



## **Love, Sex and Gender: Missing in African Child and Youth Studies**

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### **Abstract**

In African childhood studies, ideas about love, sex and gender are often ignored. Despite love's overarching presence children and young people are often written about as loveless. The study of African childhood sexualities, its gendered effects and the local configurations of power and affects, remains an embryonic field of study. Under the surveillance of sexual violence, disease and girls' particular vulnerability across Africa, much of the scholarship has remained concerned with children as victims and cast within the frame of a suffering sexuality. This article seeks to break from the tendency that ignores love, sex and gender in African children's intimate relations. By drawing on empirical research conducted with children and young people in South Africa, the article demonstrates how boys and girls negotiate and invest in intimacy under varying social conditions. In doing so it hopes to address this missing dimension in African research to reconfigure love, gender and sexuality as a critical part of young people's lives in Africa. In addressing young Africans as active agents in constructing sexualities and their investments in affective dimensions of relationships, the article seeks to arrive at a way of making childhood sexualities as critical to building a fuller account of African childhoods. In doing so this article radically calls into questions studies that curtails sexualities from the studies of children and young people. The article also argues that the benefits of addressing young Africans as sexual with capacities to engender love is important if we are to move beyond the scourge of violence and inequalities and to advance gender-equitable relations in childhood.

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## Résumé

Dans les études africaines sur l'enfance, les idées sur l'amour, le sexe et le genre sont souvent ignorées. Malgré la présence primordiale de l'amour, les enfants et les jeunes sont souvent décrits comme sans amour. L'étude sur la sexualité de l'enfance africaine, ses effets sexospécifiques et ses configurations locales de pouvoir et d'affects demeure un champ d'étude embryonnaire et manquant. Sous l'optique de la violence sexuelle, des maladies et de la vulnérabilité particulière des filles en Afrique, une grande partie de la recherche est restée préoccupée par la question des enfants en tant que victimes et s'oriente vers une sexualité subite. Le présent article cherche à rompre avec la tendance qui ignore l'amour, le sexe et le genre dans les relations intimes des enfants africains. En s'appuyant sur une recherche empirique menée avec des enfants et des jeunes en Afrique du Sud, le présent article démontre comment les garçons et les filles négocient et entretiennent des rapports intimes dans des conditions sociales variées. Ce faisant, il espère aborder cette dimension manquante dans la recherche africaine pour reconfigurer l'amour, le genre et la sexualité en tant que partie essentielle de la vie des jeunes en Afrique. En abordant la question des jeunes Africains en tant qu'acteurs actifs dans la construction de la sexualité et les dimensions affectives des relations qu'ils entretiennent, l'article vise à démontrer que la sexualité de l'enfance est un facteur essentiel pour une description plus exhaustive de l'enfance africaine. Ce faisant, le présent article remet radicalement en question les études sur l'enfance et la jeunesse qui ignorent la sexualité. L'article souligne également qu'il est important d'analyser les jeunes Africains en tant que sujets sexuels capables d'entretenir des relations amoureuses, si nous voulons aller au-delà du fléau de la violence et des inégalités et favoriser des relations équitables entre les sexes chez les enfants.

## Introduction

How do we write and theorize about African childhood sexualities? Under conditions of ongoing economic misery and precarious social existences, African childhoods have often been represented as in crisis, calamitous and catastrophic. Concerns about orphans due to disease and war, the youth bulge, overpopulation and brutal conditions of existence have reproduced the conceptualization of African childhoods as in crisis and collapse. Under these conditions, a focus on African childhood sexualities that takes full account of desires, concerns, pleasures and anxieties remains missing. The ways in which children and young Africans pursue love, the conditions under which they pursue love and the gendered effects remain an embryonic field of study. As Mark Hunter (2010: 14) writes, 'Africa is still often thought of and written about as loveless'. To date, few studies place African children at the centre of

investigation, in their own right, for what they can tell us about gender and the constructions of sexualities (Bhana 2007; Delius and Glaser 2002).

