



Review article

Revisiting the understanding of “transactional sex” in sub-Saharan Africa: A review and synthesis of the literature

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ABSTRACT

In sub-Saharan Africa, young women ages 15–24 have more than twice the risk of acquiring HIV as their male counterparts. A growing body of epidemiological evidence suggests that the practice of “transactional sex” may contribute to this disparity. Over the last 15 years, the social sciences have contributed significantly to understanding the meaning of and motivations for this practice. The findings from these studies are rich, but varied, rendering lessons difficult to navigate for intervention and further research. We therefore contribute a historically-grounded, comprehensive literature review on the nature and motivations for women's participation in transactional sex in sub-Saharan Africa. Drawing from over 300 studies (through 2014), we distill three prominent paradigms observed in the literature that we review toward presenting a unified conceptualization of the practice. “Sex for basic needs,” the first paradigm, positions women as victims in transactional sexual relationships, with implications for interventions that protect girls from exploitation. In contrast, the “sex for improved social status” paradigm positions women as sexual agents who engage in transactional sex toward attaining a middle-class status and lifestyle. Finally, a third paradigm, “sex and material expressions of love,” draws attention to the connections between love and money, and the central role of men as providers in relationships. We find important commonalities in the structural factors that shape the three paradigms of transactional sex including gender inequality and processes of economic change. We suggest that there are three continua stretching across these paradigms: deprivation, agency, and instrumentality. This review proposes a definition of transactional sex and discusses implications for research and interventions aiming to reduce young women's risk of HIV through such relationships. We consider the consequences of drawing from too narrow an understanding of the practice, and highlight the benefits of a broader conceptualization.

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1. Introduction

Globally, 15% of women living with HIV are between the ages of 15 and 24, and of these, 80% live in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS, 2014). Young women aged 15–24 are three times more likely to be infected with HIV than their male peers (UNAIDS, 2014), and

comprise 31% of all new infections in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS, 2014). Alongside research highlighting the importance of biological susceptibility, gender inequality and poor access to healthcare, a growing body of evidence suggests that informal sexual exchange or “transactional sex” (TS) may be key to understanding the gender disparity in HIV among young people (UNAIDS, 2010, 2013). Depending on how its defined, TS is a relatively prevalent practice—one four-country study found between 36% and 80% of sexually active adolescent girls ages 12–19 reported ever having had TS (Moore et al., 2007). Epidemiological studies have demonstrated a significant association between TS and HIV (Wamoyi et al., 2016). In addition, TS is associated with a number of HIV risk factors or behaviors including alcohol use (Choudhry et al., 2014; Dunkle et al.,

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2004a; Norris et al., 2009; Okigbo et al., 2014; Shannon et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2012; Weiser et al., 2007); sexual or physical violence or abuse (Adudans et al., 2011; Choudhry et al., 2014; Cluver et al., 2011; Jewkes, 2006; Kalichman and Simbayi, 2004; Okigbo et al., 2014; Zembe et al., 2015); inconsistent condom use (Luke, 2005a; Luke et al., 2011) and multiple partners (Moore et al., 2007; Okigbo et al., 2014; Phillips-Howard et al., 2015; Steffenson et al., 2011). Alongside these epidemiological findings, a now vast social science literature describes the motivations and constraints that structure the practice across a number of settings.

But, what do we actually mean by “transactional sex”? The findings from the social sciences are rich, but offer a wide range of perspectives and meanings, rendering lessons difficult to navigate for intervention and further research. We focus this paper on reviewing this now extensive literature at a time when renewed energy is being directed toward reducing young women’s vulnerability to HIV. While TS takes place in many contexts, we focus our attention on sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) given both the pronounced epidemiological relevance for this region, and that the overwhelming concentration of literature on the topic is situated in SSA. The latter point is not a matter of coincidence. The use of the term “transactional sex” arose from critical analysis of how sexual exchange relationships were being described in SSA early in the HIV pandemic. In the 1990s, dominant biomedical discourse in HIV/AIDS prevention labeled prostitutes or commercial sex workers as a “reservoir of infection” in SSA (Plummer et al., 1991; Simonsen et al., 1990). Social scientists began to criticize what they saw as a careless use of the labels “prostitution” or “commercial sex work” in reference to all forms of sexual exchange (Day, 1988; de Zaluondo, 1991; Seidel, 1993; Standing, 1992). As Hilary Standing explained in 1992:

The overarching problem arises from the tendency to label ‘risk’ populations using ... ‘prostitute’ without either questioning the appropriateness ... or providing any definition of the term. It should be noted ... that much sexual exchange in Africa has a monetary component but it would be quite inappropriate ... to define it as prostitution ... and ... that simply labelling categories ... without contextualising the behavior ... contributes nothing to an understanding of the social phenomenon lying behind the label (Standing, 1992, p. 477).

