

# **A reflection on the practice Transactional sex**

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# What constitutes Transactional sex?

- Transactional sex (TS) refers to the exchange of sex for material support of some kind including cash, gifts, economic assistance, favours
- Does not refer to professional interaction but rather a financial arrangement within a relationship often characterised with friendship, affection or romantic attachment
- Conceived as different from sex work (financial arrangement whereby a client pays a sex worker an agree fee for sexual services)

## Scope of the problem

- Prevalence of engaging in TS is varied depending on: age group, sample of the girls & phrasing of the questions
- TS very common in many sub-Saharan African countries:
  - estimates range from 5% to 96% among the 12-19 yr olds (Jewkes et al. 2012; Matasha et al 1998; Nyanzi et al.2001; Nzyuko et al, 1997; Luke & Kurz 2004, Meekers & Calves, 1997; Chatterji et al. 2004; Dunkle et al 2004)
  - A comprehensive literature review of quantitative & qualitative studies reporting TS in SSA found 45 publications of women & girls engaging in TS (Luke 2003)

# Consequences of Transactional sex

- TS likely to increase risk of HIV & other STIs, unplanned pregnancy & other undesirable SRH outcomes through the following pathways:
  - Provides a dynamic for partner change
  - Makes particular people attractive as sexual partners, who, given the current distribution of HIV, are more risky
    - affluent, older men & mobile
  - Creates uneven power relationship which makes it difficult for girls to negotiate for condom use (e.g. men want 'value for their money')
  - Encourages gender-based violence
  - Encourages the sexual exploitation of women

# Reflections on beliefs/norms/structural issues sustaining the practice

- **Poverty** (e.g. alleviate extreme poverty, capital for small business)
- **Gender inequalities** (e.g. fewer opportunities for young women to make money compared to young men; women given less with an assumption that they will make up the deficit themselves)
- **Peer pressure** (e.g. to conform to conventional consumption, gain as much as possible, participate in discussions)
- **Symbolic dimensions & eligibility for marriage**
  - men's demonstration of affection & appreciation through generosity & consistency of gifts
  - size of gifts sometimes interpreted as a sign of affluence & therefore eligibility for marriage
  - cultural expectation that men provide for women

# Reflections on beliefs/norms/structural issues sustaining the practice

- Beliefs/norms among women (e.g. social norm on TS requires that girls must guard their reputation)
  - a validation of their worth from their partner & hence, it is sex without exchange that is considered demeaning to a woman
  - sex without exchange is equal to prostitution
  - sex without exchange is not mutual & is a reflection of one's stupidity
  - ability to attract many partners & get more a sign of a woman's "attractive power"
  - engagement in TS reflects the smartness/cleverness of a woman
  - ability to face men & negotiate a sign of "empowerment"
- Beliefs among men
  - an easy way to get a woman to satisfy men's sexual desire & prove masculinity
  - sex is not free & should never be free

## Points of contention

- Is the TS similar in form and meaning across settings & among couples?
- How different is TS from sex work?
- Are women who engage in TS exploited/abused?
- Is poverty the key driver of TS or are social/sexual norms more salient?
- Are women who engage in TS passive victims or active agents/initiators? (e.g. Sustaining & shaping the exchange system?)
- Could TS be riskier than sex work? (given the power dynamics, explicit negotiations, insisting on condom use)