

## Investigation of Transactional Sex among Adolescent Females in Alice, Eastern Cape, South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** Grounded in Ajzen's planned behaviour theory, previous scholars documented that when there is lack of parental emotional and financial support, there is a tendency among adolescent females to exchange sex for money. Exacerbated by dysfunctional environment and societies which embrace culture, literature documented such adolescent females become susceptible to sexual abuse and exploitation. The aim of the study was to investigate transactional sex among twelve IsiXhosa-speaking adolescent females, aged 17-19 years old, from Alice, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The study employed qualitative approach. The ethical principles were adhered to, during the focus group interview and data was collected through tape-recording device. The following themes were identified; attachment, orphanhood, intergenerational relationships, female agreeableness, condom use and masochism. In conclusion, this research recommends sex- education for adolescents in general to curb sexual transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy.

### INTRODUCTION

Transactional sexual relationships in Africa have drawn researchers to pay attention to the problem of "sugar-daddies" who capitalise on their financial powers to attract young women, aged 15-24 (Abajobir et al. 2017; Groes-Green 2013; Ybarra et al. 2013) especially on adolescent females growing up in families characterized by poverty, lack of adequate housing, food and clothing because they are being afforded school fees and gifts in exchange for sex (Zuma et al. 2016). In Ugandan districts, Nakasongola and Luwero, found that the involvement of adolescent females aged 12 to 15 years with older men was precipitated by poverty and the need for good things from men with gifts (Aujo et al. 2014) while in Zimbabwe, Amnesty International (2008) reported that ninety-two percent of adolescent females were imprisoned for sex in exchange for money for survival. Nevertheless, in all these commercial sex, Brody et al. (2016) found that adolescent females see it as an option to bridge the economic gap of their family backgrounds. To some extent, Kheswa (2014) documented that parents fuel these sexual relationships by not asking their daughters' whereabouts because upon returning home, the adolescent females buy grocery and electricity. In a

peri-urban setting in the Western Cape, South Africa, Zembe et al. (2015) found that despite the money these young women receive, eighty-six percent reported intimate partner violence from older men. Furthermore, they are subjected to humiliation, forced vaginal penetration and/or oral sex (Gibbs et al. 2014). Epidemiologically, literature confirmed that females with forced penile vaginal penetration complain of vaginal dryness in the long-run and that may lead to sexual disorder (Okafor and Duru 2010). Although prior studies have investigated the sexual behaviour of adolescent females (Groes-Green 2013; Jewkes et al. 2009; Sommer et al. 2016) there is dearth of phenomenological research on adolescent females in intergenerational relationships in Alice, Eastern Cape, South Africa. Against this background, this research study attempted to answer the following questions: (i) What are the factors leading adolescent females to get involved in intergenerational relationships? (ii) What are the effects of transactional sex on adolescent females?

### Research Objectives

In addressing the research questions of this study, the research objectives are outlined as follows:

- ♦ To investigate the factors leading adolescent females to intergenerational relationships.
- ♦ To determine the effects of sexual promiscuity on adolescent females in multiple sexual relationships.

## Literature

### *Definition of Concepts*

#### *Adolescence and Adolescent Females*

Adolescence refers to a stage between age 11 and 18 years of human development on physical, emotional, cultural and mental domains and begins with puberty which is marked by sexual maturity and the ability to produce a child, should a girl engaged in a penile vaginal penetration without using contraceptives (Swartz et al. 2011). Adolescent females may take risky decisions especially under peer pressure because their pre-frontal cortex is still immature to inhibit inappropriate behaviours (Kalat 2014).

#### *Transactional Sex*

Transactional sex involves sexual relations or contact with multiple partners with the likelihood of getting rewards such financial support in exchange for sex (Kheswa 2014). It is often associated with gender-based violence, victimization and HIV transmission (UNAIDS 2014). Townsend et al. (2011) found that transactional sex is common at the South African pubs or taverns where young women compromise their assertiveness to procure beverages and to be able to participate in the social milieu at the entertainment venues. In countries such as, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya and South Africa, to exchange sex for money or gifts among girls seems to be normal as they cite poverty as the main driving force to be involved in sexual promiscuity (Barnett et al. 2011). Poverty being a predisposing factor, it often pushes such vulnerable youth to the periphery and end up being pregnant at an early age owing to a lack of sexual agency and an inability to discuss the use of condom (Kheswa and Hoho 2017) and eroded self-esteem (Koen 2009; Toska et al. 2016).

