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Young people's perceptions of relationships and sexual practices in the abstinence-only context of Uganda

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ABSTRACT

The Ugandan government has been criticised on several grounds for its abstinence-only policies on sexuality education directed towards young people. These grounds include the failure to recognise the multiple realities faced by young people, some of whom may already be sexually active. In the study reported on this paper, students' perceptions of relationships and sexual practices were analysed to obtain an understanding of how young people construct and negotiate their sexual agency in the context of abstinence-only messages provided in Ugandan secondary schools and at the wider community level. Ten in-depth interviews and six focus group discussions were conducted with students aged 15–19 years ($N = 55$) at an urban co-educational secondary school. Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using grounded theory. Findings show that students engage in sexual activity despite their belief that contraception is ineffective and their fears for the consequences. Students' age, gender, financial capital and perceived sexual desire further increase risk and vulnerability. To improve their effectiveness, school-based sexuality education programmes should support students to challenge and negotiate structural factors such as gender roles and sociocultural norms that influence sexual practices and increase vulnerability and risk.

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Introduction

Sexuality education is generally believed to be important because it supports young people to make informed choices regarding their sexual and reproductive health, and teaches them how to avoid contracting HIV (Mueller, Gavin, and Kulkarni 2008; UNAIDS 2010; UNESCO 2009). Worldwide, governments have allocated funds for sexuality education and HIV prevention programmes, and researchers have become involved in debates over what type of sexuality education young people need.

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A central topic in this debate is whether sexuality education should focus exclusively on promoting abstinence or whether programmes should be more comprehensive (e.g. Cohen 2004; Kirby 2006; Stanger-Hall and Hall 2011). Abstinence-only sexuality education programmes usually promote sexuality education based on moral teachings. Such programmes often consider young people to be ‘innocent’ regarding sex, and marriage as the only legitimate context for sexual activity. Supporters of abstinence-only sexuality education programmes fear that discussing sex encourages young people to become sexually active. In contrast, supporters of comprehensive sexuality education programmes claim that young people are active sexual agents who construct and negotiate their sexuality and, therefore, need evidence-based information to make well-informed decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health and rights (Bhana 2007; Greslé-Favier 2013; Miedema, Maxwell, and Aggleton 2011; Robinson 2012). The European Expert Group on Sexuality Education (2016) has recently argued that narrow interpretations of comprehensive sexuality education have downgraded the meaning of comprehensive sexuality education programmes to the category of abstinence-plus programmes (Nixon et al. 2011). In consequence, the group has introduced the term ‘holistic sexuality education’ and used a definition from the WHO Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe (2010) to define holistic sexuality education as education that focuses on ‘the cognitive, emotional, social, interactive and physical aspects of sexuality’ and which aims to support children and young people in their sexual development ‘with information, skills and positive values’ (WHO and BZgA 2010, 20). The inclusion of sexual pleasure as part of comprehensive or holistic sexuality education offers a positive approach to young people’s sexuality that is associated with increased contraceptive use and sexual agency, i.e. young people’s ability to act in line with their ‘sexual needs, desires and wishes’ (McGeeney and Kehily 2016; Wood, Mansfield, and Koch 2007, 189).

The tone of these debates suggests that there are sharp contrasts between the content delivery of abstinence-only and comprehensive or holistic sexuality education programmes, but in practice these programmes are diverse and are not always readily distinguished. Nonetheless, research shows that sexuality education and HIV prevention programmes for young people are more effective in reducing teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections when they promote not just abstinence, but also condom use and other forms of contraception (Johnson et al. 2011; Kirby 2007; Lindberg and Maddow-Zimet 2012).