Standing’s critique drew on earlier anthropological work that detailed sexual relationship and union formation and the role of exchange in relationships from the pre-colonial period onwards (e.g., Schoepf, 1988; White, 1990). A number of in-depth studies have since contributed to “contextualising the behavior”—demonstrating that most forms of sexual exchange are not equated with commercial sex by participants or the broader community. Studies also drew attention to how gendered social and economic inequalities structured sexual exchange rather than any “African sexuality” (e.g., Ankomah, 1992; Schoepf, 1988).

Yet, as research on this subject rapidly expanded in the last 15 years, there has been a “drift” in the understanding of the practice, such that TS is now sometimes conflated with “sex work” or “prostitution” in meaning and measurement (e.g., Ferguson and Morris, 2007; Fitzgerald-Husek et al., 2011; Graham et al., 2014; Robinson and Yeh, 2011). This conflation has extended to some agenda-setting organizations and it belies the history of the concept, confounds efforts to track and understand the role that TS relationships may play in HIV risk, and stymies effective intervention efforts.

The aims of this paper are to review the meaning and motivations for women’s involvement in transactional sex, develop a

unified conceptualization and definition of the practice; and discuss implications for interventions with young women. We argue in this paper that TS should be defined as *noncommercial, non-marital sexual relationships motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits*. This conceptual paper is part of a broader effort to review the body of knowledge on TS in SSA (a companion paper reviews the association between TS and HIV (Wamoyi et al., 2016)), and provides a foundation for efforts to improve measurement, and therefore understanding, of the role that TS plays in HIV risk.

Our analysis of the literature revealed three ideal-type paradigms of the determinants and nature of women’s practice of TS: sex for basic needs; sex for improved social status; and sex and material expressions of love. The “ideal type” is a sociological construct that serves to build meaning by depicting “pure” representations of social categories or actions. Importantly, ideal types are not meant to be taken as realistic portrayals; they are explicitly reductionist in order to facilitate comparison (Weber, 1978). Most original social science research portrays a reality that draws from at least two of the paradigms we describe; however, there is a tendency among donors and civil society groups to emphasize one paradigm at the expense of others. By delineating ideal-type paradigms of TS, we highlight what is left aside when each is examined alone. This exercise generates multiple narratives, and helps to explain why defining TS has proven so challenging. It also serves as the basis for considering implications for intervention efforts aiming to reduce women’s HIV risk; and highlights the consequences of drawing from too narrow an understanding of the practice.

2. Methodological approach

We conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on TS in SSA through 2014. The review was designed to address multiple aspects of TS including its conceptualization, measurement, and associations with HIV and related risk behaviors. We used the following databases to identify peer-reviewed articles and monographs: PubMed, EMBASE, Global Health, POPline, Web of Science, ADOLEC, Scopus, and Anthropology plus. Grey literature and national reports were searched through a number of websites: Google Scholar, UNAIDS, UNFPA, WHO, the World Bank, FHI, Population Council, PSI, USAID, CIDA, DFID, PEPFAR, OSI, HIV/AIDS Alliance, Guttmacher Institute, African Population and Health Research Center, and Population Reference Bureau. Experts’ suggestions were used to identify relevant monographs, peer-reviewed articles, and grey literature papers and reports. Additionally, the following journals were hand searched: African Journal of Reproductive Health, African Health Sciences, African Journal of AIDS Research, East African Journal of Public Health, East African Medical Journal, African Affairs, Culture Health and Sexuality, Archives of Sexual Behavior, Gender and Development, Exchange on HIV/AIDS, Sexuality and Gender.

The search terms included: [“transactional sex” or “survival sex” or “consumption sex” or “intergenerational sex” or “commodified sex” or “cross-generational sex” or “informal sex”, or “sex* exchange”, or “sex* trade” or “sugar daddy*”, or “globalization and sex*” or “modernity and sex*” and Africa]. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were included. No types of publication or time restrictions were applied to the search. Only studies in English were included.

Following the removal of duplicates, we identified just over 3000 titles. In title and abstract review, the majority were found not relevant to TS. In total, 739 studies were retrieved for full text review. Of these, 339 met our inclusion and exclusion criteria (located in SSA; concerned transactional sex, not sex work; did not focus on

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