#### *Family-settings*

Literature documented that adolescent females who grow up with single parents are often plagued by challenges ranging from early sexual

debut, poor self-image to teenage pregnancy as compared to their counterparts growing up with both authoritative parents (Schultz and Schultz 2013). Lack of parental figures (especially fathers) may propel teenage girls to, early home leaving, psychological disturbance, delinquent behaviours, formation of low self-concept, poor self-restraint and social adjustment (Agaba et al. 2016). Consistent with this, adolescent females living with stepfathers have also been linked to sexual abuse especially when their biological mothers are unemployed and financially dependent on the sexual partners (Kidman and Palermo 2016). As for the orphaned adolescent females in sub-Saharan countries than the rest of the world, reasons such as poverty, food insecurity, loss of parents, lack of parental supervision, residential instability and social isolation tend to compel them to engage in transactional sex with older men (Heymann et al. 2012; Morantz et al. 2013; UNICEF 2014). In contrast, the effects of the present father-figure on their children's development have been found to contribute to intellectual functioning, cognitive development and school achievement because parents act as buffers against risky sexual behaviour (Swartz et al. 2011). As a result, such youth from households that provide love and support tend to delay early sexual debut as compared to youth from households characterized by domestic violence (Holborn and Eddy 2011).

#### *Culture*

Given that females in societies which are rooted in culture and traditions are expected to be subservient to their sexual partners, majority of adolescent females are scared to express their inner feelings and emotions and eventually become neurotic (Schultz and Schultz 2013). In South Africa, such behaviour among women lacking in assertiveness has been found to be induced by the social constructions of masculinity (Gibbs et al. 2014) whereby men place demands on their vulnerabilities and sexually coerce them especially if they have accepted material gifts or money (Jewkes et al. 2012). According to Karen Horney's theory, neuroticism is characterized by negative emotions such as anger, anxiety or depression and it is common among abused females (Schultz and Schultz 2013). Due to psychological discomfort, to cover their emotional inadequacies, they may be in-

clined to substance abuse, have two or more sexual partners and feel the need to prove that they are fertile and could have children before marriage as a way to attain adult status (Jewkes et al. 2009). On the other hand, numerous scholars expressed concern regarding morals and questioned whether the societies which are culturally embedded ostracize or guide young women who engage in multiple sexual relationships (Fielding-Miller et al. 2014; Kaschula 2011; Stoebenau et al. 2011).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) which is the extension of the theory of reasoned action by Ajzen (1985) states that adolescent female's sexual behaviour is determined by her level of readiness to engage in sexual activities (intentional behaviour) and her belief about how peers she interacts with will approve or disapprove of that behaviour. Nicholas (2008) pointed out that when adolescent females become easily influenced by their peers to experiment unhealthy sexual practices and abuse drugs on purpose, they have a tendency to leave school prematurely and disregard the danger of HIV/AIDS.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design, Respondents and Data Analysis**

The researcher opted for the qualitative approach for it is contextual, inductive and explorative. According to de Vos et al. (2011), qualitative research allows data to be collected in the form of face-to-face interviews or written language and it is analyzed by identifying and categorizing the themes. In this study, focus group was conducted with twelve late adolescent females aged 17-19 from one secondary school in Ntselamanzi township, Alice, Eastern Cape. Through the assistance of designated Life-Orientation educator, one well-ventilated class with electricity was reserved for conducting focus group. Data was collected through tape-recording device, later transcribed verbatim and then translated into English by a professional translator. For data analysis, the researcher relied on open coding, axial coding and selective coding as suggested by Babbie (2010). Open coding is

the labelling of words and phrases found in the transcript while axial coding is creating themes by grouping labels given to words and phrases. Selective coding refers to a process of choosing the main category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships and filling in categories that need further refinement and development.