This article radically calls into question the sexual silences in researching and working with children in Africa. We need to change the way in which children and young people in Africa are viewed whilst developing new methodological and theoretical tools to understand childhood sexuality. In setting childhood sexualities as a key agenda in African child and youth studies, the article argues that it is time to acknowledge young Africans as invested in and motivated by sexual pleasures and desires whilst paying attention to the gendered, social and cultural conditions through which sexualities are forged. Like the small but growing body of scholarship around children and sexualities, it argues that children are strongly invested in sexuality, have pleasures and desires and that childhood is entangled with gender and affective relations of power (Bhana and Pattman 2011). Taking a cue from recent work on love and sexualities in Africa (Cole and Thomas 2009; Hunter 2010; Tamale 2011), the article presents a challenge to and questions the omission in research and debate on childhood sexualities in Africa. Understanding how African childhood sexualities are constructed – with a few exceptions (Delius and Glaser 2002; Bhana 2007; 2013) – remains missing and elusive.

By stating that African childhood sexualities are ‘missing’, the article does not seek to reproduce dehumanized accounts of African children as loveless and without desires and pleasures. Understandings of love, sex and gender in African child and youth studies have not been fully acknowledged. In much of Africa the suppression of childhood sexuality has been authorized not only by religious views, historical and colonial effects that position children as asexual, but also by laws that make it difficult to raise sexuality as an issue of serious concern and pleasure for young Africans. How do we begin to reframe childhood sexuality in Africa that considers more deeply children’s sexuality whilst also recognizing the social and cultural conditions under which sexuality is produced? In order to attend to widespread forms of vulnerabilities including sexual violence and gender inequalities faced by children, we must take heed of children’s investment in sexuality beyond one-sided conceptualizations of sexual affliction and suffering. We need new entry points to substitute suffering with survival and resilience within the sexual and gendered landscapes of the continent.

The argument made in this article is that it is time to put childhood sexualities on the map of African child and youth studies. We need to stop the pretense of childhood sexual innocence, to shake up conceptualizations of African childhoods, to ‘trouble’ children, gender and sexuality so that

the problems and issues that face childhoods in Africa are better dealt with in order to improve our interventions that take heed of the active ways in which sexualities are produced. A comprehensive understanding of African childhood sexualities requires a broader analytical view and deeper appreciation of the actual lives of young people. Sexualities are produced, but their production is often premised upon conditions not of their own choosing suggesting ways in which agency is and can be constrained by wider structural inequalities (Morrell and Jewkes 2012).

The ways in which childhood sexualities are produced and struggled over take place in vastly varying social contexts on the continent, they are rooted in gender relations of power and inequalities and they tell us not only about the inequalities but about the early formations of love and desires which have thus far been rendered invisible in African research with children and young people. Childhood sexualities in Africa are not given the seriousness that they deserve because of dominant conceptualizations of children's inability to think, know and feel sexuality as gendered beings. Against this narrow approach, this article draws from research conducted with South African children and argues that African children are active agents in the construction of gender and sexuality whether at age six or nine or sixteen and seventeen. The article thus starts from the premise that childhood sexualities are always present (Delius and Glaser 2002) but not acknowledged. The first section of the article focuses on missing childhood sexualities in Africa before it turns to conceptualize the field more broadly. Specific examples are cited from South African school-based research to illustrate the productive ways in which children invest in sexualities and their relations to gender, power and inequalities. The paper ends with implications for theory and method in the field of African childhood sexualities.

### **Missing Childhood Sexualities in Africa**

In much of Africa, the ways in which childhood sexualities are forged remains missing in research and debate. Children's construction of sexuality (whether they are six or sixteen) remains on the fringes. Whilst a significant body of research has illustrated the benefits of understanding childhood sexualities more comprehensively, African research has been slow to address young people's sexual agency, concerns, desires and pleasures.

The term 'sexuality', as developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), has relevance for the understanding children's sexuality:

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in

thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors. <

Since sexuality is part of the life course, children are not asexual. Sexuality is not simply about sex and is part of a constellation of meanings and practices that are part of African childhoods (Bhana 2007). Instead of seeing sexuality as fixed and biological, sexuality is a product, consequence of discursive practices and laden with power. Beliefs and norms about what is appropriate for children vary according to social context. A normative construction of children and childhood is premised upon innocence. Whilst historical analysis of children and sexualities in South Africa (for example Delius and Glaser (2002)) contests the innocence and silencing of children's sexualities, the effects of religion, colonialism and economic conditions have produced a version of an African child that is often thought of as loveless and without sexual desires. The muting of African childhood sexualities is especially evident with regards to same-sex sexualities.

