

Informing programming to reduce the HIV risk of transactional sex

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Summary

We have made substantial progress towards achieving the strategic goal for this stream of work within STRIVE:

Programmes to reduce HIV risk and empower young women in sub-Saharan Africa are informed by a clear definition of transactional sex and understanding of the multiple motivations for engaging in the practice.

Transactional sexual relationships have been shown to increase the HIV risk faced by adolescent girls and young women. Too often, however, programming to address this risk is based on simplistic and misleading definitions of the practice and of what motivates girls and young women to engage in it. Effective interventions and effective resource allocation depend on evidence-based understandings. STRIVE's work in this arena is finding traction and application among researchers, bilateral funders, UN agencies such as UNAIDS and UNICEF, intervention designers and influential media platforms.

What is the issue?

The practice of transactional sex is a driver of HIV risk, particularly for adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa who face a higher risk of HIV infection than any other population worldwide. To be effective and to prevent a waste of resources, however, steps to address the HIV risk posed by the practice must be based on a clear conceptualisation of transactional sex and the motivations that underlie the practice. Three key misunderstandings must be addressed:

- Transactional sex is not the same as sex work – interventions aimed at sex-workers are unlikely to reach young women and girls engaging in transactional sexual relationships
- Programmes should not aim to stop the practice itself but rather to address the HIV risk it poses

- Young women and adolescent girls do not engage in transactional sexual relationships (only) because of extreme or relative poverty – programmes addressing only this motivating factor will be less relevant or effective in many contexts

Correcting these and other misconceptions is an urgent priority for the HIV field, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where HIV prevalence is more than twice as high among young women as it is among young men. In parts of South Africa, it is up to eight times higher.

What did STRIVE analysis contribute?

From our analysis of in-depth research in sub-Saharan African contexts, systematic reviews and conceptual thinking, STRIVE researchers have produced:

- a clear definition of the practice
- a nuanced understanding of three key motivations underlying the practice
- a crucial distinction between transactional sex and sex work, demonstrated by mathematical modelling
- clear evidence that demonstrates the association between transactional sex and HIV, based on a systematic literature review
- improved survey questions
- a technical brief, with UNAIDS
- a measurement brief
- recommendations to researchers, HIV prevention programme developers and implementers and funding partners

Impact

STRIVE work on this question has seen growing impact in terms of informing the design of programmes for adolescent girls and young women, through symposia, media attention and influential grey literature.

As recommended by STRIVE, the most effective way to address the HIV risk involved in transactional sex

is not to attempt programming on the practice alone but rather in combination with other, empowerment-focused interventions.

“The STRIVE research has been very useful for us to understand better the context of transactional sex. There is probably an opportunity for broader learning and sharing with decision makers in government as well as key development partners who have an interest and finance programmes with girls and young women, SRH, HIV and economic empowerment. From the CT and AGYW [cash transfers and adolescent girls and young women] symposium it was clear that adolescent girls and young women programming is getting more attention but remains complex, with different packages and streams of interventions in place and different ways of addressing economic issues. For these programmes, the reduction of transactional sex does not seem to be the entry point. Perhaps a component. It was also clear that the current interventions are limited in scale and that more efforts are needed to scale up programmes which address multiple vulnerabilities at the same time and for longer period of time to have a more long-term effect on behaviours and social norms.”

ULRIKE GILBERT-NANDRA, CHIEF, HIV AND AIDS, UNICEF COUNTRY OFFICE, TANZANIA¹

The Population Council is the implementation science research partner to the DREAMS Partnership: Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored and Safe Girls.² Population Council's research is assessing the reach, implementation approach and effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing HIV risk for young women and their partners in sub-Saharan Africa. This work is being conducted in seven countries: Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

“While we appreciated that transactional sex is important for HIV prior to the STRIVE consortium's efforts, we have drawn on STRIVE's measures and efforts to distinguish transactional relationships from sex work to better unpack these relationships in our work with both adolescent girls and young women and with men. Every time we talk about these efforts to define and distinguish these relationships from sex work, we refer to the work of STRIVE.”