When comparing types of sexuality education programmes, the reported sexual practices of young people often serve as an indicator of programme effectiveness (e.g. Johnson et al. 2011; Kirby 2007; Lindberg and Maddow-Zimet 2012). However, such studies often tend to overlook the fact that young people’s sexual practices are not merely the result of individual, rational considerations, that young people’s perceptions of relationships and sexual practices can be competing and conflicting, and that sexual practices are the result of interpersonal and contextual interaction (Harding 2007; Quinn 1992). Depending on these interactions, young people may exercise different forms of sexual agency (van Reeuwijk 2009).

The importance of contextual interactions is stressed in several studies which argue that sexuality education programmes should address the structural factors that underlie young people’s HIV-related vulnerability and risk (e.g. Auerbach, Parkhurst, and Cáceres 2011; Gupta et al. 2008; Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2016). For instance, addressing gender and power relations through sexuality education can help young people ‘understand how gender inequality is socially constructed’ and reflect on how such structural factors lead to different behaviours and health outcomes (Haberland and Rogow 2015, S17; Wood, Rogow, and Stines 2015).

The Ugandan government has been criticised for its abstinence-only policies directed at young people on a number of grounds, including that they fail to recognise the multiple realities faced by young people, some of whom may already be sexually active (e.g. Cohen 2004; Cohen and Tate 2006; Lagone et al. 2014; Okware et al. 2005). This paper explores and analyses students' perceptions of relationships and sexual practices to obtain an understanding of how students construct and negotiate their sexual agency in the context of the abstinence-only messages largely provided in Ugandan secondary schools and at the wider community level.

Sexuality education programmes in Uganda

Since 2003, the Ugandan government has been implementing an HIV prevention education programme in primary and secondary public schools (Cohen 2006). This programme is known as the Presidential Initiative on AIDS Strategy for Communication to the Youth (PIASCY) (Santelli, Speizer, and Edelstein 2013). PIASCY encourages abstinence until marriage, and avoids the topic of condom use. The government's promotion of abstinence-only for young people has been strongly criticised (Cohen 2004; Cohen and Tate 2006; Okware et al. 2005), and despite abstinence-only policies and the abstinence-only HIV education programmes being implemented by the Ugandan government, there are also more comprehensive sexuality education programmes being implemented in Ugandan schools (Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2016).

The delivery of sexuality education in Ugandan secondary schools varies by school. Sexuality education can be delivered in a weekly class meeting, through extra-curricular clubs or on a weekend day each semester. Elements of sexuality education are also integrated into curriculum subjects such as Biology and Religious Education. Extra-curricular clubs include those associated with the government's PIASCY programme, the faith-based Youth Alive Uganda programme and the more rights- and evidence-based World Starts With Me and Straight Talk programmes (de Haas *forthcoming*).

In addition to the concerns that have been raised about the content of Uganda's HIV prevention strategies directed at young people, critics have recently pointed out that Uganda's funding and policy strategies disproportionately focus on AIDS treatment rather than on behavioural strategies for reducing HIV transmission (Green et al. 2013; UAC 2015).

Methodology

Selection of participants

Data collection took place in a co-educational secondary day school in the centre of the capital city, Kampala, in April and May 2008. The study population comprised 55 students (28 girls and 27 boys) aged 15–19 years who were not enrolled in a school-based comprehensive sexuality education programme. In general, participants' exposure to sexuality education appeared limited. Sources of sexual and reproductive health information mentioned included external counsellors at school seminars, the website of a local church, and a teenage health centre. One male interviewee was a peer educator in an extra-curricular club at the time of the interview.

Table 1. Participants' background characteristics.

