Despite evidence pointing to varied and overlapping motivations for engaging in transactional sex, current programming to address the harmful effects of the practice on young women’s lives, including HIV risk, assumes that women are helpless victims, motivated by basic economic needs. To be effective, programme designers must identify and address the context-specific sets of motivations for the practice.

Recommendations

Interventions
We recommend that, to be effective, programme designers need to:
- understand the prevalence of and motivations for transactional sex in a specific context
- address the associated HIV risk, not the practice itself
- integrate appropriate measures into broader empowerment and health interventions, rather than attempt to intervene on transactional sex alone
- address the gender inequality and norms that underpin the practice
- strengthen economic interventions for young women by including critical reflection processes on:
  - their agency and choices in transactional sex relationships
  - their aspirations for consumer items that symbolise a better life, as motivation for sexual exchange
  - the norms and beliefs that sustain gender inequality in transactional sex relationships

Research
We recommend that:
- public health research and intervention efforts use the STRIVE definition and conceptualisation in order to capture the practice of transactional sex accurately
- researchers develop longitudinal studies to better understand the mechanisms and pathways through which transactional sex increases young women’s risk of HIV
- large-scale studies across sub-Saharan Africa use STRIVE rigorous, tested measures of transactional sex that differentiate it from sex work in order to estimate the prevalence of the practice more accurately, as well as to facilitate better understanding of the contribution of transactional sex to HIV risk among young women
Figure 1: Three Factors Motivating Young Women to Practice Transactional Sex

- Absolute Deprivation
  - Poverty
  - Household insecurity
  - Peer pressure
  - Parental influence

- Vulnerable Victim
  - Male provision = love

- Powerful Agent
  - Male provider norm

High Instrumentality
- Gendered labor markets
- Economic inequality

Sex for Basic Needs
- Change in marriage systems
- Relationship power dynamics
- Gender attitudes and beliefs

Low Instrumentality
- Consumer culture

Sex and Material Expressions of Love
- Male provision = love

Economic and Socio-Cultural Processes of Globalization

Related Strive Publications

Transactional sex is likely to be a factor in adolescent girls’ and young women’s disproportionate risk of HIV in sub-Saharan Africa

**Existing evidence**

Key epidemiological studies find an association between transactional sex and HIV for women.[1-6] There is also some evidence of an association between transactional sex and other known HIV risk behaviours:

- partner violence or abuse[7-11]
- alcohol[12, 13]
- multiple partners[8, 14-16]
- non-use of condoms[17-19]

Among these factors, the strongest evidence exists for the link between past experiences of violence or abuse and transactional sex. Evidence of the association between transactional sex and multiple sexual partners is also fairly strong for both young and adult women. Studies that show an association between transactional sex and alcohol tend to be among adult women rather than adolescent girls and young women.[20-24] Finally, the association between transactional sex and condom use is less clear.[8, 12]

However, studies that have looked at the value of the goods or money provided to women in transactional sex relationships have found that condom use becomes less likely as the amount a man provides increases.[17, 18]

**STRIVE findings**

Our systematic review and meta-analysis find that in sub-Saharan Africa, transactional sex is associated with HIV among women. Those who practice transactional sex are 1.5 times more likely to be HIV positive than women who do not. There was no conclusive evidence of an association between transactional sex and HIV for men.[25]

An individual baseline study from rural South Africa (the HPTN 068 trial) shows an association between transactional sex and HIV but does not show that other risk factors (such as age difference between partners, sex under the influence of alcohol/drugs) mediate this association.[6]

Modelling studies based on Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data from West Africa show evidence of an association between females aged 15–24 with two or more partners (given the association between transactional sex and reporting of multiple partners, this may serve as a potential proxy measure for transactional sex) and prevalence of HIV in the population. The same association is not evidenced in males.[26] In the same study, findings show HIV prevalence weakly negatively associated with coverage of antiretroviral therapy. In other words, the variations in HIV prevalence are not caused by increased survival as a result of access to treatment.

Transactional sex is not sex work, and is motivated by at least three interrelated sets of factors

**Existing evidence**

Social science studies:

- distinguish transactional sex from sex work in sub-Saharan Africa
- describe transactional sex as separate from marital relationships[27-36]
- show that transactional sex is motivated by financial need[37] and/or aspirations for a better life[33, 38] and may include emotional intimacy[39, 40]

**STRIVE findings**

In our review of the literature from sub-Saharan Africa, we find three depictions of the nature of and motivations for young women’s engagement in transactional sex:

- vulnerable ‘victims’ who practice transactional sex for basic needs
- ‘powerful’ young women who practice transactional sex for social status
- sexual exchange as an expression of love

To design effective interventions, we must account for all three of these depictions of transactional sex.[41]

Findings from across sub-Saharan Africa indicate that transactional sex is framed by structural and gender inequalities that increase the reliance of adolescent girls and young women on men to meet their needs and aspirations. Findings from urban and rural contexts in Tanzania and Uganda indicate the importance of perceived exploitation and power in transactional sex relationships.