There are few examples of intimacy, love and sex in writing about African childhood sexualities. Indeed, childhood sexualities in Africa appear to be contained within a definition of sexual terror and misery. In South Africa, Delius and Glaser (2002) have recognized the muting of sexuality in historical studies providing rare examples of young African sexualities, except through anthropological research dealing with families and communities. Delius and Glaser suggest further that unlike the current context in many African communities in South Africa where children's sexuality is silenced, in the nineteenth century youth sexuality was openly acknowledged and celebrated:

African communities recognised the power and centrality of sexuality in human experience and were acutely aware of the strong passions which swayed pubescent hearts and minds. There were, however, in all communities strong prohibitions and sanctions against pre-marital pregnancy (2002: 31).

Indeed, in contrast to the missing element of sexuality in the current African context, in some African societies in South Africa, adolescence was viewed as a time when sex was to be practised although strong sanctions were placed on pre-marital pregnancy. Pre-marital pregnancy was frowned upon especially as it transgressed cultural values such as *ilobola* where virginity was prized and celebrated through the payment of bridewealth. The current practice of *ilobola* still holds high value and women are complicit in fuelling their position within gender and sexual relations by accommodating cultural

practices and values that celebrate virginity. Delius and Glaser (2002) argue that the relative openness of childhood sexualities in pre-colonial times was dismantled by Christian missionaries, changing traditional practices and widespread poverty brought about by changing economic structures where men especially sought labour away from their homesteads.

Historical evidence thus points to relative openness in relation to African childhood sexualities, although such work is rare. A dominating theme draws mainly from the negative constructions of power. Like Western constructions of childhood as a time of innocence South African research documents the ways in which children are viewed as innocent and ignorant, and in need of protection from sexual knowledge (Bhana 2003). Such constructions work to frame children as passive, without agency and determined by structure. The effect of children's innocence is that children too participate in discourses of innocence in order to present an 'authentic' child, uncontaminated by sex (Bhana 2008). Indeed the focus on children and sexualities has been underlined by the spectre of danger requiring adults to protect children.

Despite the multi-dimensional nature of sexuality, childhood sexuality has been addressed especially when it concerns sexual violence, rape, health, disease and HIV. Whilst these concerns are very significant, the sophisticated ways in which young Africans negotiate sexuality and the cultural and social values through which sexuality is mediated are missing in African research. When the angle of interest in African children, where it exists, is only on negative constructions of sexuality, childhood sexuality becomes problematic and solutions to end sexual disease, violence and gender inequalities take on an abstract and technical direction. A significant problem is that children are not regarded as sexual and as agents with passions, desires and interests in sexuality.

Indeed, interest in children, gender and sexualities has been highlighted nonetheless, particularly in work on the number of girls in schools and African girls' lack of access to schooling. Girls have also been the focus of attention as public health concerns have been raised about teenage pregnancy, the gendering of HIV and young women's vulnerability to disease, female circumcision and early marriage, for instance, reproducing the view of a suffering sexuality. Research attention has also focused sharply on sexual coercion and violence, condom use, transactional sex work within gender relations of domination and subordination without paying much attention to the entanglement of love, sex and gender in African childhood studies (Bhana and Pattman 2011). Beyond these concerns, the ways in which young Africans negotiate sexuality and the rootedness of gender in the shaping of African childhood sexualities are not particularly visible

(Pattman and Chege 2003; Bhana 2007). Childhood sexualities in Africa have been framed within a negative discourse and contained within wider research acknowledging sexual terror and fear.