Participants per method (<i>IDI</i> = <i>in-depth interview</i> ; <i>FGD</i> = <i>focus group discussion</i>)	Sex	Form (<i>S</i> = <i>Senior</i>)	Age
IDI B1	Boys	S5	18
IDI B2	Boys	S5	19
IDI B3	Boys	S5	18
IDI B4	Boys	S6	19
IDI B5	Boys	S4	17
IDI B6/FGD B2	Boys	S5	17
IDI G1	Girls	S6	19
IDI G2	Girls	S5	16
IDI G3	Girls	S4	15
IDI G4/FGD G1	Girls	S6	18
FGD only girls 1	9 girls	S5–S6	17–19
FGD only girls 2	8 girls	S5–S6	17–18
FGD only boys 1	7 boys	S5	16–18
FGD only boys 2	8 boys	S5	16–18
FGD mixed 1	3 boys/4 girls	S4	16–17
FGD mixed 2	4 boys/4 girls	S5	16–19
Total	27 boys/28 girls	S4–S6	15–19

Of a group of 55 students, eight students were interviewed; 45 students participated in the focus group discussions; and two students were both interviewed and participated in a focus group discussion (see Table 1). The literature suggests that boys in urban areas have an earlier onset of first sexual intercourse than girls, and their relationships with older women have been less studied (Nyanzi, Pool, and Kinsman 2001; Uganda Bureau of Statistics and Macro International Inc 2007). Therefore, interviews with boys were expected to elicit more personal experiences with sexual practices, and it was decided to interview five boys and three girls. For the purposes of additional data collection, a male and a female student were asked to participate in an in-depth interview after being in one of the focus group discussions.

The participants in this study were among the minority of young people in Uganda who are able to attend secondary school (Uganda Bureau of Statistics and Macro International Inc 2007). As highly educated people aged 15–24 years living in an urban area, it may be assumed that participants had more comprehensive knowledge than many of their peers about issues such as HIV, AIDS and condom use. Furthermore, they were less likely to have had sexual intercourse before the age of 18, and were more likely to have used a condom when having sexual intercourse (Ministry of Health Uganda and ORC Macro 2006).

Data collection

In their evaluation of a sexuality education programme targeting young people in secondary schools in Uganda, Rijdsdijk et al. (2011) based their quantitative questionnaire on the socio-cognitive reasoned action approach (Fishbein and Ajzen 2010). The present study is related to this evaluation but aimed to provide a more in-depth understanding of the evaluation results. As such, the semi-structured interview and discussion guides were informed by concepts derived from the reasoned action approach and focused in on participants' attitudes, perceived norms and perceived behavioural control in relation to the following

topics: relationships, sexual practices, intergenerational sex, transactional sex, having multiple partners and practising safe sex. The semi-structured interview and discussion guides were piloted at a co-educational secondary day school close to the centre of Kampala.

The topics of intergenerational sex and transactional sex were discussed more in the focus group discussions than in the interviews. Based on participants' answers, more attention in data collection was given to gender relations in a co-educational school, abstinence, the meaning and content of sexuality education, the role of the school and the role and meaning of 'sexual urges', and less attention was given to sexual harassment.

Six focus group discussions were conducted: two with only boys, two with only girls, and two with mixed groups (see Table 1). Each focus group discussion involved seven to nine participants, a male note-taker and the researcher (BdH), who asked the questions and guided the discussions. Some participants already knew each other. Both mixed-sex and single-sex groups were formed to encourage a broader range of opinions in case the gender composition of the groups affected participants' replies. In general, both boy and girl participants appeared comfortable in the mixed group discussions. However, a difference was noted in discussions of gender, such as gender roles and interactions with the opposite sex. Participants in the mixed groups, for example, tended to defend the opposite sex by playing down their perceived bad habits. Meanwhile, in one of the girls-only discussions, girl participants characterised the male note-taker as a 'typical Ugandan man', and used him to express their frustrations with boys.

Both the interviews and the discussions were conducted in English, as English is the official language of Uganda and is spoken in all secondary schools. The in-depth interviews and focus group discussions lasted on average 93 and 96 minutes, respectively.

In addition to the transcripts of the interviews and discussions, the qualitative data included notes on the participants' attitudes and visual gestures during and after each interview and discussion; field notes that provided impressions of the school; and relevant newspaper articles and pictures of, for example, billboard advertisements targeting the sexual health of young people. Finally, code notes and theoretical notes were made during the data analysis.

