

Motives for the first sexual experience and sexual behaviours practiced among out of school Youths in Mpimbwe District, Katavi Region Tanzania

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Abstract:

Background: Early sexual debut is a common practice among youth in Africa. However, little is known about the motives for the first sexual experience and subsequent sexual behaviours practised among out-of-school youths.

Objective: To determine motives for the first sexual experience and sexual behaviours practised among out-of-school youths in Mpimbwe District, Katavi region Tanzania

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted among 320 out-of-school youths in Mpimbwe district. Data was collected through structured questions, analyzed using SPSS version 22, (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) and results were summarised and presented in textual and tabular formats.

Results: The age of the respondents ranged from 15 to 24 years. Age at first sexual experience varied from 14 to 19 years with a median age of 16 years. By the age of 14, about a quarter of the girls (26.8%) and relatively few boys (1.9%) had their first sexual experience. None of the respondents reported using prevention against the consequences of unprotected sex during the first sexual experience. Pleasure was the main motive (79.1%) for the first sexual experience followed by gifts (18.6%) and these varied significantly by age and sex. The majority (98.4%) were aware of vaginal sex and had personal experience with it. Other common sexual behaviours reported were masturbation (81.9%) and anal sex (75.6%). None had practiced anal sex and a third of males (33.1%) and a few females (7.5%) had practiced masturbation. Other sexual behaviours reported were frotteurism and wet and dry sex.

Conclusion: Early sexual debut was common among out-of-school youths with less protection against the consequences of unprotected sex. Pleasure and gifts were the main motives for the first sexual experience. Different sexual behaviours are known and practised by the study respondents. There is a need for effective educational interventions on safe sex for informed decisions on sexual behaviour among this population sub-group.

Keywords: Sexual behaviour, Sexual Motives, Sexual experience, out-of-school, youth

Introduction

The United Nations defines youth as an individual aged between 15 – 24 years (Bersaglio, Enns, and Kepe 2015). This group represents about 1.2 billion of the world's population and close to 90 percent of those are living in less developed countries. Africa is home to the largest youthful population with more than sixty per cent of its population aged under 25 years. By 2030, Africa's youth population is projected to constitute about 42 per cent of the global youth. In Tanzania, this population sub-group constitutes about 20.4 of the total population (Tanzania demographic profile https://www.indexmundi.com/tanzania/demographics_profile.html).

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While the bulging youth population could be seen as an opportunity to reap in driving the continent economies and enhance sustainable development (Bosco Ekka, Prince Verma, and Harishchander Anandaram 2022), to realise this youths need to be informed, engaged, mentored and be healthy including being sexually healthy.

Youthhood marks a critical stage of human development that is accompanied by rapid biological transition, reproductive capability and psychological transition (Denno, Hoopes, and Chandra-Mouli 2015). It is a time of self-discovery as well as physical and cognitive development (Harrower 2019). At this stage youths pass through and experiences new situations and experiments different life events which may have negative consequences to their health and wellbeing if are not approached carefully (Girmay, Mariye, and Gerensea 2019). While curiosity and experimentation are normal, it is within this context that youth sexual development and sexual behaviours occur. Early age at sexual debut among youths is associated with risk sexual behaviours through adulthood (Durowade et al. 2017; Bengesai, Khan, and Dube 2018). It is also associated with elevated rates of sexually transmitted infections (Kaestle et al. 2005; Ankomah et al. 2011), having sex with high-risk and multiple sexual partners (Kassahun et al. 2019), unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions and inconsistency condom use (Kassahun et al. 2019; Pringle et al. 2017) hence risking the sexual health and the general wellbeing of this young sub-population group.

In most of the Sub-Saharan African countries including Tanzania, pre-marital sex is culturally and religiously not encouraged even though there is evidence that many youths engage in pre-marital sex (Bengesai, Khan, and Dube 2018; O. Asante et al. 2018; Hailegebreal et al. 2022; Kalolo and Kibusi 2015). In Tanzania, about 15% of women aged 20 – 24 years reported experiencing sexual debut before they were 15 years old (Nkata, Teixeira, and Barros 2019). The same rate was also reported in Uganda (Sommer et al. 2016) and a slightly lower rate of 10% was reported in Kenya (Macro 2008).

Tanzania is one of the ten countries with the highest rate of teenage pregnancy (Nkata, Teixeira, and Barros 2019; Wado, Sully, and Mumah 2019) In 2016, 27% of the adolescents aged 15 - 19 years had either a birth or were pregnant, an increase from 26% in 2004-5 and 23% in 2010 (National Guidelines for Water). There is a wider inequality in marriage between adolescents residing in rural areas and urban living in settings. In rural settings, about 23% of the girls aged 15 years have been either married, divorced or widowed before the age of 18 years, compared to 12% in urban settings (OECD 2022).