### **Trustworthiness**

To establish trustworthiness of the research study, four alternative constructs by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were followed, that is; credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. By credibility, the researcher took the participants through the same questions and interviewed them to the point at which there was data saturation (prolonged engagement). Furthermore, by dependability, the researcher achieved it through describing the research methodology and organised data into themes after the verbatim transcriptions and translations, have been made. Confirmability was ensured by audit trial of the verbatim descriptions and themes (Krefting 1991). Transferability was ensured by a literature control after data collection where comparable findings of previous scholars were reported.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Research ethics provide researchers with the code of moral guidelines regarding how to conduct research in a moral acceptable way. The researchers are obliged to protect all rights of the human subject as suggested by Creswell (2013). The Ethical and Research Committee of the University of Fort Hare, granted to researcher with the ethical clearance. The sample was conveniently selected based on the adolescents' availability. Participants gave their informed consent to participate voluntarily and to be tape recorded. The following principles were adhered to, during the focus group interview; anonymity of participants and protection from harm. During the focus group interviews, none of the participants withdrew. Confidentiality was ensured by destroying the audio-tapes after employing axial and selective coding for data analysis. To protect the participants' dignity, pseudonyms were preferred.

## RESULTS

The analysis resulted in the development of seven key themes.

### Attachment

This theme is related to lack of attachment as the adolescent females expressed that they grew up in families which do not provide warmth, love and motivation, hence they sought comfort from older men. For example, the respondents cited that:

*"Older men provide us with love that we do not get from home."* (Zodwa, Aged 17)

*"Younger guys just fool us around, and older men have that care. It becomes worse if at home you are raised by your mother and there is no father-figure."* (Thabile, Aged 18)

### Orphanhood

Respondents described how their multiple partners helped them in terms of meeting their basic needs. They mentioned that if it had not been for the financial support they get from their sexual partners, their siblings would suffer since they are orphans.

*"I grew up without parents and I must look after my siblings. Having three boyfriends who are employed, at least that helps me to survive."* (Bazi, Aged 18)

*"I would not be looking presentable if it had not been for the support I get from my sexual partners. They each know that my I live with my unemployed aunt and my mother passed away 4 years ago."* (Mafihlasi, Aged 19)

### Intergenerational Relationships

This theme emerged when the participants reported that they developed multiple sexual relationships because their basic needs are being met and they derive sexual pleasure. For example, they cited the following;

*"Because we have unlimited needs and we will never be satisfied with only one partner."* (Bazi, Aged 18)

*"Sugar-daddies spoil us and coming from a poor family, I receive much support from my old man."* (Manono, Aged 18)

*"Older men are matured and have money."* (Siphe, Aged 17)

*"It is for status that we are involved with older men because it becomes common in our village."* (Thabile, Aged 18)

*"I don't become satisfied having sex with one person. Getting different men who penetrate me, I become satisfied."* (Mafihlasi, Aged 19)

*"Girls taste different penises to see who is hot or not."* (Ntombi, Aged 17)

### Condom Use

With regard to the question: "Do you practise safe sex when engaging in sexual intercourse with your sexual partner(s)?" Majority of respondents showed low self-efficacy and autonomy to make informed decisions regarding their sexuality. In their responses, they expressed that condom-use reduces sexual gratification.

*"We don't use condoms because we want flesh to flesh. You must enjoy sex because condoms have infections. Condoms are very risky and may break."* (Lulama, Aged 18)

*"I once practised unsafe sex because we did not have condoms and he insisted on flesh to flesh because he promised me money."* (Thandiwe, Aged 17)

*"It becomes difficult to negotiate safe sex with them because they support me and with that money I manage to feed my family."* (Mafihlasi, Aged 19)

### Agreeableness

Adolescent females described how parents' especially older sisters, aunts and mothers approved of their involvement in sexual promiscuity. Their narratives are extracted below:

*"My sister protects me from my mother when I have gone to see my boyfriends by saying I have visited a relative in another village."* (Ntombi, Aged 17)

*"My mother sees nothing wrong when I change boyfriends because I do buy grocery and help her to pay for burial scheme."* (Thabile, Aged 18)

### Intimate Partner Violence

The empirical findings of this study could be a confirmation of how women like to be treated by their boyfriends because of financial dependence.

*"The reason for a girl to stay in abusive relationship is because you love him and he gives you everything and if he is hurting you, you know he will say sorry and you will forgive him because you love him."* (Bazi, Aged 18)

*"Most of us stay in abusive relationships because we are being financially supported."* (Hluphekile, Aged 19)

### **Masochism**

Respondents continued to express being comfortable in abusive sexual relationships (although they showed some form of depression).