Ethical considerations

This study was part of a larger evaluation of a comprehensive sexuality education programme that was approved by the Psychology Ethics Committee of Maastricht University. The principal of the school and all of the participants were asked for their consent to participate after being informed of the content of the study and the aim and the role of the researcher. Participants were informed about issues of confidentiality, that they could leave the study at any time, and that they were not obliged to answer any questions. Abiding by the judgement of the school under study and SchoolNet Uganda, the Ugandan organisation coordinating the evaluation, parental consent was not sought. Participants were handed a health referral list of youth-friendly health centres in Kampala that they could visit, write to or call if they felt affected by the interview or had questions or problems related to the topics discussed.

Limitations of the study

The data were collected in the school compound. Because school regulations do not allow students to have relationships or to be sexually active, the responses of the participants may have been guided by the desire for social conformity, and may not fully reflect their actual practices. Moreover, in response to the setting, participants may have been more likely than they would have been otherwise to assert that they are able to resist the pressure to have sex.

Analysis

The interviews and focus group discussions were recorded with a digital voice recorder, transcribed verbatim and analysed using Atlas.ti 5.5 software which facilitates the coding and analysis of qualitative data. For the analysis, grounded theory was used, which allows researchers to use the data collected to identify new concepts and their relationships to the phenomenon under study through the construction of an inductively derived theory. The grounded theory was built up from the data using three types of coding: open, axial and selective (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

The analysis began with 'open coding' using mainly 'in vivo' codes: i.e. concepts named after terms used by the participants in the data (Strauss and Corbin 1990). For the purposes of methodological triangulation, the interviews and focus group discussions were coded separately and compared later. After grouping the concepts, twenty code families were identified that addressed either the students' sexual agency and their perceptions of relationships and sexual practices or the contextual aspects in which these perceptions were embedded. The contextual aspects were assumed to interact at three different levels: (1) the individual level, e.g. the participant's cultural and religious beliefs, gender, age and financial capital; (2) the school level, e.g. the school rules and norms; and (3) the wider community level, e.g. gender roles, media messages, religion and governmental laws and policies. The codes that addressed the students' sexual agency and perceptions were abstracted to five themes: (1) engaging in romantic and transactional relationships, (2) engaging in sexual practices, (3) consequences of relationships and sexual practices, (4) contraception, and (5) sexual urges.

The following section presents participants' perceptions structured according to three main themes: first, participants' access to sexuality education information as embedded in the sociocultural context; second, participants' perceptions of engaging in relationships and sexual practices; and, third, students' sexual agency as constructed by their perceived gender roles, age and financial capital.

Findings

Students' access to sexuality education information

Students' perceptions of relationships and sexual practices were found to be embedded in the sexuality education information they obtained at school and the wider community level. This information, which they received from their teachers, parents and health workers, consisted mainly of abstinence-only and contraceptive-discouraging messages. To complement

these messages, students appeared to seek out additional information from the media, including pornographic movies.

Sociocultural norms and values at school and the wider community level

Participants reported that local religious, cultural and societal norms and values were not accepting of kissing in public, placed a high value on virginity and prescribed abstinence until marriage. According to participants, people assume that young people kissing in public are also sexually active, and sex before marriage can bring shame, embarrassment and bad luck to the family. Participants said that their parents warned them that having sex will endanger their sexual health and their academic achievement, and that abstinence until marriage is taught in church. Participants also indicated that the societal norm of abstinence can be a barrier to obtaining condoms in health centres, as health counsellors typically refused to make condoms available to young people. In addition, health counsellors sometimes provide them with information which discourages the use of condoms. For instance, a 17-year-old boy in Senior 5 (S5) said that health counsellors told him that condoms are not entirely safe and that you could still become infected with HIV when using a condom:

When I went to this teenage centre, they told me you can't be a hundred percent sure that this condom is what? Working. So it's like fifty or seventy. [...] You can't be sure that you use the condom and do not get HIV.