DR SANYUKTA MATHUR, ASSOCIATE II, DREAMS IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE PROJECT DIRECTOR, POPULATION COUNCIL³

Important findings are emerging out of Population Council's data on adolescent girls and young women, as well as men's participation in transactional sex over the course of the DREAMS programme – with STRIVE's measures proving to be of considerable value.⁴

How did STRIVE partners achieve impact?

To inform the design of programming on transactional sex and HIV risk, it was necessary to first achieve academic validation for STRIVE's conceptualisation and analysis.

- A substantial record of publications and citations attests to progress.
- STRIVE researchers designed and tested questions to gain accurate data on transactional sex and submitted them to the demographic health survey (DHS), as described in a separate Impact Case Study. <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/impact-case-study-questions-transactional-sex-dhs>
- A study on an assessment of the mechanisms through which cash transfers work using longitudinal qualitative interviews, conducted analysis using the Stoebanau et al. 2016 transactional sex framework. “Transactional sex plays a significant role in the relationships of AGYW in rural northwest Tanzania. The combined cash transfer and financial education intervention reduced some AGYW's engagement in sexual relationships to meet basic economic needs and increased agency in partner selection.”⁵
- Reflecting on how cash transfer interventions would work to address adolescent girls' and young women's risks, researchers taking a behavioural economics approach have recommended helping girls to reframe their vision of desired future states to increase the expected rewards for the path of self-reliance rather than reliance on men.⁶

STRIVE's conceptual framework for understanding transactional sex was able to achieve impact for a number of reasons.⁷

- Qualitative work in affected communities (primarily in Tanzania, Madagascar and South Africa) led to significant new insights into the motivations underlying the practice.
- Clear conceptual thinking on transactional sex provided a nuanced model of motivations for the practice and contributed answers to an urgent set of questions.
- STRIVE engaged with peers in the field in refining concepts, inviting others working on transactional sex to an intensive two-day workshop in 2014.
- STRIVE platforms – Learning Lab webinars, high-level meetings, including Greentree II on HIV and

TECHNICAL REPORT AND JOURNAL ARTICLES

- **Transactional Sex: From analysis to action.** STRIVE/UNAIDS Reference Document, Geneva (2018). <http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2018/transactional-sex-and-hiv-risk>
- Wamoyi, Joyce, et al. **A review of interventions addressing structural drivers of adolescents' sexual and reproductive health vulnerability in sub-Saharan Africa: implications for sexual health programming.** *Reproductive Health*, 11.1 (2014): 88.
- Prudden, Holly J., et al. **Factors Associated with Variations in Population HIV Prevalence across West Africa: Findings from an Ecological Analysis.** *PloS One*, 10.12 (2015): e0142601.
- Stoebenau, Kirsten, et al. **Revisiting the understanding of "transactional sex" in sub-Saharan Africa: A review and synthesis of the literature.** *Social Science & Medicine*, 168 (2016): 186-197.
- Ranganathan, Meghna, et al. **Transactional sex among young women in rural South Africa: prevalence, mediators and association with HIV infection.** *Journal of the International AIDS society*, 19.1 (2016).
- Wamoyi, Joyce, et al. **Transactional sex and risk for HIV infection in sub-Saharan Africa: a systematic review and meta-analysis.** *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, 19.1 (2016).
- Ranganathan, Meghna, et al. **Young women's perceptions of transactional sex and sexual agency: a qualitative study in the context of rural South Africa.** *BMC Public Health*, 17.1 (2017): 666.
- Ranganathan M, et al. **"It's because I like things... it's a status and he buys me airtime": Exploring the role of transactional sex in young women's consumption patterns in rural South Africa** (secondary findings from HPTN 068). *Reproductive Health*, 15:102 (2018).
- Wamoyi, Joyce et al. **Improving the Measurement of Transactional Sex in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Critical Review.** *J AIDS*, 80(4): 367-374. (2019)
- Stoebenau, Kirsten et al. **Developing experimental vignettes to identify gender norms associated with transactional sex for adolescent girls and young women in Central Uganda.** *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 64(4), S60-S66. (2019)