African sexualities are usually framed as a problem. Within this framing the image of the 'Big Man' looms large in the conceptualization of women and girls as victims of sexual violence and male power (Barker and Ricardo 2006). In the context of war and violence, young African men in particular are viewed as weapons of mass destruction, wreaking havoc on the continent and intensifying the problem of gender inequalities and coercive sexual relations. Sexuality is framed as a 'problem' fuelling stereotypical racist notions of a hyper-sexualized young African masculinity. Young men are constituted as violent and rampantly creating vulnerabilities for women and girls. The social constitution of sexuality as dangerous is embedded within gender relations and power where young African men are regarded as vicious and violent with voracious sexual appetites putting young women and girls at risk, and creating painful African female sexualities. Fuelled by historical, racialized and popular representations of African men, young women and girls are considered to be at risk to hordes of young unemployed, inherently violent men lurking the continent as sexual predators reproducing gender inequalities (Barker and Ricardo 2006). In such a representation, young women and girls are deemed to be docile victims, unprotesting and casualties of culturally embedded practices of patriarchy where African men hold monolithic power. This is a hackneyed colonial legacy that constructs African sexuality as debauched, menacing and degrading (Hunter 2010).

A dominant conceptualization that lingers in research and media coverage regarding African children is that related to sexual risk, sexual danger, sexual suffering and affliction, death, HIV, poverty, hunger, starvation and malnutrition (Bhana 2013). The devastating effects of sexual violence, danger and disease, especially for young women, must not be underestimated (Morrell and Jewkes 2010). Indeed, the angle of research in much of the scholarship in Africa focuses on sexual and gender vulnerability and in the generation of fear rather than on a dual focus including childhood sexual pleasures and desires (Delius and Glaser 2002). Whilst there is now a slowly emerging body of work on African children's agency (Bhana 2007), a full picture of how African children and young people conceptualize sexual desires, experiences and relationships is often consigned to the margins. Whilst anthropological research has shown the central role that African children play within families and communities, especially in conditions of social and economic distress (Grier 2004; Bass 2004), the ways in which sexuality features in the making of African childhoods is often missing (Bhana 2007).

Ignoring the ways in which African childhood sexualities are constructed within gender relations and against broader structural constraints means that we continue to run the risk of developing programmes that do not take account of the ways in which intimacy, desires and love shape and are shaped by African boys and girls and young men and women. In the absence of research on childhood sexualities in Africa, the stereotypical framing of young violent African masculinity is stoked, as well as the construction of a docile femininity. Indeed, the absence of research into the lives and identities of childhood sexualities in Africa fuels the idea of loveless relationships, constructing Africans without desires and pleasures and contributing to the dehumanization of African childhoods.

This predicament remains despite a growing account of young Africans sexualities beyond danger, terror, fear and disease (Smith 2010; Swidler and Watkins 2007; Bell and Aggleton 2014; Groes-Green 2013; Bhana and Pattman 2011). The missing discourse of love, sex and gender is especially silent in relation to childhood constructions of homosexualities and younger children under ten (Bhana 2013). The result of the one-sided conceptualization of childhood sexualities is that the cultural, social and political manifestations of sexuality are dismissed rendering children as victims of sexuality, with girls in particular being victimized, and boys depicted as sexual predators, both undermining young Africans active agency in the social construction of sexuality.

Recently there have been attempts to address the missing discourse of love, sex and gender on the continent (Tamale 2011; Bhana 2013a); however the focus on children and young teenagers is still missing. Such research illustrates how young men and women and children under ten within local contexts use the cultural resources they have available to construct a version of sexuality which is pleasure-based, showing potential for care and love, whilst being at the same time locked into a familiar conceptualization of gender and power, accommodating subordinate positions especially of women and girls, and reproducing the gender hierarchies that fuel health problems. Much more research is required from the perspectives of young African children taking heed of a sharper focus on sexualities which is multidimensional, where young Africans' agency is foregrounded against the backdrop of structural inequalities, if we are to address African children as human beings in their own right with potential to act and change the circumstances in which they find themselves.



## **Another Look at African Childhoods: Love, Sex and Gender**

Busi: We don't know what love is anymore, we think love is just having sex, having fun, going out there clubbing.

