

Measuring transactional sex and HIV risk

TECHNICAL BRIEF

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Authors: Joyce Wamoyi, Kirsten Stoebenau, Nambusi Kyegombe, Lori Heise and Meghna Ranganathan

Why is transactional sex important for adolescent girls and young women's HIV risk?

In sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) face a disproportionate burden of HIV risk. Globally, 2.1 million young women are living with HIV. Four-fifths live in sub-Saharan Africa¹ and over 25% of all new HIV infections occur in young women aged 15-24.^{2,3}

Transactional sex has received increasing attention in the public health literature, as it is considered to be an important contributing factor to the high HIV infection rates observed among this age group in sub-Saharan Africa^{4,6}. This practice, driven by economic and gender inequality⁷, increases women's risk of HIV. A recent systematic review found that having ever practised TS increased women's risk of HIV by almost 50%.⁶

There is an urgent need to improve the measurement of transactional sex in order to effectively capture the contribution of transactional sex to the HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa.

Yet, as the attention to the role of transactional sex in HIV risk for AGYW has grown, so too has misunderstanding over its meaning and, therefore, how best to measure it. 'Transactional sex' is sometimes mistakenly understood as encompassing all forms of sexual exchange, including sex work. However, this conceptualisation runs counter to findings from studies conducted in the last 25 years across sub-Saharan Africa, which have described 'transactional sex' as informal sexual exchange relationships that are different from sex work⁸. The confusion that persists over the meaning of transactional sex has significantly compromised understanding whether, how, and to what extent transactional sex explains AGYW's HIV risk, acquisition and transmission. An improved measure of transactional sex will not only advance the evidence base around transactional sex and HIV risk for AGYW, but better evidence will in turn facilitate more effective interventions.

Definitions

While transactional sex takes place across a range of contexts and for multiple reasons (for an in-depth look at the motivations for this practice see: Stoebenau et al, 2016.⁸), shared characteristics in these relationships can be used to direct a

Transactional sex can be defined as: non-commercial, non-marital sexual relationships motivated by an implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits

definition of the practice. Transactional sex is characterised by non-commercial, non-marital sexual relationships motivated by an implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits⁸.

These implicit exchange relationships stem from broader expectations across many societies about the roles of women and men in relationships: men are expected to provide financial and material support; and women, in turn, are expected to offer sexual and domestic services. The length of these relationships vary: they may endure for a few days to many years. They may include a low or high degree of emotional intimacy, but they are primarily motivated by exchange of material support or other benefits for sex. While gender expectations direct male provision of support in all relationships, the degree to which that support motivates engaging in the relationship is what differentiates transactional sex from other non-marital relationships.

These relationships are largely distinct from sex work. In sex work, sexual encounters are pre-negotiated, immediately remunerated, discrete sex acts; and are not framed within broader gender expectations concerning male provision of support within romantic relationships, but rather framed in terms of a commodity exchange⁹. Importantly, those engaging in transactional sex relationships do not self-identify as sex workers.

Sex work	Transactional sex
Self-identifies as sex worker	Does not self-identify as sex worker
Money or goods explicitly exchanged for sex	Exchange of money or goods implicit in sexual relationship
Often little shared emotional intimacy	Often at least some shared emotional intimacy

In addition, transactional sexual relationships are non-marital relationships. Marriage differs from transactional sex on the bases of the level and type of commitment made between partners, the resulting duration of the relationship, and the meaning of marriage as a social institution in society.

Why do we need to improve current measures of transactional sex?

It is important that indicators distinguish transactional sex from the far more stigmatised practice of sex work to ensure accurate reporting.

The conflation of transactional sex and sex work, the extensive variability in measures across studies, and the failure to clearly identify the gendered nature of transactional sex all limit our ability to adequately account for the role of transactional sex in AGYW's HIV risk over time and across contexts for women and men.

Approaches to measuring transactional sex have too often conflated the practice with sex work (see Table 1). An improved measure that can be used consistently across countries is particularly critical for large, repeat nationally representative surveys.

Table 2 reports TS prevalence from studies of sexually active young women less than 26 years of age in South Africa. While the specific settings and study populations likely explain some of the observed variation in prevalence, the differences in the questions used to measure transactional sex also likely contribute to these differences. Prevalence estimates were lower in studies that relied on more conventional measures of transactional sex, which tend to confuse it with sex work; while prevalence estimates were higher in studies that drew on more nuanced measures.

