

Socializing influences and the value of sex: the experience of adolescent school girls in rural Masaka, Uganda

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In order to explore the socializing influences which have shaped rural adolescent schoolgirls' views and values about sex in a high HIV prevalence area of Uganda, detailed qualitative data was obtained over a one year period from 15 schoolgirls (aged 14-17), chosen for their willingness to participate actively in a series of role plays, focus group discussions (FGD) and one-to-one interviews. Findings suggest that the girls have been subjected to a wide range of influences, including parents, social functions, other young children, nature, their *ssengas*, peers, school, and various media, such as pornography. There was disagreement about the relative values of sex and virginity. Some were determined to retain their virginity, but the majority felt that sex benefits them socially and personally. Peer pressure was a major factor shaping many girls' opinions, while traditional influences are in decline. Because of the small sample size, care should be taken in generalizing from the findings. However, the data suggest that sex has a high value for at least a substantial minority of adolescent girls in rural Masaka, Uganda. Policy makers and health educators should therefore consider how best to devise safe sex messages that are both relevant and applicable to this especially vulnerable group.

Introduction

Sexual activity is to a large extent socially constructed. Any attempt to reduce unwanted teenage pregnancy or STD/HIV infection must therefore have at its core a solid understanding of the social context in which young people's values towards sex develop, as well as of the influences that contribute to their decisions to participate in or delay sexual activity (World Health Organization (WHO) 1993: 2).

Although Caldwell *et al.* (1994: 130) have argued that there is a 'distinct and internally coherent African system embracing sexuality, marriage and much else', sub-Saharan Africa none the less contains significant regional and ethnic differences with respect to sexual values and practices, even within relatively small geographical areas (Olowo-Freers and Barton 1992). Consequently, what may be an appropriate intervention for one group or area may not work for another. Therefore, interventions throughout sub-Saharan Africa should ideally be designed locally and based on an informed understanding of the values held by the specific target population (Standing and Kisekka 1989).

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With this in mind, we present here the findings of an exploratory and descriptive study which sought information from adolescent rural Ugandan school girls about the socializing influences which have shaped their views, as well as the values they hold concerning sex. The study area has a high HIV seroprevalence rate, with 2.5% of 13–19 and 19.4% of 20–24 year old females testing positive for antibodies to the virus (Mulder *et al.* 1995: 834).

Socialization—process and theory

Socialization has been defined as ‘the process through which an individual learns the cultures, values and norms of his or her society’ (Wilmot 1985: 228). It is a lifelong process, and as Hewitt (1986: 149) suggests, ‘people are never fully socialized, nor are they fully formed. They are always in the process of becoming’. The socialization process is not a passive, one-way affair, and neither need it be prescriptive. Similar external stimuli affect different people in different ways, according to their biological and psychological predisposition, so an individual’s behaviour, and indeed her sense of self, is therefore the product of a complex array of unique and dynamic factors, both external and innate.

Twa-Twa (1997: 69) has produced a ‘sociological model of adolescent sexual behaviour in Uganda’, in which he examines the environmental factors associated with adolescent sexual activity in this country. He identifies four such influences, which, according to their quality and type, could serve either to suppress or promote sexual activity. They include parental care, peer influence, economic factors and STD/AIDS education. He also describes the importance of feedback mechanisms, whereby ‘bad effects’, such as rape, acquiring an STD or HIV, getting pregnant or being caught by parents would probably suppress future sexual activity; while ‘good effects’, due to luck, condom/contraceptive use or enjoyment at climax would encourage young people to continue with their sexual activity.

This model provides a useful starting point for discussing the various socializing influences to which adolescent school girls may be subjected in rural Masaka. These influences are central to the development of each individual girl’s set of values about sex, and they can therefore play a key role in determining when a girl decides to become, and whether she should stay sexually active.

Methods

Thirty secondary students (15 boys and 15 girls, age range 14–18 years, mean age 16.1 years) were recruited from one rural secondary day school in Masaka District, Uganda, to take part in a series of role play exercises, focus group discussions (FGDs) and one-to-one interviews. The age range of the participating girls—who discussed the socialization theme at length, and on whom this paper therefore concentrates—was 14–17 years, and their mean age was 15.9 years. All the girls came from the Baganda ethnic group,¹ which is dominant in Masaka district.

The school was chosen because it falls inside the catchment area of an ongoing community-based qualitative study, also run by the Medical Research Council Programme on AIDS in Uganda, which is examining sexual behaviour change, the socio-cultural context of this change, and the reasons for change or the lack of it. Results from the two studies would therefore complement each other. Although there are two other secondary (boarding) schools in that area, most of their students come from the capital city, Kampala. The school we chose was the only secondary school in the area which attracts exclusively local students.

Students identified as potentially co-operative by the head teacher, and who expressed initial interest in the study were met at the school by JK and SN, who explained broadly what the study would examine and what would be expected of prospective participants. All 30 students present at the meeting were enthusiastic to take part, each indicating their consent by signing a sheet of paper.

The study methodology had been previously developed and piloted in neighbouring Tanzania (Nnko and Pool 1997). It arose through a recognition of the huge problems associated with studying sexual behaviour directly, and the consequent necessity that research into the subject must rely predominantly on what people *report* that they do. However, since formal interviewing techniques may not provide an environment conducive to open discussion of such personal matters, we attempted to make participants as comfortable as possible, and to create an enjoyable, free atmosphere in which they would feel able to speak openly and frankly. The informal discourse produced from this process would provide the core of the study's data.