A trial in rural South Africa (HPTN 068) showed that:

- young women value securing their own financial resources toward independence
- money symbolises a young woman’s value and a man’s commitment
- ‘exchanges’ are the basis for the organisation of romantic relationships
- young women express agency in partner choice, but this weakens once the relationship is established – women struggle to translate perceived agency into risk reduction[42]
Valid measures of transactional sex enable better understanding of how transactional sex increases adolescent girls and young women’s risk of HIV

Existing evidence
Numerous epidemiological studies that measure whether or not someone has practised transactional sex conflate transactional sex with sex work[43-45] and this may result in under-reporting. Until recently, demographic and surveillance studies failed to measure transactional sex as adequately distinct from sex work or failed to measure it at all. The lack of robust, consistent measures of transactional sex has hampered efforts to understand the role it plays in increasing the risk of HIV. When differentiated from sex work, measures of transactional sex show an association between the practice and HIV.[1, 4]

STRIVE findings
Evidence from cognitive interviews in Uganda and Tanzania show that the following questions will improve assessment of the prevalence of transactional sex. Similar questions have been included in the Phase 7 core questionnaire for the DHS surveys.

For women: In the last 12 months, have you entered into a sexual relationship with a man mainly in order to get things that you needed, money, gifts or other things that are important to you?

For men: In the last 12 months, have you given a woman who is not your wife and is also not a sex worker, any money, (gifts) or helped her to pay for things mainly in order to start or continue a sexual relationship with her?

A recent study in Uganda using these measures has found reporting of the practice to be more in line with qualitative evidence indicating it to be quite common. A recent study from Uganda found 44% of a small general population sample of 78 sexually active, unmarried 15–24-year-olds had practiced transactional sex in the last 12 months.

The measurement questions above are carefully worded to capture the gendered nature of the practice, avoid stigmatising language, differentiate the practice from sex work, and ensure the respondent understands that the relationships in question are motivated by exchange. Women are asked about relationships they have entered in order to receive goods; men are asked about relationships they have entered in order to access sex, reflecting the normative expectations for men’s and women’s roles in these relationships. Key components of the wording include:

- “sexual relationship” points to exchange embedded in relationships
- “mainly in order to” points to the motivation underlying this relationship
- “other than a sex worker” helps men differentiate the relationship from encounters with sex workers

Structural interventions that address the context-specific, interrelated motivations for transactional sex have the potential to reduce HIV risk for adolescent girls and young women

Existing evidence
Individual-level behaviour change approaches are insufficient on their own to prevent HIV risk behaviours including transactional sex.[46-48] Structural interventions show more promise: cash transfers and other economic empowerment programmes have shown mixed success in reducing the prevalence of transactional sex.[49-52] Mass-media approaches to change gender norms around cross-generational sex with ‘sugar-daddies’ have had mixed results, perhaps because they narrowly portray these relationships as between female victims and male predators[53, 54].

STRIVE findings
In our review of HIV interventions addressing adolescents and young people,[55] most have addressed intergenerational sex[53, 56, 57] or reported on transactional sex outcomes within broader aims of reducing HIV incidence.[49, 52] We find very few that set out to reduce transactional sex per se.[57, 58] We argue that this is for the best, as transactional sex is one among a cluster of behaviours and practices that increase adolescent girls’ and young women’s risk of HIV in sub-Saharan Africa. Programmes can and should address transactional sex by adding material to existing multi-component HIV prevention and wider social and development programmes. Such programmes should combine structural approaches, interpersonal communication strategies and biomedical and behavioural intervention components. Combination programming can attend to the underlying inequalities that influence women’s participation in economically motivated relationships, as well as reduce the risk that women and men experience through engaging in transactional sex. The structural components that programmes should ideally address include context-specific economic vulnerabilities as well as gender inequality at the community and interpersonal levels.[49, 51, 59, 50]
What impact have we had?

Our work on transactional sex has attracted considerable attention in the field and has been taken up in practice. STRIVE’s work has influenced understanding of the meaning of transactional sex and its measurement, and made recommendations to guide intervention efforts.

- UNAIDS commissioned STRIVE to develop a reference document on transactional sex and the vulnerability of adolescent girls and young women to HIV in sub-Saharan Africa. This publication has the potential to impact the field in terms of how to approach intervention in transactional sex.

- In 2013, STRIVE’s working group on transactional sex and HIV submitted a memo to the DHS open forum requesting they include measures of transactional sex and improve measures to capture this practice. (Demographic and Health Surveys are conducted in about 90 low- and middle-income countries every five years and provide invaluable data at national and sub-national levels on indicators including HIV.) In 2015, the DHS incorporated our suggested changes and included, in the next round of surveys (phase 7), questions to capture a nuanced understanding of the practice of transactional sex.

- STRIVE working group has worked directly with researchers to improve measures of transactional sex in studies of adolescent girls and young women (AGYW):
  - The DREAMS evaluation instruments in Tanzania, South Africa, and Kenya.
  - The UNICEF TRANSFER project, which aims to assess the role of social protection, through cash transfers, on AGYW’s health.
  - The Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS), another multi-country, multi-wave survey mechanism akin to the DHS.
  - The Kisesa Health and Demographic sentinel surveillance (HDSS) survey, in Tanzania.
  - A number of individual surveys.

- As a result of the STRIVE findings of the role of transactional sex on AGYW’s risks of sexual and reproductive health, the Oak Foundation has funded a pilot intervention to address norms on intergenerational transactional sex in Tanzania. It is hoped that the intervention will reduce risks faced as a result of AGYW engaging in intergenerational transactional sex.

More information: http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/themes/transactional-sex-and-hiv

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