to the girls that attended co-educational schools. As a result, participants noted that adolescent males targeted girls in single-sex boarding schools for sexual activity.

Adolescents in boarding school were noted as being particularly vulnerable to sexual encounters on the first day of the school term (i.e., on their way from home back to the schooling environment), and on occasions when they were sent away from school for non-payment of fees. Some adolescents pointed out that on the first day of the school term, they would spend the night at lodges with their boyfriends and then proceed to school the following day.

P7:if you plan with a boy like when you are going to school you meet in a very distant place from home. Here you can feel free because you know those at home won't come to know of it. You spend with the boy a night and then next day you go to school.

P8: Or sometimes if they chase you [from school] because of school fees. You pass by the boyfriend's place and spend a night. The next day you proceed home. Those at school and home won't know that I passed at the boyfriend's place.

This indicates that although the school environment can prevent adolescents from engaging in sex, sometimes there are some intervening variables that may increase the risk of sexual onset or activity among young people. These intervening variables can include the type and amount of monitoring at school, as well as the motivation that individual teenagers have to engage in sex. In reference to the motivation to have sex, Forste and Haas's (2002) study distinguished between delayers and anticipators. They point out that delayers were adolescents that had made a conscious decision to delay sexual onset for a variety of reasons, while anticipators did not have sex simply because the right opportunity had not presented itself. Below is what a girl who had decided to delay sexual onset had to say about her decision:

R. I am afraid of getting AIDS. And my parents told me to wait until I get married....like any other girl of my age I have feelings of getting a boy friend but I want to concentrate on my books...I expect to get my first boy friend after school...if I have managed to be alone for this long why not waiting until I complete my books. I can handle to be single until I get married.

I. What are the reasons why you have not had sexual intercourse?

R. I fear getting AIDS and unwanted pregnancy and you know I want to have a good future. Second, I have not had sex yet because I'm saved and the Bible states that sex is done by married people. (19 year old female in school urban Uganda)

As a result, it might be that although the school milieu can reduce the opportunities for sexual intercourse, 'anticipators' can sometimes take advantage of the loopholes that their respective school systems offer. On the other hand for delayers as in the above respondent, there are a host of protective factors such as religion and parental advice which may motivate adolescents to shun sexual activities.

In addition to the physical and systemic environments provided by schools, schooling itself has been regarded as a protective factor against early sexual debut. For instance, students who are committed to the value of education, or who have good relations with their teachers might not engage in deviant behaviour. Although in the PNG survey, questions on commitment to schooling were not asked, for both Uganda and Malawi, schooling was rarely mentioned as among the main reasons for abstaining from sexual

intercourse. In Uganda, only 3.3 % and 2.8% of adolescent males and females, respectively, mentioned schooling as a reason why they had abstained for the past twelve months (Neema et al, 2006). In Malawi, 2.3% and 0% of adolescent males and females, respectively, who had never had sex, mentioned schooling as one of the reasons they had never had sex (Munthali et al 2006a).

R: Yes I have not had sex because... It is only that I am shy to have sex....I am also afraid of HIV/AIDS and have seen my peers dying because of the same disease.... fear of pregnancy, being in school I can trouble my parents and ruin my future...Yes, my parents told me never to have sex....they told me that having sex with a girl would lead into pregnancy or contracting diseases and such things scare me...People mock me at school saying I am a fool but I tell them I know what I am doing....I tell them that I fear girls and my parents advise me against that and would lose their trust if I was found HIV positive and responsible for pregnancy.

I: When do you anticipate to have your first sex?

R: When I am married otherwise I am afraid of girls.

(18 year old male in school rural Malawi)

Here it is clear that a close bond with parents may delay sexual onset and increase the chances of adolescents being able to withstand peer pressure.

I: Why have you never had sex with anybody?

R: I am afraid of being impregnated

I: What is the other reason which has made you reach your age before having sex with anybody?

R: Just keeping myself pure and I envy friends who are working. They live happily

I: What does living happily mean?

R: Whatever they want, maybe if both man and woman are employed they may help each other (Malawi Urban girl aged 15 in school)

The most frequently cited reason for not engaging in sexual intercourse for those who were in school and out of school, never sexually active and those who had ever had sex but were not currently sexually active, was fear of STIs/AIDS, fear of pregnancy and the lack of a sexual partner in order of importance.