Similarly, the share of adolescents and young women aged between 20 and 24 years married before the age of 18 is significantly higher in rural settings (24%) than in urban areas (4%). It is also estimated that 4% of boys in Tanzania are married before the age of 18 and in some rural areas some girls reportedly marry as young as 11 years. In such contexts it is significant to examine the aspects prompting the decisions of the youths from rural settings to initiate sexual activities. This study therefore aims to gain insights on the motives for the first sexual experiences and the different sexual behaviours practices among out-of-school youths in Tanzania. Such information could be useful not only for predicting sexual behaviours but also for shaping development of strategies to informed decisions on sex and sexual health among the out-of-school youths

Methodology

This study involved out-of-school youths aged 15 – 24 years in Mpimbwe District Council (DC) in Katavi Region. Mpimbwe DC is located in Southwest Region of Tanzania with an area of 7,704.84 square Kilometer. The district was established in 2016/2017 after the division of the former Mlele District. Mpimbwe DC has a total population of 117,539 people including 32,098 youths (14,411 males and 17687 females). The most recent data shows that the prevalence of HIV in the district is

5.7% among the general population and that of the youth population is 0.6% and 1.2% for males and females respectively (Tanzania 2018). This higher HIV prevalence in the district made it an appealing choice for the study to understand the motives for the first sexual experiences and sexual behaviors known and practiced in the setting to contribute to informed targeted interventions for improving sexual health and wellbeing of the youth population.

A multistage sampling method was used for recruiting the study respondents. A list of all the wards in the district was made and three wards were randomly picked. Thereafter, a list of the villages in each of the wards was made and from each ward two villages were randomly selected for the study. From each selected village, a sampling frame consisting of all households were constructed and 53 households were randomly selected. In households with two or more youths, one was randomly picked for the study.

Data was collected using structured interview guide. Apart from the information on respondents' demographic characteristics, motives for the first sexual experiences, partners of the first sexual experiences, venues for the first sexual experiences and awareness and practice of different sexual behaviors was obtained. The data collected was then processed and analysed using the Statistical Package and Service Solutions (SPSS) version 22 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Finally, the results were summarised and presented in textual and tabular formats.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS) Ethical Review Board (DA/287/298/01A). The ethical clearance facilitated approval to conduct the study from the administrative authorities of Katavi Region and Mpimbwe District, respectively. Each of the study respondents received detailed information on the nature of the study, assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of the information before providing written informed consent to take part in the study

Results

Characteristics of the study respondents

The study involved 320 youths out of which 51.6 were males. Their age ranged from 15 to 24 years with a median of 19 years. The majority of the respondents (43.2%) were primary school leavers, 12.5% did not have any formal education and very few (2.8%) had post-secondary education. Most respondents had a father (90.9%) and mother (94.7%) who were alive at the time of the study. As summarized in Table 1, almost two thirds (63.6%) were living with both parents and 7.2 % had their own living arrangements.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the study respondents (N320)

Variables	Male %	Female%	Total%
Respondents age			
< 14 years	24.8	36.8	30.6
>15 years	75.2	63.2	69.4
Education level			
No formal education	14.5	10.3	12.5
Incomplete Primary school	13.9	14.2	14.1
Complete Primary school	38.2	46.5	43.2
Incomplete Secondary school	11.5	14.2	12.8
Complete Secondary school	18.2	12.9	15.6
Post-secondary school	3.6	1.9	2.8
Living arrangements			
Both parents	62.8	64.5	63.6
Mother alone	18.9	18.7	18.8
Father alone	4.3	1.3	2.8
Relatives	6.7	8.4	7.5

Other arrangements 7.3 7.1 7.2

Age at first sexual experience

The age at first sexual experience varied from 14 to 19 years with median of 16 years. By the age of 14, 14.1% of the respondents already had their first sexual experience. At this age about a quarter (26.8%) of the girls were sexually active compared to 1.9% of the boys.

There was a great variation in the type of partner during the first sexual experience. Close to three quarters (72.1% said they first had sex with their friends. This type of response was higher among females (74.5%) compared to males (69.8%). About 1 in 4 had their first sexual experiences with their fellow students and this was higher among males 28.3% compared to females (21.6%). Sex with relatives was reported by 3.9% of females and (2.9%) of the males. None of the study respondents used any protection against consequences of unprotected sex during the first sexual experience.