In addition to the information received from these various sources, participants obtained most of their sexuality education information from school. School regulations however prohibit students from having relationships or being sexually active, and signs in the school compound read: 'When you think of fun, don't think of sex'. The participants reported that at their school abstinence was discussed by teachers during school assemblies and by visiting health counsellors. According to participants, these discussions about abstinence usually involve messages that emphasise the unreliability of condoms and other forms of contraception and the risks of sex, including becoming pregnant, contracting HIV or other sexually transmitted infections, adverse effects on academic performance, expulsion for pregnant girls, and imprisonment for boys who impregnate girls. Male participants often mentioned the fear of being sent to prison as a motivation for abstaining from sexual intercourse because the Ugandan 'Defilement Law', an amendment of the Penal Code of Uganda (section 123, cap 106), makes it illegal for them 'to have sexual intercourse with a female under the age of eighteen years old' (Parikh 2012, 1774).

Role of pornography and other media in learning about relationships and sexual practices

Despite being surrounded by messages that discourage sex, participants described Western high school movies and pornography as sources from which Ugandan youth can learn about relationships and sexual practices. Participants reported that many people watch pornography, including some of their friends. As explained by this 18-year-old male participant in S5: 'I walk into the room when they're [friends] watching it. [...] Many watch them'. Nevertheless, most of the students expressed negative opinions about pornography. Students felt that watching pornography caused sexual arousal and, therefore, could encourage an 'addiction' to masturbation, such as discussed by the following boys in S5:

Boy 1: Because pornography is even worse than [...] sex itself. [...]

Boy 2: You might get addicted to ...

Boy 3: Masturbation.

Boy 2: Yeah, that's usually the reason ... of watching too much pornography.

Boy 1: That's why I'm saying pornography is worse ... than having sex itself.

Students' perceptions of relationships and sexual practices

The compromised sexual and reproductive health information students receive puts them in a vulnerable position because, on one hand, they fear the consequences of sexual intercourse and, on the other hand, they want to engage in relationships and sexual practices. In addition, both male and female participants reported experiencing sexual urges which makes it difficult for them to abstain.

The perceived consequences of engaging in relationships and sexual practices

The admonitions of teachers, counsellors and parents to abstain made participants aware of the 'dangers' of sex and afraid to have sexual intercourse. Participants expressed the fear that they might have an unwanted pregnancy or contract HIV if they had sex too early. Their age increased their vulnerability as they observed that they were still financially dependent and that pregnant girls may need to drop out of school. As such, students felt that engaging in sexual practices could interfere with their goal of finishing secondary school. Several participants mentioned the importance of education, as they believed that getting a qualification would make it easier for them to find a job and safeguard their future. Participants reported feeling pressure to work hard, perform well and avoid being suspended from school.

Many participants did not perceive protected sex to be an alternative to abstinence because they appeared to think that the risk of getting infected with HIV or becoming pregnant when using a condom was still high. For instance, an 18-year-old girl in S6 felt that condoms could protect against pregnancy but not against HIV: 'There is no way that you can prevent catching AIDS. Even if you used a condom. [...] Condoms, I think, are only ... are only helpful for not getting pregnant. A part from that ... there is nothing else'.

But other participants said that if they were to use contraception, they would prefer to use condoms rather than hormonal contraception, because condoms are easy, cheap and lack the perceived side effects of hormonal contraception. For instance, a 19-year-old girl in S6 feared that hormonal contraception could lead to infertility: '[Pills and injections] have bad side effects [...] They told us that the womb becomes used [...] it cannot hold the baby [...] that's why people produce immature babies ... what, sometimes they completely fail to produce'. Based on their perceptions of contraception, most of the participants said they believe that abstinence was the best way for them to stay safe.