Unsupervised time

Most of the sexual activity for adolescents in both Malawi and Uganda took place at night or when parents or other guardians had gone visiting, gone to the market or simply not nearby. Although the PNG quantitative data (Neema et al, 2006 & Munthali et al, 2006a) indicate that the fear of STIs and pregnancy deterred young people from engaging in sex, the available qualitative data indicate that adolescents were also particularly concerned about the risk of getting caught. Getting caught having sex had many negative consequences such that young people took many precautions to avoid this situation. Some of the consequences of being found out involved feelings of embarrassment, being taken out of school by irate parents, or being forced to marry one's sexual partner when they were not ready to do so. In both countries, adolescent sex was fraught with many social risks such that it was characterized by secrecy. As a result adolescents preferred to have sex at night or evening where parental monitoring was at its lowest. For instance, particularly in Uganda, most of the sexual liaisons between adolescents took place in the bushes in the evening, or at friend's houses or when parents were not at home. The following discussion with an adolescent boy out of school who had started having sex when he was still in school had this to say about his first sexual partner

I (Interviewer): What actually happened for you to get a chance of having sexual intercourse with her?

R: Her parents were not around

I: What time did that happen?

R: It was late in the afternoon.....

R: The second time my mother had gone to the market and there was nobody at home so I went with her to my house (12 year old street kid Malawi Urban)

This neatly summarizes the nature of sexual liaisons of adolescents in both Malawi and Uganda. They mostly took place where monitoring and supervision was at its lowest. In focus group discussions in both Uganda and Malawi the evening was frequently pointed as a time adolescents could be safe to have sex:

P2: Most adolescents in this area, if they have friends, they book their friend's room in advance. They can say that in the evening I will bring my girls; so that the friends leave

the keys. They will then be free at any time to take their partner to their friend's house. So if one has no where to take his partner, then he takes her to his friend's place (Uganda girls aged between 14-19 in school).

Participants in the current study indicated those in school may wait until evening when they can have a chance to see their girlfriends. When asked about the places they preferred to have sex, a group of adolescent males in school had this to say:

P 9: So you decide to go to the bush.

P 7: Like in the evening

M (Moderator): So you wait for the evening?

P7: Yes...Because like us who [are day scholars], it is only in the evening that you can get the girl at home.

P3: Some girls are shy to [have] sex during the daytime.

In rural areas in Malawi adolescents pointed to having sex in the evening mostly because of the lack of monitoring at that time.

In rural Malawi, boys visiting girls in girls' huts, and, girls visiting boys in boys' huts at night for sex was a common theme. Talking about a sexual experience he had had with a long term sexual partner one male adolescent from Malawi said

I: Then so what happened when you met in the evening as per your agreement?

R: This time I started with begging her.

R: I was begging "who is better between a beggar and a thief?" Then she would say "a beggar." Then I would ask her "would I touch your breasts" (laugh,) then she say "you can touch my breasts," then I would touch her breasts. After touching her breasts I would ask her that if she went for a visit and she was given Nsima (Polenta), would you take "Nsima" without relish? "Then she would answer no." The I would tell that "why have you given me Nsima without relish?," then she would say "No" its now daylight and we are not as free. There are parents around....meaning that there wasn't any free time to eat the relish. Then she would say you will eat relish in the evening. Then I endured, during the evening I will say I have come and she will open the door for me [and we have sex]. (Rural Malawi male aged 16 out of school)

In Malawi, it was customary that a girl who had started menstruating could sleep in her own hut (referred to as *mphala*) and an adolescent boy who had been initiated could have their own sleeping hut (referred to as *gowelo*). Consequently, some adolescent sexual

activities took place in these huts, which are built separately from the main home (see also Chimombo et al 2000). Young people also spoke of occasionally allowing their friends to make use of their huts. Thus, certain cultural practices can potentially expose adolescents to sexual activity, providing them with the required opportunity, privacy and space. Although providing separate sleeping units for adolescent boys and girls is a Malawian custom meant to ensure parental privacy and to protect young people from the parent's sexual activities (Kachingwe et al, 2005), it also seems to create risks for adolescents in terms of unsupervised time.

Entertainment, community events and other cultural activities

Community dances and festivals in Malawi were frequently identified by adolescents in this study as places they would go to have sexual encounters or at least to find potential sex partners. In Uganda, young people highlighted cinemas and other places where romantic or pornographic films were shown, as well as nightclubs, as places where sexual activity could occur. Although in some cases these places were pointed out as places teenagers went to have sex, in some discussions it emerged that adolescents went to dances (at night and during the day) to see and select people they would want to have sex with.

Among Malawian participants, the *chitelela* dance was described as an entertainment event in which girls dance before the community at night, while boys play the drums or simply attend the event as spectators. In the context of this nocturnal cultural community entertainment event, young people highlighted opportunities for scouting potential sex partners and for having sexual intercourse. The following is an excerpt from a discussion among a group of 15-19 year old girls in Malawi:

M: When it is night time. When girls are dancing, are the boys found at these dances?