Motives for the first sexual experience

As summarized in Table 2, pleasure was the main motive (79.1%) for the first sexual experience especially among males. Gift as a motive was a response mainly given by females (37.5%).

Table 2 Variation on the motives for the first sexual experience by sex

Motives	Male (N=159)	Female (N=152)	Total (N=311)
Pleasure	98.1	59.2	79.1
Gifts	0.6	37.5	18.6
Money	1.3	3.3	2.3
Total	100.0	99.0	100.0

Chi-square = 72.941 and P.000

Sex for pleasure varied significantly by age. A large majority (83.6%) of those at the age of 15 and above tried sex for pleasure compared to 51.2% of those at the age of 14 or below. The younger ones were more likely to try sex in exchange of gifts (17.8%) compared to 14.2% of those aged 15 years and above. The need for money was almost the same for the younger (2.3%) and older (2.2%) respondents (chi-square = 25.696); P = 0.001

Venue for the first sexual experiences

Venues where the first sexual experience took place revealed an interesting pattern. More than a half (51.6%) of the first sexual experiences took place either at the home of the partner or the respondent while 42.3% took place either in the bush or in abandoned buildings. Female youth were more likely to have their first sexual experience at the partner's home (55.6%) a venue which was reported by very few male youth (2.2%). The home of the respondent was more likely to be the venue for the first sexual experience for the males (33.3%) compared to the females (6.5%) as summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Venues for the first sexual experience

Venues	Male (N=159)	Female (N=153)	Total
Partners home	2.2	55.6	31.4
Respondents home	33.3	6.5	20.2
Guest house	0.6	0	0.3
Bushes	25.2	16.3	20.8
Abandoned buildings	24.5	18.3	21.5
Hostel/school compound	8.2	3.3	5.8

When the venue for first sexual experience was examined in relation to age it was noted that the younger respondents aged 14 years or less were more likely to have it at the partners' home (45.5%) compared to those who were older (29.1%) while the older ones were more likely to have it at their home (22.0%) compared to the younger ones (9.1%).

Sexual behaviours known and practiced

Virginal sex was known by a large majority (98.4%) of the respondents and had practised it before the time of the study. Awareness and practice of other types of sexual behaviours are as summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Awareness and practice of other sexual behaviours among study respondents

Sexual Practices	% Known			% Practiced		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Anal sex	75.2	75.6	75.6	0	0	0
Oral sex	58.8	61.9	60.3	37.8	31.2	34.5
Masturbation	93.3	69.7	81.9	33.1	7.5	22.6
Dry sex	13.9	41.9	27.5	0	26.2	18.9
Wet sex	30.9	33.1	32	35.3	47.2	41.3
Frotteurism	31.5	7.1	19.7	12.5	16.7	13.3

The other common other sexual behaviour known was masturbation (81.9) followed by anal sex (75.6%). While an equal proportion of males (75.2) and females (75.6%) were aware of anal sex none of them reported to have practiced it. On the other hand, masturbation was known to a large majority of the males (93.3%) and a third of them (33.1%) had practiced it while this type of sexual behaviour was known to 69.7% of the females and very few 7.5% said to have tried it.

Frotteurism, a practice common in overcrowded transport facilities in urban settings was known to 19.7% of the study respondents especially males (31.5%). However, only 13.3% of the respondents said they had practiced it including 16.7% of the females. Wet and dry sex which is fairly common in parts of East and Central Africa (Duby and Colvin 2014) was known to almost a third (32%) of the respondents. However, dry sex was practiced only by 26.2% of the female respondents while none of the males reported to have practised it. Wet sex was practiced by 47.2 of females and 35.3% of males.

Discussion

Many youths are sexually active but little is known about the motives for the first sexual experience and the sexual behaviours known and practiced particularly in rural districts in Tanzania. In this study an attempt was made to determine what motivated the youth to have sex for the first time and where such behaviour was initially attempted. Many of them started practicing sex at a fairly young age. By the age of 14 years more than a quarter of the girls (26.8%) and 1.9% of the boys were already sexually active. The likelihood of girls experiencing sexual activity earlier than boys has also been reported in Uganda (Renzaho et al. 2017; Sommer et al. 2016), Kenya (Obonyo 2010) and South Africa (Bengesai, Khan, and Dube 2018). This may be due to socio-cultural norms and practices that encourage young girls to marry relatively older men (Fagbamigbe and Idemudia 2017).