Sexual urge as a reason to engage in sexual practices

The desire to conform to sociocultural expectations and the perceived consequences of sexual intercourse motivated participants to abstain. In addition, many students believed it was better to avoid relationships during secondary school because they believed that constantly thinking about a boyfriend or a girlfriend could lead to a loss of focus on study. Also, they feared that being in a relationship could lead to having sexual intercourse, especially when couples hug or kiss. For instance, one male participant in a discussion with boys and

girls in S4 said that ‘... from pecking [i.e. a kiss on the cheek] you guys will end up kissing, and from kissing maybe you’ll go out [on] to having sex’.

Although many participants believed it was better to avoid relationships during secondary school, three boys in S5 aged 17, 18 and 19 years old and one 19-year-old girl in S6 indicated they were currently involved in a romantic relationship. In addition, several participants were positive about kissing and having sex, which they described as a way to express themselves in a relationship or, as indicated by a 19-year-old boy in S5, ‘some kind of enjoyment’. With regard to engaging in sexual practices, many of the participants said they were abstaining, although two of the male interviewees in S5, aged 18 and 19 years old, indicated that they had had sexual intercourse.

Participants indicated that they believed that secondary school students do not have sex out of love, but out of lust. In addition to curiosity and the financial rewards that can come through sex, most of the motivations for engaging in sexual practices mentioned by the participants were related to physical needs or sexual urges, such as ‘emotions’, ‘instincts’, ‘excitement’, ‘human nature’, ‘high libido’, ‘hormones’, ‘lust’ and ‘desire’.

Participants seemed to perceive these physical needs to have sex as difficult to control, or even beyond their control. For instance, one 18-year-old male participant in S5 explained that he did not recall whether he had used a condom when having sex because sex is ‘like a force. [...] that can make you forget something. [...] you can wake up the next day without knowing [what happened]’. His explanation reveals how perceptions of sexual urge can be problematic. A similar problematic perception of sexual urges was also present in the expressions of other participants who indicated that excitement can cause a person to forget the risks of sex, that human nature cannot be controlled, and that boys become easily aroused by girls wearing short skirts.

Yet a further problematic perception of sexual urges was found in statements from students who indicated that they intended to abstain but that they were not sure whether they would be able to ‘control’ their physical needs until marriage. For instance, one 19-year-old girl in S6 said she wanted to abstain until marriage, but ‘if the need comes’ perhaps she might have sex while at university. ‘But if still, I can hold on, than I can still ... [wait]’, she said.

At the same time, there were also students who expressed confidence in their ability to abstain from or refuse sex. These participants mentioned that it was important to have self-control and to ensure that they do not go beyond hugging and kissing in relationships. As one girl in a discussion with boys and girls in S5 put it, ‘That’s why we need self-control. [...] Cause if you don’t have self-control, you can ... you can be able to be anything’. Agreeing on certain principles in relationships was cited as a method for preventing intercourse from happening, such as ‘hugging only’, and avoiding meeting in places where the couple might be alone or where it is dark, because ‘... you can’t control nature’ in a dark place. When asked about the desire for privacy, a male participant in a discussion with boys and girls in S4 noted ‘... you can also have privacy on the phone’. Although participants claimed that they were confident in refusing and avoiding sex, the question of whether they would act so confidently if such a situation actually arose remains open.

Students’ sexual agency: gender, age and financial capital

In the setting described above, students reasoned how to act and showed different forms of sexual agency. For instance, due to their age and financial capital, participants’ sexual

agency was compromised as they indicated there are a limited number of places where people their age could go have sex, such as dormitories when they were in boarding school, around campus, near night clubs at night and in hostels during the day. Using a hostel could, however, be difficult, as getting a room required money and some pre-arrangement. One of the female participants in a discussion with only girls in S5 and S6 explained how not having a private place in which to have sex could lead to hurried, unprotected sex:

So, that's why sometimes, like when [...] they are using a condom but you find that a girl got pregnant. The reason is they were scared when they were doing it. So, the boy was maybe trying to do it in the hurry, so that they don't get them!