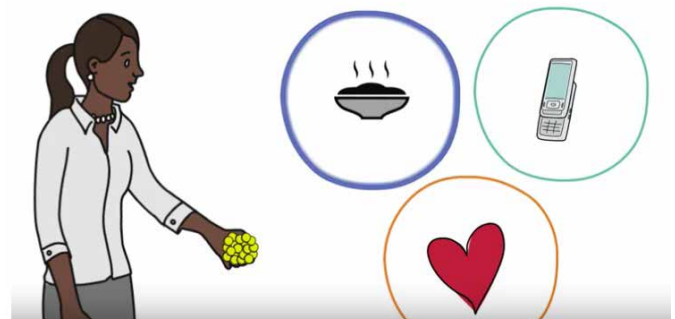
gender-based violence⁸ – expanded the audience for and potential users of the transactional sex conceptual framework, definition and measures.

- STRIVE knowledge translation (including a measurement brief and a video infographic) make the ideas accessible.
- Presentations at national, regional and international conferences, UN agencies and donor meetings built academic credibility and extended the reach and potential impact of the conceptual model.
- The innovative and timely nature of the work, together with early engagement with stakeholders, led to invitations to present the framework, including to UNAIDS whose prevention team went on to commission STRIVE to produce a technical brief on transactional sex.
- Because the STRIVE consortium examines the intersections between different structural factors, insights on transactional sex contributed to discussions on models for resource allocation by the Global Fund and others; the potential synergies between HIV prevention and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); sexual and reproductive health and rights; programming for, and new research on, adolescent girls and young women; evidence on cash transfers and other approaches to shifting harmful social norms and risky behaviour including transactional sex.

For potential users of the model in further research and in practice and programmes, DHS data will be invaluable.



4. DO NOT FOCUS ON A SINGLE SET OF MOTIVATIONS.



This 7-minute STRIVE video infographic, based on research and analysis, explains what transactional sex is and why it matters: <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/transactional-sex-what-it-and-why-it-matters>

KEY MOMENTS

STRIVE Learning Lab webinars

- Joyce Wamoyi: **Adolescents and transactional sex** (2011) <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/adolescents-and-transactional-sex-joyce-wamoyi>
- Holly Prudden: **Disaggregating 'transactional sex' from 'sex work'** (2012) <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/disaggregating-transactional-sex-sex-work-holly-prudden>
- Sanyu Majola: **Situating transactional sex** (2014) <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/situating-transactional-sex-comparisons-history-and-theory-sanyu-mojola>
- Kevin Deane: **Is fish-for-sex a special case? Local value chains and HIV risk** (2014) <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/fish-sex-special-case-local-value-chains-and-hiv-risk-kevin-deane>
- Audrey Pettifor: **HIV prevention for young South African women – Lessons from Swa-Koteka** (2015) <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/hiv-prevention-young-south-african-women-lessons-swa-koteka-audrey-pettifor>
- Rebecca Fielding-Miller: **What do we mean when we say transactional sex?** (2016) <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/what-do-we-mean-when-we-say-transactional-sex-rebecca-fielding-miller>
- Kirsten Stoebenau and Joyce Wamoyi: **Transactional Sex in Sub-Saharan Africa: Meaning, Measurements and Implications for HIV Prevention** (2017) <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/transactional-sex-sub-saharan-africa-meaning-measurements-and-implications-hiv-prevention>
- Meghna Ranganathan: **Transactional sex and HIV risk among young women in rural South Africa** (2017) <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/transactional-sex-and-hiv-risk-among-young-women-rural-south-africa-meghna-ranganathan>

Significant meetings

- **3rd Structural Drivers of HIV Conference** (Cape Town, December 2013), co-hosted by STRIVE, HEARD at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, HIV and Development Group at the University of East Anglia – presentation by Nambusi Kyegombe
- **Greentree II – Violence against Women and Girls, and HIV**, a high-level consultation on the evidence and implications (Greentree Estate, New York 12–14 May 2015)
- **3rd International Association for the Social Sciences and Humanities in HIV (ASSHH) Conference** (Stellenbosch, July 2015) – presentation by Joyce Wamoyi