Table 1: examples of variability in existing questions used to measure transactional sex

To women and men	<i>Have you ever exchanged sex for gifts or money?</i> (widely used conventional question)	Conflates transactional sex with sex work
To men	<i>Have you ever paid anyone in exchange for having sexual intercourse?</i> (Phase 6 DHS surveys)	
To women	<i>Have you ever become (sexually) involved with a (non-primary partner) because he provided you with or you expected that he would provide you with food, cosmetics, clothes, transportation, school fees, somewhere to sleep, or cash?</i> ¹⁰	Better distinguishes transactional sex from sex work
To men	<i>Have you ever had a sexual relationship (or act) motivated by her expectation that you would provide her with food, cosmetics, clothes, transportation, items for children or family, school fees, somewhere to sleep, alcohol, a "fun night out", or cash?</i> ¹¹	

Table 2: Range in estimated prevalence of TS for young women in South Africa by measurement approach

Study	Question	Percent report TS	Sample design
Hallman, 2005 ¹²	Have you ever received goods, money, or favors in exchange for sex?	6%	2,194 sexually active young women ages 14-24 in two districts of KwaZulu-Natal
Abel, 2011 ¹³	Have you ever received money or gifts in exchange for sexual intercourse?	2%	263 sexually active first year University students, Western Cape
*Nduna, 2010 ¹⁴	Have you ever had a sexual relationship (or act) with a (main partner, roll-on, or once-off partner) because he provided you with or you expected that he would provide you with food, cosmetics, clothes, transportation, school fees, somewhere to sleep, alcohol or a 'fun night out', or cash?	25%	1,294 sexually active HIV negative, young women ages 15-26, recruited from schools in mostly rural Eastern Cape
*Jewkes, 2012 ¹⁵	(with just 'casual partners' – roll-on; once-off)	9%	

*Note: These papers are based on the same study (Stepping Stones) and study populations.

Previous measures also varied with respect to the length of time being assessed.^{5, 10, 15-25} The exposure period varied from 'ever' practiced transactional sex to having transactional sex with their 'last partner,' 'a recent partner' or 'in the last 12 months'. This variability has potential consequences for assessing the association of the practice with HIV and for understanding the pathways through which it increases risk.

Another concern is that the gendered nature of transactional sex is too often ignored in measures directed to men. The association between TS and HIV is unclear for men⁶; and this may be explained at least in part by poor measurement. While studies point to young men occasionally being the recipients of gifts and money from women, as well as providers of goods in transactional sex relationships^{26, 27}, questions that

aim to assess men's participation in transactional sex should prioritise their role as providers of goods in exchange for sex.

Finally, in order to understand the conditions and circumstances through which transactional sex increases AGYW's HIV risk, it is important to include, alongside robust measures of transactional sex, questions that capture risk behaviours that are associated with both transactional sex and HIV and may explain how transactional sex increases HIV risk. These include, but are not limited to alcohol use, multiple and concurrent partners, age of sexual partner, violence in the relationship, and condom use practices. (See the STRIVE website for technical briefs on measuring alcohol use, and measuring intimate partner violence: <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/>).

Approaches to improving measures of transactional sex

The definition of transactional sex presented above has direct implications for how we should go about measuring transactional sex. We recommend consideration of the following:

- Questions used to measure transactional sex must clearly differentiate the practice from sex work
- Questions used to measure transactional sex must include a clear statement of the motivation for the sexual relationship (e.g. Dunkle et al from South Africa, "*Have you ever had a sexual relationship (or act) with a [partner] because he provided you with or you expected that he would provide you with food, cosmetics, clothes, etc.*"¹⁰)
- Measures must ensure the wording is non-judgmental to minimise response bias, resultant under-reporting, and accurately capture the prevalence of the practice
- Transactional sex measures should not include marital relationships (but may include married individual's extramarital relationships)
- Measures should account for the gendered roles of women and men in transactional sexual relationships

We used cognitive interviewing techniques to identify the most appropriate, context-specific wording for questions that adhere to the above recommendations towards approaches for the measurement of transactional sex. Research participants were asked not only to answer a question, but to explain how they understood the question and arrived at the answer. This technique can improve survey questions by exploring how research participants understand and interpret research questions.²⁸ Through successive rounds of interviews, questions were refined and improved in order to arrive at a measure that captures transactional sex. Two types of questions were tested. The first were designed to be included in a module addressing characteristics of relationships with up to three recent sexual partners. The second 'stand-alone' questions were designed to better measure the prevalence of TS in surveys that may only include a short sexual behaviour module (e.g. demographic surveillance sites).

