Adolescents and young women’s vulnerability to HIV: Understanding the role of Transactional Sex

Joyce Wamoyi

Despite efforts to address HIV among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in sub-Saharan Africa, this group has continued to experience disproportionate burden of HIV infection. Biological susceptibility, poor access to sexual and reproductive health information and services combined with structural factors (e.g. gender-inequalities, poverty, social norms, violence) have been postulated as key explanations for the high rates of infection. Structural drivers push AGYW to engage in high risk sexual behaviors such as multiple and concurrent partnerships, non-use of condoms and transactional sex. The STRIVE research program consortium, funded by the Department for International Development, set out to address the structural drivers of HIV risk. Here, I present findings from STRIVE on the complex nature and motivations for transactional sex. Based on the systematic review of social, anthropological and behavioural literature, we: a) came up with a definition of transactional sex as non-marital, non-commercial sexual relationships or encounters motivated by an implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits; and b) delineated three different framings of the motivations of transactional sex as: 1) sex for basic needs; 2) sex for improved social status; 3) sex for material expressions of love. Although transactional sex is often conflated with sex work, we argue that transactional sex is distinct from sex work. We also conducted cognitive interviews in Uganda and Tanzania and came up with suggestions on questions that can be best utilized to measure transactional sex in sub-Saharan Africa. This work has implications for measurement of transactional sex and how the practice can be addressed to reduce HIV among AGYW in sub-Saharan Africa. Addressing transactional sex needs multi-sectoral and combined prevention programmes so as to tackle the multiple motivations of the practice.

Joyce Wamoyi Biography

Dr. Joyce Wamoyi is a social and behavioral researcher at the National Institute for Medical Research, Mwanza, Tanzania and is currently Glidden visiting professor at the University of Ohio. She has an MSc in community health and a PhD in social and behavioral sciences. Dr. Wamoyi has worked on various public health topics for over 19 years and has extensive research experience in the following areas: Adolescents and young people’s sexual and reproductive health (SRH) behavior; Structural drivers of SRH risk; HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment; Gender and sexuality; Parenting/ families and child outcomes; Stigma and discrimination in adolescent access to SRH services; Malaria in pregnancy; and Qualitative and participatory research methods. In her work, she has explored the dynamics of transactional sex in adolescents and young women's sexual relationships in Tanzania and sub-Saharan Africa. She was a co-leader for the transactional sex working group of the STRIVE research program consortium on tackling the structural drivers of HIV. In addition to her research work, she is also involved in capacity building work and has been an advisor and supervisor for Masters and PhD students in the UK and Africa.