Nona: Love is when someone understands who you are, where you come from, understands your dreams, your future. Love is just ... it doesn't hurt people.<sup>1</sup>

In the last decade, my research in South Africa, together with an emerging body of African scholarship (Hunter 2010; Cole and Thomas 2009; Harrison 2010; Swidler and Watkins 2007; Smith 2010), has begun to illustrate the ways in which young Africans give meaning to sexuality. The introductory transcripts in this section offer a snapshot that contradicts the static and gruelling representation of childhood sexualities on the continent, suggesting young women's investment in discourses of love, pleasures, desires and hopes for the future. These narratives, as other researchers are demonstrating too (Groes-Green 2013), suggest that boys and girls and young men and women express desires, have agency and are not helpless in the grim depiction of the gender and sexual matrix where male power is monolithically subordinating young women. Muhanguzi (2011) in Uganda has argued that whilst sexuality is a vital part of young Africans' experiences of schooling, sexual vulnerability is heightened for young women. In developing, practising and producing their sexualities, relations of domination and subordination are produced rendering young women vulnerable to sexual violence.

In taking another look at African childhoods and sexualities, research is illustrating the powerful ways in which young people's sexuality is based in and driven by material, local cultural and social processes. Whilst the major issues regarding children's vulnerability to violence and disease are clear, in taking another look at children, the complex ways in which young men and women weave their way through relations of domination and subordination are becoming clear. For instance, newer research in Uganda (Bell and Aggleton 2014), Mozambique (Groes-Green 2013), Malawi (Swidler and Watkins 2007), Nigeria (Smith 2010) and South Africa (Harrison 2008; Morrell and Jewkes 2012; Bhana 2009; 2010; 2011) suggests that whilst young Africans face insecure livelihoods, they are not passive. Young people's sexual relations are enmeshed within material impoverishment and both young men and women struggle to produce masculinities and femininities under these circumstances. Given the gendered nature poverty, women and girls idealize and imagine futures with rich men (Bhana and Pattman 2011). Poverty and men's inability to realize economic goals, migrant labour and

cultural norms lead to men establishing multiple partners to gain respect and power. Under these precarious circumstances young Africans find it hard to talk about sex and sexuality and find difficulty in accessing sexual health services. Access to sexual knowledge is made difficult by poor schooling and lack of focus on the sexuality needs of young people.

As Bell and Aggleton (2014: 13) note in their study of Uganda:

The systematic structuring of vulnerability experienced by young people in relation to their sexual health, arising from experiences of economic insecurity and inadequate provision for sexual health needs, is therefore multi-layered, exacerbated by other local social and moral influences on young people's sexual decision-making and sexual health...

Beyond looking at children in relation to sexual danger, Bhana (2013; 2007) and Bhana and Pattman (2011) have showed how African children negotiate their lives and identities in ways that reject the construction of a docile femininity versus a violent masculinity. In this study of sixteen and seventeen year-old African men and women, young people make claims to love but love operates as a strategic means to address economic disadvantage making men with money a viable option where clothes and middle class-related consumerist values are idealized and obtainable through provider masculinity (Hunter 2010). Young men on the other hand idealize girls who come from rural areas and were constructed as virgins. In Bhana and Anderson's (2013) study, young girls had some level of sexual experience and talked about boyfriends who were supportive and loving but they also reproduced their subordination by accepting cheating boyfriends based on the ideal of love. Whilst many programmes linked to advancing girls' sexual health in Africa are premised upon providing financial resources to stop girls from engaging in relationships based on money, little attention is given to the emotional conditions which spur young women into relations of subordination creating sexual risk:

In relation to the context of sexual risk and against the backdrop of AIDS in South Africa, girls are not always able to insist on condom use. The conditions of sex are framed by emotional and economic vulnerability. The fear of losing a boyfriend if you take too long to decide on having sex also propels decisions that put girls in relationships of vulnerability. The thought of cheating also creates emotional turbulence and patterns of vulnerability for young girls. Constructions of femininity make it difficult for young girls to ensure their sexual well-being. Working with both girls and boys is an important strategy of intervention, and involves shifting dominant patterns of masculinity and femininity to broaden pathways towards love, trust, loyalty and understanding (Bhana and Anderson 2013; 30–1).

In other work, I have shown how South African children aged between six and nine give meaning to sexuality (Bhana 2007; 2013). I argue that early sexual cultures amongst young Africans remain largely unquestioned and yet detailed ethnographic work shows how boys and girls play at gender and sexuality and construct and police their masculinities and femininities. Children do so through their narratives of boyfriends and girlfriends and through games which include love letters and kissing. Young children's insertion within heterosexual cultures provides evidence of their pleasures and their agency, whilst contesting the idea of sexual innocence, but Bhana (2013) argues that their sexualities are already suggestive of gender inequalities and relations of domination and subordination. Indeed, in some examples Bhana (2008) shows how violence is engendered in these relations already at the age of six.