*"When your boyfriends beat you, it is a sign of true love. At times they would beat you and while you are in pain and bleeding, they would demand sex."* (Mbuyi, Aged 19)

*Some men would stretch your legs and engage in oral sex."* (Siphe, Aged 17)

*"They abuse us in such a way that they will call whores and force us to suck their penises."* (Puleng, Aged 18)

### **DISCUSSION**

From the empirical findings, it is clear that adolescent females who get involved in inter-generational relationships are forced by financial hardships to practice unsafe sex owing to unemployment of single parents and being responsible to look after their families. These findings correspond with the study by Mchunu et al. (2012) where adolescent females expressed that accepting financial assistance from their multiple sexual partners compromised their health. The implication is that adolescent females are at heightened risk to contract sexually transmitted infections such as gonorrhoea, syphilis, Chlamydia and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) because they are scared of losing the benefits attached to transactional sexual relationships. Contrary to Parse's Theory of Human Becoming (Parse 1999) which views human beings as free agents, open and capable to make informed decisions about their sexuality (Mitchell 2006) these group of adolescent females displayed compliance and neuroticism towards male dominance. Furthermore, the respondents lacked the ability to report sexual assaults and sexual harassment to the police because their partners would apologize. Could their behaviour be translated to low levels of assertiveness and impaired

self-autonomy since they cannot realize that their inherent human rights are tarnished? Analogous to this finding, in Ethiopia, Womankind Worldwide (2012) investigated how women perceive intimate partner violence and found that based on cultural values, more than eighty percent of women cited that it is the right thing for their sexual partners to beat them.

Partly, for the fact that their maternal aunts, sisters and mothers' values and attitudes are permissive towards sex, such adolescent females' behaviour might be socialized to commercial sex owing to lack of role models in their families. They indicated that they were even taught how to seduce men to love them more by maternal aunts. To confirm the impact of Bandura's (2001) social learning theory, even in Maputo, knowledge about erotic powers is passed on by grandmothers or older sisters and it embodies ways to seduce a man and satisfy him in bed and to control his will and possessions (Groes-Green 2013). However, the concern raised by the research finding is that the adolescent females in multiple sexual relationships may be pregnant because it is clear that they are not equipped in sex education.

Finally, the respondents expressed the derivation of sexual pleasure from old men because they comfort them. They further emphasized that older men are compassionate in comparison to boyfriends of their age. From this finding, it is evident that adolescent female may be living alone with no parental supervision or parents may be uninvolved. Theoretically, it is true that the neurotic needs of adolescent females with insecure attachment from the family tend to be involved with men who would offer them security, protection and affection so that their self-esteem may be boosted (Schultz and Schultz 2013). However, the respondents' dissatisfaction was that their sexual partners would introduce them to unusual sexual positions and threaten them when not complying, thus, exploitation. According to Makin and Bye (2016) their responses resembled features of individuals who succumb to humiliation when whipped and humiliated by their sexual partners. Drawing from the American Psychiatric Association (2013) individuals exemplifying such characteristics are referred to as masochists since they tend to settle in sexual relationship characterized by exploitation even during sexual intercourse. Masochism is described as a sexual and gender identity

disorder characterized by deriving sexual pleasure from being inflicted pain or humiliated (Comer 2013).

### CONCLUSION

This research has shown that adolescent females growing up in poverty stricken backgrounds and where adults demonstrate unclear values and attitudes concerning sex are susceptible to risky sexual behaviour. Although the research objectives have been achieved and new themes emerged, there are limitations in this study. For example, the sample was drawn from one village in the Eastern Cape, which may not be true representative of adolescent females in South Africa. Also, the results would have been different should the quantitative research employed because it would consist of a larger sample.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Sex education is imperative to buffer against susceptibility to sexually transmitted infections, sexual dysfunctions and unwanted pregnancy. Therefore, educators should address the danger of unsafe sex during Life-Orientation classes even though the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 upholds the recognition of the rights of learners' religion before sexuality can be taught. Finally, parents (especially fathers) should avail themselves to the emotional needs of their children to prevent them from being neurotic and subservient to male dominance.

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