Early sexual debut is of particular concern in Tanzania since it is among the African countries where adolescent girls and young women account to 80% of the new HIV infections (Zanzibar 2017) which are mainly sexually transmitted. The association between early sexual debut and risk sexual behaviour (Kaestle et al. 2005; Doyle et al. 2012; Amo-Adjei and Tuoyire 2018), higher risk of exposure to pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Speizer et al. 2013; Shrestha, Karki, and Copenhaver 2016; Houlihan et al. 2016; Seff, Steiner, and Stark 2021) as well as the

general threat to health and wellbeing of the adolescents is well reported (Pringle et al. 2017; Taylor-Seehafer and Rew 2000; Mensch, Grant, and Blanc 2006). Improving access to age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health and rights education will not only be beneficial to adolescent health and well-being but also for the long-term HIV epidemic control.

This study reveals that pleasure and the need for gifts were among the main motives for the first sexual experience by the study respondents. Similar results were reported from a study involving adolescents in Anambra State in Nigeria (Duru et al. 2010). In their study peer group pressure, personal satisfaction and individuals' own curiosity were the other underlying motives for the initial sexual experiences (Duru et al. 2010). Although sex is a basic human drive, there is a need to improve sex socialization during pubescence to support these young people to make informed decisions during sexual engagements and improve their sexual wellbeing as they mature towards adults.

Use of preventive gears such as condom during sexual intercourse is one of the recommended measures to prevent sexual partners from unintended sexual outcomes such as unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Duru et al. 2010). However, in this study none of the adolescents reported to use any prevention against the consequences of unprotected sex during the first sexual experience. Not using protective gears during the first sexual experience was also reported among adolescents from other parts of Tanzania (Nkata, Teixeira, and Barros 2019) and elsewhere (Magnusson, Masho, and Lapane 2012). This behaviour could be informed by the reported limited sexual education and negotiation skills (Mmbaga et al. 2017) and knowledge of STIs and HIV or prevention activities in sexual and reproductive health among the adolescent population (Nkata, Teixeira, and Barros 2019).

The existing literature shows that sexual education is most effective when delivered to pre-sexually active young people (Boonstra 2015; Hendriksen et al. 2007). Facilitating acquisition of this knowledge should be accompanied by improved access to adolescents sexual and reproductive health services in order to enable knowledge translation into practice.

This study further inquired from the respondents the sexual behaviours known and practiced. Vaginal sex was the commonly known and practiced sexual behaviour reported. Other sexual behaviours commonly known and reported in the study included masturbation, oral and anal sex although none of the respondents reported personal experience anal sex.

The current study findings differ from what was earlier reported in a systematic review that anal sex between men and women is a wide spread practice in sub-Saharan Africa (Morhason-Bello et al. 2019) including the East African countries (Duby and Colvin 2014; Shayo et al. 2017). This difference could be explained by the fact that these studies had different population groups. However, it is also possible that because anal sex is illegal and culturally unacceptable in the Tanzanian settings, study respondents did not want to be associated with it.

Evidence shows that both men and women in Africa practice anal sex for a variety of reasons including to maintain virginity, contraception, fulfilment of male pleasure, relationship security, menstruation, financial gain and prestige (Duby and Colvin 2014). It may not be surprising to see similar reasons influencing the same sexual practices among the out-of-school youth. This is also because in other settings in Tanzania, a study observed self-reported anal sex among adolescents and youths to be around 8% (Morhason-Bello et al. 2019).

This study had to contend with one major limitation. Since a discussion on sexual behaviours with the youth is not culturally and morally favoured in Tanzania there might be chances of under-reporting on the sexual behaviours known and practiced in the study. Reporting on sexual practices among the respondents as a topic is culturally sensitive and one that could attract stigma among the youths' social circles. Therefore, the findings from this study provide critical insights on the motives for the first sexual experience and sexual behaviours known and practised that are useful for informing sexual education programs targeting out-of-school youths and the general youth sub-population group in rural settings in Tanzania and elsewhere.

Conclusion

The study has found that early sexual debut is a common practice among out-of-school youths. This practice was mainly motivated by the want for pleasure or gifts and protective measures against the consequences of unprotected sex were rarely observed. Virginal sex was the main sexual practice even though the youth were aware of other types of sexual behaviours. Consequently, the study establishes an urgent need for interventions to providing effective, sufficient and appropriate education among out-of-school youths on sexuality and safer sex for informed decision on sexual practices and improving their sexual health and well-being in general.

Data availability

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request

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Conflict of interest

Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

Authors' contributions

EM, AM and ML conceived and designed the study. AM collected the data. EM performed the analysis and the interpretation of the data, and wrote the manuscript. All authors participated in the interpretation of the data and editing of the manuscript and approved the final manuscript for publication

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