

Constructing Transactional Sex Involving Children in an Informal Settlement in Nairobi, Kenya

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Introduction

Findings drawn from my on-going PhD study which explores how residents of an informal settlement in Nairobi construct child sexual abuse.

Presentation will explore 3 factors affecting the way in which participants constructed an act of transactional sex:

- The child's perceived capacity for comprehension regarding transactional sex;
- The child's motivation for engaging in transactional sex;
- The child's perceived ability to interact in the sexual marketplace.

Transactional Sex

Exchanges are a common feature of commercial and non-commercial sexual relationships (Hunter, 2002; Bhana and Pattman, 2011; Jewkes et al, 2005).

The term *transactional sex* is increasingly used to distinguish less commercially-defined relationships from prostitution (Hunter, 2002).

It can be difficult to clearly distinguish between prostitution and transactional sex, and also between different types of transactional sex (Jewkes et al, 2012).

Child Transactional Sex Research - Kenya

There has been a strong focus on links between transactional sex and public health risks, such as HIV/AIDS (e.g. Luke, 2005; Longfield et al, 2002)

When exploring transactional sex in Kisumu, Kenya, Njue et al (2011) noted that young women frequently framed their transactional relationships in terms of love rather than material gain.

An act of transactional sex can therefore be subjectively interpreted in many different ways.

Methodology and Sample

Interpretive case study approach, in which the case was a village in the selected informal settlement.

Sample

- 27 Adult Residents aged 18 years and above.
- 26 Child Residents/ Young People aged 13-17 years.
- 11 Key Informants working in and around the village (e.g. police, teachers, social workers, community elders).

Purposive and snowball sampling.

Methods

Main methods: Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observation in field site (October 2012 – June 2013).

Interviews and focus groups covered four main topics:

- Constructions of childhood;
- Children's sexuality;
- Sexual acts involving children that are inappropriate, requiring protective intervention, and/or abusive;
- Responses to the above kinds of acts.

Thematic data analysis, assisted by Nvivo 10.

Children's Capacity for Agency

Social constructionists have highlighted the competencies children possess during childhood and their capacity for agency (e.g. James and James, 2004, Lee, 2001).

East African studies have highlighted children's agency, including Davies' (2008) street child study in Kenya, Evans' (2011) study of child-headed households in Tanzania, and Skovdal's (2011) study of child carers in Kenya.

Evident tension between children's perceived capacity for agency and structural constraints, such as poverty.

Overview of Findings

Different types of transactional sex involving children/ young people:

- Peer relationships, which incorporated an expectation that the boyfriend would provide for his girlfriend;
- Sex with sugar mummies or sugar daddies;
- Sex for material goods or money within the village;
- Enticement (relating to a child's economic vulnerabilities);
- Luring (in relation to a child's perceived naivety).

All tended to be constructed as inappropriate due to the potential physical and social risks of having sex in childhood, such as early pregnancy and STIs.

Child's Perceived Understanding of Transactional Sex

Martin: “Those who are in grade 2-3 [aged 7-9 years] – they are people who can be sent by us and then lured into a trap...it is very easy to confuse them”.

Cases of transactional sex where the child was perceived to lack the capacity to understand what they were doing were constructed sympathetically as luring or rape.

There was significant variance over when children were seen to have the capacity to give informed consent, linked to participants' understandings of childhood and child development.

Child's Perceived Motivation to Engage in Transactional Sex

Alice: “[transactional sex occurs] because of poverty. So maybe the child slept hungry...While in such a situation, she finds a man who is willing to give her 50 bob (shilling) or buy her chips. So she sees it's better to have the chips than go with the man”.

Transactional sex undertaken in order to meet basic needs tended to be constructed sympathetically as *survival sex*; an example of children exerting *thin agency* (Klocker, 2007).

Child's Perceived Motivation to Engage in Transactional Sex *Ctd.*

Although participants differentiated between survival sex and transactional sex for treats, with the latter being viewed negatively, there was little consensus over what is a basic need or a treat.

Leonard: “[members of the community] don’t take any action [if they see a child offered money for sex]... because they don’t know whether this child slept without food....it’s not that it is good, but the people won’t be against it”.

Children's Perceived Ability to Interact within the Sexual Marketplace

Lilian: "There's a difference [between exchange sex in the village and prostitution in Koinange Street] because....the people in here can't offer you big money...but if you go to Koinange, there's some Ministers who goes there. They can offer you even up to ten thousand".

When children are perceived to be competent actors in the sexual marketplace, the adult-child binary becomes disrupted (Davidson, 2005); protective intervention is less likely.

Conclusion

An act of transactional sex could be constructed and responded to in many different ways, depending on a person's understanding of concepts such as childhood, children's agency and basic needs.

Adequate exploration of how participants construct these concepts and understand key terms, such as prostitution, is essential when delivering child protection awareness programmes.

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