According to participants, the type of school attended could also have consequences for students' sexual agency. The Ugandan education system distinguishes between single sex and co-educational schools, and day and boarding schools. In the co-educational day school under study, students' perceived gender roles influenced how they approached the opposite sex and exchanged money and gifts in relationships.

Approaching members of the opposite sex

Participants, and especially the girls, said that maintaining a good reputation was very important to them. According to one 16-year-old female participant in S5, a girl can be popular in two ways: the good way is by showing that she is, for example, Christian, 'humble', 'smart' and 'well preserved' – i.e. a virgin; while the other way is by having a sugar daddy and wearing expensive clothes. Some female participants claimed that boys often make fun of a girl who has had sex by saying that 'she is cheap'.

Most of the participants said they believed boys should approach girls first, observing that in Ugandan culture girls who approach boys are considered either cheap or desperate. However, some of the participants challenged these cultural notions, arguing that they were outdated, and that girls can approach boys. Furthermore, a female participant in a discussion with only girls in S5 and S6 explained how, within these gendered scripts, girls can actively encourage boys to approach them:

But sometimes, [...] girls do it indirectly. [...] being good to the boy all the time, huh? [...] So she's trying to communicate [...] 'I like you and maybe I love you', [...] but when she can't say it openly. [...] You leave this guy to approach you first. It's not the girl to ... to first approach.

In addition, one 17-year-old male interviewee in S5 described how he appreciated that his girlfriend took the initiative to kiss:

Okay, she was just like ... we're tight. And she was like 'Can we kiss?' She first asked. So I said it's okay. [...] I was not nervous. [...] She wasn't nervous because obviously she first asked for it [chuckles a bit].

Transactional relationships

In contrast to girls', it was noted that having sex could be good for a boy's reputation, and that some students commented that 'virginity is not dignity but lack of opportunity'; that a boy is a *fala*, or 'half a man', if he does not have sex; and that a boy is 'not styled up' if he does not have multiple girlfriends. Several of the participants discussed the strategies boys used to persuade girls to have sex with them. For example, they described the practice of 'hit and run', whereby a boy will break up with a girl after having sex because he has lost interest in her.

It's very easy to [...] hit [leave] a girl when you've had sex with her. [...] the moment you get into that ... act, you lose some interest in her [...] Now what do I want, eh ... anymore from her. You get it? (19-year-old male interviewee in S5)

But stories like this also suggest that 'hit and run' strategies could actually be the result of shyness and of not knowing how to communicate with their partner after they have had sexual intercourse. According to one 18-year-old male interviewee in S5: 'After tasting the sex fruits it ends [...] You feel uncomfortable. There is a feeling that grows in between and you become a bit shy'.

Furthermore, to live up to gender norms, some boys described needing to find money to buy their girlfriend gifts or take them on dates to show they cared for them. Failure to do so would cause them to lose the respect of their girlfriend and their friends. One male participant in a discussion with only boys in S5 explained:

Even if she really loves you, [...] she'll lose interest because her friends will be on her back all the time because 'He's dull!' [...] but if you're rich, and you're intelligent ... that, she'll respect.

In the same discussion, the boys discussed how the pressure to come over as 'well-off' to find and sustain a girlfriend affected them. For instance, they might need to cut down on the free food provided by the school because eating this free food might suggest that they came from a poor family. As one boy in S5 described it, 'Some guys [...] they want the [free] food but they're like "How will the chicks see me lining up [for free food]?"'. In addition, the boys mentioned that they can experience shame and inferiority when girls reject them due to a lack of money:

- Boy 1: Girls, for them already have that ideal that whenever you have a boyfriend, he will ... it is a must he has to give you money. [...] And yet you find that it's affecting our social life. So everything ... everything ... whatever it takes to impress her [...] whether you go and steal ...
- Boy 2: Supplementing on this thing, that is, some girls who are now in S6 can't go for these A-level scholars. [They want] high class, campuses, what? Just for the money.
- Researcher: How does that make you feel?
- Boy 1: No, you feel inferior.
- Boy 3: It's like they don't respect us.