This newer research in Africa places love at the centre of relationships whilst recognizing the effects of structural violence. As I note elsewhere (Bhana 2013b), love is not often acknowledged in African research. A refreshing focus on African childhoods is necessary; one that reconfigures the ways in which sexuality features both as pleasurable and contested domains where gender is negotiated. A dominant image is of African children's suffering, affliction and rape; of children in relation to war, HIV, poverty, hunger and starvation; of child labour, children in crisis, malnutrition, exploited children and children without water. These remain important issues but need to be framed by theoretical directions that take seriously young people's investment in sexuality in their own right.

### **Implications for Theorizing Childhood Sexualities in Africa**

This article has argued that childhood sexualities have been evaded, are missing, are elusive and remain on the fringes of studies in African children and youth. Careful attention is required in different contexts to a more nuanced understanding of how children weave, mediate and place themselves within sexual cultures. Rejecting the view that children are innocent or simply victims of sexuality is an important move away from reproducing outdated versions of children as pitiful and incapable of acting. Innocence and victimization mask children's active interests in sexuality even at age six. There is an urgent need to generate studies about African childhood sexualities that can further our understanding of how agency is developed, thwarted and constrained so that we have a better picture of our responsibilities towards children and the implications for policy and interventions.

The evidence of children's engagement in sexual and love cultures has forced a rethinking of children as innocent. What is required is the development of theory that takes children as active agents without an exclusive focus on their neediness and protection. At this level there is a need to provide evidence in a variety of contexts about the ways in which poverty, structural inequalities and sexualities coalesce to produce not simply vulnerability but to examine young Africans' agency in these contexts which shape, as they are shaped by, sexualities. The point here is not to discount the major structural inequalities facing young Africans but to understand how young people strategize and navigate sexuality and gender under such conditions of extreme vulnerability, and to point to changing sexual and gender relations. For instance, Bhana (2014) shows that young men are developing caring patterns. This goes against the stereotype that labels young men as violent and bad. Even under the most extreme circumstances, sexual lives live on and there is need to understand these circumstances of sexual living. Children are not passive in the face of these settings, but as fresh evidence suggests they do work on their circumstances both in reproducing gender and sexual hierarchies whilst dismantling some of these.

Theoretical developments must pay attention not only to pain and suffering but also to a pleasure-oriented, view of sexuality which can illuminate love and affection as key to the making of childhood sexualities. New entry points into the field of African childhood studies can help illuminate the intricate workings of power beyond victimization and expected gender roles.

## **Conclusion**

This article began with concerns about the missing dimension of sexualities in African child and youth studies. How do we begin to theorize about childhood sexualities in Africa when much of the research remains silent regarding children's active investment in sexuality under conditions of social and economic turbulence? Recognizing the social and economic ills which shape (as people shape) sexualities has given rise to a negative framing, not just of sexuality but of childhood sexualities. In such a framing children are victims of sexuality, dying, and boys in particular are cast as violent and girls as victims of a hypersexual African masculinity. The silence around childhood sexualities is especially apparent in research with younger children under ten as well as in the construction of young same-sex sexualities in Africa. This article radically calls into question this silence and argues that it is time to stop the silence on childhood sexualities in Africa. Whilst oral history and rare examples of children's sexuality in pre-colonial times suggest a relative openness with regards to children and sexuality (Delius and Glaser 2002), the silence is harmful to African children and to development.

New research emerging in different parts of the continent suggesting different conceptual approaches is promising; it is important to advance nascent scholarship on childhood sexualities in Africa. In doing so the category of childhood must be opened up to demonstrate how gender and sexuality are key elements integrating the experience of sexuality with local contexts including poverty, culture, gender and structural violence. The promise in the path ahead is that African childhoods can be engaged with in a more comprehensive manner that takes heed of and pays attention to what matters to children so that we can improve sexual health and advance gender equality and well-being.

## Note

1. Focus group discussion with African township youth, aged 16–17, Kwa Mashu Township, Durban, South Africa.

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