We conducted 80 cognitive interviews with sexually active women and men in both Tanzania and Uganda. We conducted

two rounds of 40 interviews in each setting. Analysis of the first round of cognitive interviews was used to guide the wording of questions in the subsequent round. Because socio-cultural understandings of transactional sex may differ across individual characteristics and context, cognitive interview participants were stratified by urban and rural residence and captured variation in school status and age in each study setting. The age ranges for participants varied by sex and were in response to the often age-disparate nature of transactional sex relationships: between ages 15-24 for women and 18-35 for men. The variation in age and education accounted for potential differences in levels of comprehension of complex questions as well as variation in sexual experience.

Recommended measures of transactional sex for the sub-Saharan African context

Using the findings from cognitive interviews in Uganda and Tanzania, previous research addressing the meaning of transactional sex in multiple settings across sub-Saharan Africa, an extensive review of the social science and epidemiological literature, and a careful review of measurement approaches to date, we provide recommendations (see Tables 3 and 4) for improved measures of transactional sex.

- For both women and men, we first provide **a recommended question to measure transactional sex with a specific sexual partner in a pre-existing 'relationship module'** The relationship module would first establish up to the last three sexual partners of the respondent, and the type of the partnership (e.g. spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, acquaintance) before then asking specific questions about sexual behaviour with each partner.
- Second, we provide **a recommended question to measure whether the respondent had practiced transactional sex with anyone in the previous 12 months**. This question could be added to any survey that includes even a few questions on sexual behaviour.
- Finally, we provide **guidance from lessons learned through the cognitive interview work on specific recommendations for the wording of these questions**.

Summary

In order to better understand and address young women's disproportionate risk of HIV within sub-Saharan Africa, we must improve definition and measurement of transactional sex, a known risk factor for young women.

It is critical to ensure that questions asked of women and men differentiate transactional sex from sex work by making clear the motivation for the sexual relationship. By including questions that can provide an accurate measure of transactional sex alongside other important risk factors, we can improve our understanding of how, and the extent to which this practice continues to influence the risk of acquiring or transmitting HIV.



Table 3: Recommended questions for women

Relationship module question	Did you enter into a sexual relationship with (INITIALS) mainly in order to get things you need, money, gifts or other things that are important to you?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ This question would be asked of any partner who is not the respondent’s husband, or with respect to non-marital relationships ■ “sexual relationship” is less likely to be conflated with sex work than “have sex with” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “relationship” differentiates this practice from discrete sex work exchanges ■ “enter into a sexual relationship” is less judging than “become sexually involved with” ■ “mainly in order to” directs attention to the motivation for the relationship ■ “things that you need” and “things that are important to you” are subjective and captured items ranging from oil and sugar to school fees, clothing, and cell phones ■ Money and gifts are common items in exchange relationships ■ The exact wording may vary by context: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “enter into a relationship” was preferred in Uganda and “start a relationship” was preferred in Tanzania – “gifts” may be confusing if it signals a transfer that does not require exchange ■ This question is understood as intended by the majority of women, but can be “heard” by a few as a question simply asking if their partner had provided for them. It therefore may lead to slight over-reporting 	
Stand-alone question	In the last 12 months, did you enter into a sexual relationship with a man mainly in order to get things that you need, money, gifts, or other things that are important to you?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ This question would be asked to unmarried women, or could be analysed among all women, excluding those who married within the last 12 months (as those married for more than a year would be answering to other relationships they ‘started’ in the last 12 months) ■ “In the last 12 months” was chosen so that older women and younger women are being asked about the same time frame; and allows for a long enough time frame for younger women with larger gaps between sexual partners and activity to be captured. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – For studies addressing only AGYW (15-24), a question asking about lifetime or “ever” engaging in transactional sex is also recommended – “enter into” or “start” a sexual relationship in the last 12 months also reduces probability of response referring to a spouse ■ For this stand-alone question it is necessary to specify that this refers to a “sexual” relationship 	



Recommended questions for men

Relationship module question	Have you given (INITIALS) any money, gifts or helped her to pay for things mainly in order to start or continue a sexual relationship with her?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ This question would be asked of non-marital relationships ■ As is the case for women, “mainly in order to” emphasises the motivation for the relationship ■ “to start or continue” recognises that men feel they must continue to provide for a woman if they wish to continue the relationship, as well as it recognises that men sometimes provide goods before sex, or after the relationship begins. ■ “Sexual relationship” was used here to help differentiate the question from sex work, it points to more than a single encounter ■ “Money, gifts, or helped her to pay for things” captures some of the transfers common in transactional sex and allows for subjective interpretation with “help to pay for things” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The word “gifts” may not work in some contexts for men, as described above for women 	
Stand-alone question	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?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “Who is not your wife and is also not a sex worker” is important in helping men to identify the type of relationship this question refers to 	

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