All participants: They are there.

P7: They come to watch.

M: They come to watch, after that where do they go?

P5: At home

P4: Others, they go to the bushes and have sexual intercourse.

Malawian men also had their own dance which respondents referred to as *gule wa mganda*. Women were also said to attend to watch the dance, which was highly valued by many for its entertainment value. For some, the event provided not only diversion, but also a chance to meet with their partners at predetermined places.

P3: Aaah, for example, the dancing which occurs at night is not all that 'straight.' Young people especially girls seem to be involved in sexual relationships during the nights when there are such dances.

P1: While some women seem to go there with the aim of watching mganda, in the real sense they have a different aim altogether.

P5: For example, going there to meet a man and having sexual intercourse.

P3: When the dance ends

P7: They also happen to meet where they had already agreed in advance before leaving for the place where the dancing will be. (Malawi, rural adolescent males in school)

Evidently, some community and socially accepted entertainment options can create the necessary space for adolescents to engage in sexual activity, primarily because they are difficult to monitor.

Initiation rites are an example of a culturally sanctioned community ritual that could encourage adolescents to engage in sexual activity. Some male adolescents who admitted to having feared being circumcised pointed out they had been forced by their parents to attend these ceremonies as they were a cultural expectation. One young man pointed out that his uncle had sent people to kidnap him and take him to the initiation ceremony because the uncle believed that he would be taught good manners such as respecting elders and generally be taught good behaviour. Although the study participants mentioned that at initiation ceremonies they were taught to be respectful to elders as well as to their parents, and to never hit women some participants pointed out that they were then expected to have sex after the ceremony and they were cautioned that failure to do so would result in 'zimanyala' which meant a shrinking of the penis. A rural male who had started having sex when he was still in school but after initiation said:

R: At the camp we were told to have sex with girls, so we went to girls to have sex. After the camp we gathered - initiated boys only- and went to chat with girls.

I: Did the girls not refuse your proposals?

R: No, when they go to 'Msondo' they are also told to go and have sex with boys. So when we told them they just started laughing and then accepted the proposals. When they accept we told them, to have sex with us. They agreed and we had sex.

I: How did you know that at 'Msondo' girls are also told the same?

R: At Jando [initiation and circumcision ceremony among the Yao of Malawi] we asked 'what should we do if the girls refuse?', and we were answered that they are also told the same at Msondo and they won't refuse.

I: So you are only interested with girls who went to Msondo?

R: Yes. (Malawi Rural Male age 16 out of school)

Another initiate had this to say:

R: They [the elders after initiation] said that we should sleep with a girl of our choice and I chose someone and had sex with her.

I: After doing it did you go to inform the 'Madoda' that you had done that?

R: No but there was someone who was following me behind and it was him who reported back to them.

I: If you did not do that what would have happened to you?

R: They were going to repeat whatever they told me like this is how we do it (12 year old rural Malawi boy out of school)

A 12 year old adolescent in Malawi pointed out that after initiation he went and had sex with a girl without using a condom because there had been a debate among the 'madoda' (elders) with some urging the use of condom to prevent HIV/AIDS and pregnancy whilst others said sex with a condom was no real sex and the woman could urinate after sex to guard against pregnancy. The adolescent expressed fear that if the girl continued to 'spit' out the sperm by urinating she would end up barren. In this respect cultural activities which some parents may have regarded as safe and as teaching children good behaviour may in the end have exposed them to risk. However one rural male respondent attending school aged 18 who had never had sex pointed out that they had been forbidden to have sex at the Jando he had attended.

Safe activities

It is often pointed out in the literature and indeed in the data from Malawi and Uganda that adolescents sometimes become sexually active simply because they are bored and have few diversions to occupy their time. This has given rise to initiatives designed to address this predicament. Some adolescents in the study pointed to soccer and drama as important ways of helping young people remain sexually abstinent:

P8: We can be very happy if we can have some work or activities to do which can keep us occupied. For example, if we can have balls we would really be kept busy. Hence when we go and play football, we would be avoiding engaging in activities which would have made us to engage in activities which would put us at risk of getting HIV/AIDS.