Lack of financial capital could hinder boys from engaging in same-age relationships. To acquire money and gifts, whether for themselves or to sustain another relationship, both male and female participants described the possibility of transactional sex with older men and women. The following discussion with only girls in S5 and S6 shows the interaction between power relations of gender, age and economic position, and how they exercised agency within these. The female students first discussed how girls could be 'tricked' into having sex after having accepted gifts and money. Later, they discussed how, after this has happened, girls may then adopt an active role in transactional relationships by setting down the terms of the relationship.

- Girl 1: You just have to expect it. When they tell you 'Yeah, I want to have sex', you just have to go there if you've accepted the terms of the gifts and everything. [...]
- Girl 2: But they didn't tell you that ... at the beginning [...] after ... I don't know, you've taken a lot of cash [...] then he will tell you what he expects.
- Girl 3: They just take you to some secret place. [...] So that if someone tells you 'You can't escape', then you have to give it.

- Girl 1: Most girls [who engage in transactional sex] ... the first time [they have sex], it's actually for sex. And then after the first sex, [...] they will know 'If I am to have sex with this guy, I have to keep on [...] getting money from him', so you also have to set terms.

Discussion

This paper enquired into students' perceptions of relationships and sexual practices in Uganda to develop an understanding of how students construct and negotiate their sexual agency. Students' perceptions of relationships and sexual practices appeared to be strongly embedded in local sociocultural and religious norms and values, school regulations, and national policies and laws that instruct young people to abstain. This abstinence-only context limits students' sexual agency as it prevents them from accessing contraception and comprehensive, accurate sexuality education messages. As a result, students experience an increased risk of and vulnerability to sexual and reproductive health problems because they engage in sexual practices despite their beliefs that condom use cannot prevent them from becoming pregnant or infected with HIV, and fears of the consequences of engaging in sexual practices, such as expulsion from school.

Students' age, gender and financial capital further increase their risk and vulnerability. For instance, due to their age, some students may conduct their sexual lives in secret, leading to hurried and unprotected sex. Depending on their gender, students may either feel pressured or discouraged to engage in relationships and sexual practices. Also, economic motives may encourage some students to engage in transactional, intergenerational relationships.

Another factor found to be limiting students' sexual agency was the dominant sociocultural construction of sexual practices as an inescapable sexual urge over which students have little control (Kippax and Stephenson 2005). Findings from other studies on sexuality education in Uganda confirm that teachers tell students that the way to abstain is to control their biological urges (Iyer and Aggleton 2013; Kibombo et al. 2008). Because these messages stress the supposed difficulties young people face in controlling sexual desire and advise them to avoid practices perceived as likely to lead to sexual intercourse, emphasising that students need to control their sexual urges seems to diminish rather than bolster students' confidence in the ability to abstain.

Students in this study were not well informed about the use and reliability of contraception, felt pressured to conform to adverse gender norms, and did not know how to handle themselves after engaging in sexual activity. These findings show that young people in Uganda may value comprehensive sexuality education that takes into account the needs of those who are sexually active and which provides reliable information about sex or teaches young people the skills needed to construct and negotiate their sexuality, handle relationships and have safe sex (Greslé-Favier 2010, 2013). Sexuality education programmes in Uganda may be more effective if they support students to challenge and negotiate the structural factors underlying their current perceptions, such as gender roles and sociocultural norms, which influence students' sexual practices and increase both vulnerability and risk.

Findings also suggest that teachers are important gatekeepers of students' access to sexual and reproductive health and rights information. Therefore, to increase students' access to comprehensive and accurate information, it is important to recognise the key role played by teachers in the implementation of good quality school-based sexuality education (Robinson 2012; UNESCO 2015).

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