- **1st Annual Learning Initiative on Norms, Exploitation and Abuse (LINEA) meetings**, (Windsor, UK 2015) – presentations by Joyce Wamoyi and Kirsten Stoebenau
- **AIDS Impact conference**, 13–15 November 2017, Cape Town, South Africa – presentation by Joyce Wamoyi
- **The 30th Annual Joint Scientific Conference** 2016 (Julius Nyerere International Convention Centre, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 4–6 October 2016 – presentation by Joyce Wamoyi
- **International Conference on Fast-Tracking Social Protection to end AIDS**, UNAIDS, Geneva, April, 2018 – presentation by Meghna Ranganathan
- **Invitation to present on transactional sex to UNAIDS**, Geneva (July, 2015) – presentation by Kirsten Stoebenau to Departments of Rights and Gender, Prevention and Communications; UNAIDS request to STRIVE to produce a technical brief for UNAIDS
- **The 22nd International AIDS Conference**, July, 2018 – presentation by Kirsten Stoebenau

Engagement

- **Two-day STRIVE workshop on transactional sex**, London, 2014
- **Formal submission to the Demographic and Health Survey Open Forum** (April, 2014)
- **Requests for input from two groups at the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC)** (2015) re: developing DHS-like population-based surveys building surveys on violence against children
- **Invitation to present to UNAIDS**, Geneva (April, 2014) – presentation by Joyce Wamoyi
- **Invitation to Gates Foundation meeting on Maximising Impact of New HIV Prevention Technologies in sub-Saharan Africa**, 16–19 May 2017 – presentations by Joyce Wamoyi
- **Invited panellist to AIDS Impact Conference** (November, 2017) – presentation by Joyce Wamoyi
- **Invitation to present to the Population Council**, in their capacity as technical advisor to DREAMS (May, 2017) – presentation by Kirsten Stoebenau
- **Invitation to present at the 2nd Annual Learning Initiative on Norms, Exploitation and Abuse (LINEA) meetings**, (De Vere Beau-mont Estate, UK 2017) – presentations by Joyce Wamoyi
- **Invitation to the Consultation meeting on Adolescents and Young Women in South Africa**, organised by University of Maryland and NIH, National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases Division (March 2018, USA) – Joyce Wamoyi participated in expert discussions reflecting on STRIVE transactional sex work

- **Invitation to present at the Tanzanian adolescent stakeholder’s working group meeting organised by UNICEF Forum on Adolescent Girls in Tanzania**, Ministry of Health (MoHCDGEC) and Tanzania Commission for AIDS (TACAIDS) (April 2014)
- **Invitation to roundtable discussion on how to design programmes for uptake of oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in young women, rethinking HIV prevention in young African women**, Boston – panel discussion by Meghna Ranganathan reflecting on PhD research on transactional sex in young women (July 2014)
- **Invited discussant in panel on Reflections on Research Methodological and Measurement Challenges. Social Protection and Childhood Violence: Expert Roundtable**, UNICEF Innocenti and Know Violence consortium, Florence, May 2016 – presentation by Meghna Ranganathan on challenges of collecting data on transactional sex
- **Invitation to participate in a technical advisory committee meeting for the DREAMS meeting in Tanzania** (May 2018)

ENDNOTES

1. Ms Ulrike Gilbert-Nandra, Chief, HIV and AIDS, UNICEF Tanzania, personal communication/email
2. <https://www.popcouncil.org/research/DREAMS-capacity-strengthening>
3. Personal communication with Sanyukta Mathur and Ann Gottert of the Population Council.
4. Sanyukta Mathur and Ann Gottert, Population Council, Washington, DC, personal communication
5. Gichane, Pettifor, Balvanz, Atkins, Maman, Wamoyi (manuscript in process)
6. Final mile document, Sustainable Cash Transfer Program Model: Achieving Economic Empowerment among Adolescent Girls & Young Women – grey literature
7. Note that the following points were first noted in our earlier impact case study: <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/impact-case-study-questions-transactional-sex-dhs>
8. <http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/greentree-ii-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-hiv>

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

STRIVE research consortium

A DFID-funded research programme consortium, STRIVE is led by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, with six key research partners in Tanzania, South Africa, India and the USA. STRIVE provides new insights and evidence into how different structural factors – including gender inequality and violence, poor livelihood options, stigma, and problematic alcohol use – influence HIV vulnerability and undermine the effectiveness of the HIV response.

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