P6: What our friend wants to say is that when we play football, we can avoid sexual intercourse as we will be occupied with the match. (Rural adolescent males out of school in Malawi)

However, other participants in this same discussion pointed out that involvement in sports could actually prove to be a double-edged sword:

P1: The main method is that which my friend has already explained, that of abstinence. We can indeed say that by playing football you can keep yourself busy but what we also know is that young people who play football are the ones who engage in sexual intercourse a lot. This is mainly if they are good players as girls want them. (Rural male adolescents out of school in Malawi)

An out of school boy whose sexual debut was when he was still at school had this to say about his first sexual experience:

R: I got to know her when we were going for a football match. We went in the truck talking with each other. When we arrived at Masaka where our school was to play a football match, I asked her to take a walk with me. We walked around looking for a nearby bush where we could go to have sex. She told me that we should get a condom. So we went to a shop in Masaka where I got condoms and I put them on. Then we had sex (Male 19, Urban Uganda).

It was a tacit agreement by most participants in all focus group discussions that where adolescents gather in mixed company, there were always opportunities for sex for

adolescents anticipating sex or at the very least opportunities to meet potential sex partners.

Dramas have often been used as ways to teach adolescents and other community members to the dangers of unprotected sex, and try to encourage abstinence. In one of the focus group discussions, one of the respondents pointed out that some parents forbade their children from attending these dramas which had a negative effect in that the adolescents would not be able to access the information they need. In another focus group discussion in Malawi some males agreed that drama was a good thing to have in the villages as a form of information dissemination. However, as indicated by the discussant below it was valued for an entirely different reason:

P3: Ah, like here, we agree that drama would be good because what happens like here at home young people if they have heard that somewhere there is drama or plays, then they get prepared and go there and this presents opportunities for young men to meet their girl friends and have sex. (Adolescent males Malawi)

Thus it can be argued that activities such as drama, and sporting activities can play a role in steering adolescents away from sex if they have made a conscious decision to delay sexual onset; otherwise, for sexual ‘anticipators’, these events can provide opportunities.

Discussion

As has been apparent in the PNG quantitative data a large percentage of adolescents have also made a conscious decision not to be involved in sexual intercourse. Studies have shown that those who make a conscious effort to delay are less likely to have intercourse compared to those who are not having sex because they have not had the opportunity or because they are afraid of being caught (Forste and Haas, 2002). As a result it might be beneficial to have sex and reproductive education so that adolescents make personal and informed choices about delaying their sexual onset. At the same time programs should not be designed to target the homogenous adolescent but different programs to target different categories of teenagers. For examples, those who have made a conscious decision to abstain from sex can benefit from community activities that can keep them out of mischief. However for those who have already made the decision to have sex or

who have not made a decision either way what is more important is information dissemination. Ways that are devised to keep adolescents away from sexual activity should be context specific. For instance, peer educators have to find times and occasions that expose teenagers to early sexual debut. For instance, children in boarding school can be exposed to different kind of risk and at different times compared to those who attend day schools. As a result different programs targeting adolescents when they are at high risk could be put in place.

There are three kinds of adolescents. Those that have already made the decision to have sex and are just waiting for the best opportunity; those that have decided to delay sex until such a time they are ready and those that can be swayed either way. Those who have made the decision to have sex, always try to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves. Even those activities that are designed to protect adolescents from early sexually participation or from engaging in risky sexual behaviours may be used as occasions to look for potential sexual partners. On the other hand those that have decided not to have sex, because of information available to them are less likely to be opportunity seekers and are therefore less likely to engage in sex. As a result interventions do not have to be targeted towards the conventional heterogeneous teenager who will not have sex if kept busy, but interventions should be devised to target the three categories of teenagers. There is need to rethink the concept of safe spaces for teenagers.

Denying opportunity has been hailed as a way of discouraging adolescents from engaging in early sexual activities and other risky behaviour. Although this method is useful it is also limited in other respects. For teenagers who do not want to be involved in sexual activities insulating them from risk can work because then they don't have to be under constant pressure from their peers to have sex. At the same time some forms of entertainment that are regarded as innocuous and socially approved such as attending cultural dances at night, or attending soccer matches or community dramas can also provide ripe opportunities for those who are interested in engaging in sex. It might be helpful for parents to discourage activities that can lead to sexual activities such as going out to dances at night. For example a simple television set can mean that children can not

go out for entertainment at night as there is entertainment within the home. However, ultimately the decision to abstain or not might lie with the individual teenager. As a result, information should be made available to individual teenagers to empower them to make decisions and to protect themselves.

It should be noted that the issue of opportunities should be looked at as context specific. For instance, more teenagers in Uganda had sex at school, on their way from school, in bushes or friend's houses because those were the spaces away from parental monitoring or adult supervision. At the same time adolescents in Malawi frequently pointed to having sex in the girls 'mphala' or boys 'gowelo' as these huts provided plenty of opportunities of privacy. It is apparent in this discussion that bonding with parents where parents discouraged their children from having sex and had open relationships with their children reduced the chances of early sexual initiation for both adolescents regardless of whether they were in school or not.

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