Initial data collection took place during four sessions, each lasting between one and three days, over a four month period at a local lake resort. The participants were first asked to prepare and produce role plays on four themes, each lasting approximately ten minutes. These were (i) how boys and girls negotiate for relationships and sex; (ii) a girl falls pregnant and tells her family; (iii) boy/girl discovers that he/she is infected with HIV; and (iv) young couple discussing contraception and condom use. Boys and girls worked both separately and together. No supervision or guidance was provided by the facilitators during the preparation of the role plays, which allowed participants to develop their story-lines and characterization exactly as they wished. Within certain broad parameters, therefore, the students themselves controlled the agenda of the research.

Fourteen role plays were filmed with a video-recorder and played back to all the participants. The students then split themselves into groups of between five and ten, and were guided through a total of ten FGDs—all of which were taped—by three trained and experienced local facilitators, using the vernacular, Luganda. Three FGDs involved only girls, four included only boys, and both boys and girls participated in three. The importance of maintaining confidentiality was emphasised before each of the sessions.

The role plays acted as catalysts for discussion, stimulating the students to debate a variety of topics associated both directly and indirectly with the themes they had worked on themselves and watched on video. Questions by facilitators were general, with the students leading the discussion as far as possible.

Complete transcripts in Luganda were produced for translation into English and initial analysis. From this it emerged that certain important issues had been discussed only briefly, so the students were each invited back to participate in two one-to-one interviews in order to obtain more detailed information on these topics. Four more FGDs, involving only the girls, were also held. The period between the first role plays and the last FGD was one year, long enough to permit a relationship with quite a high degree of trust to develop between the participants and, especially, SN, who facilitated most activities with the girls. Reliability and validity of data would thereby have been enhanced.

The data presented below are derived from the ten FGDs in which the girls participated (seven alone and three with boys), as well as 30 one-to-one interviews (two for each of the 15 girls.)

Results

Three broad themes emerged during the FGDs: negotiation for sex; risk factors and behaviours; and socializing influences and the values attached to sex by girls. This paper concentrates on the socialization and values theme, and includes a few relevant quotations from the boys in the mixed FGDs, which refer to universal experiences of young children. Since they did not of their own initiative discuss the issue in the first round of FGDs, however, the boys were not invited back for further discussion on this theme—it has not therefore been possible in this paper to corroborate or add to what the girls said on the topic from a male perspective. The order in which the various categories are presented below does not imply any rank or perceived relative importance.

Socializing influences

Parents: Because many people in rural Masaka live in small houses, and children are often obliged to share the same sleeping space as their parents, they see and hear their parents' sexual activity almost from the day they are born. Children therefore become sexually aware at a very young age.

Girl: If people stay in these small houses that are rented, the child will definitely learn these things. The child sleeps in the same room as the mother and father. (*Laughter*)

Girl: The child pretends that she is asleep and sees what the father and mother are doing as they make love in the night.

Girl: She even listens to the words they whisper to each other.

Girl: She observes and learns. Meanwhile the parents think she is deep asleep. She will not cry out for something, lest they realize she is awake. She will keep quiet and watch.

Girl: The child listens and then tells a friend what she heard. She says, "Let us do what my mother and father were doing".

Girl: The child thinks it is good because it is done by the Mum and Dad.

Although this exchange does not refer specifically to any of the girls' own experiences, there was a consensus that this type of situation is common for many young people, and that it is quite harmless for the child. By

contrast, the comment below is derisive in its description of both parents' extra-marital affairs.

Girl: In fact their mother encourages them in their promiscuity. She supports the idea of her girls staying with boys. That is spoiling the child. For example, a girl I know was once walking with her boyfriend, and by chance they met her mother. The girl later told the mother, "If you report me to Daddy, I will tell him that when he is not around, you bring men to the house at night". How do you expect such a family to survive? It is certain that even the father takes a different woman when he is on his trips. After all, the mother imports men when he is away.

Parents may therefore influence their children through example, but it is reportedly rare for them to talk openly about sex with their offspring.

Girl: Apart from telling me to guard my life, my mother has not told me anything. The only advice that I have is the one that the Senior Woman used to give us in my primary school.

Girl: It is very difficult. I suspect my parents would be embarrassed to talk about these things. Probably they are shy.

This reluctance to discuss sensitive personal issues is reflected in some parents' attitudes towards condoms. Although condom promotion activities over the last decade have greatly increased usage, condoms have none the less proved controversial in Uganda, especially when used by young people. Many elders consider them an affront to traditional culture, believing that they undermine morality and established social structures. Consequently, many adolescents fear being caught in possession of condoms by their parents, which means that they may be unprepared if they find themselves engaged in a sexual encounter, and therefore at risk of an unfavourable outcome.

Girl: These days on the radio there are so many songs that praise condoms. However when you hear such a song you feel bad because of the way in which your parents react to them. The parents talk like they would rather hang themselves than listen to such songs. They do not want those songs put on radios because they spoil their children. They do not support the whole condom thing. Parents say, "People say that condoms are bad. Now hear these fools saying they are good". They grumble about them.

None the less, despite some differences of opinion between the generations, several of the girls saw their mothers as positive influences and important role models.

Girl: I want to copy my mother because she is my mother. She is the only one that I have. No one can ever take her place in my life.

Social functions: Social functions such as weddings, funerals and other large gatherings were cited as places where children and young people see sexual activity and develop ideas as to what they might do themselves.

Girl: After a round of juice or soda [at a wedding], the child will tell the mother, "Let me go to the [banana] plantation for a short call" [to urinate]. The mother permits her to go. There she will find a big boy suggesting [sex] to a girl. She will squat like she is urinating and listen, watch and take in each detail of the words and the actions. The next wedding that she attends she decides to practise what she learned, because young people like practising and copying new things.

Weddings in Uganda have been identified previously as events which provide the opportunity for young people other than the nuptial couple to engage in their first sexual activity (Schopper *et al.* 1993).

Other young children: It may in fact not be necessary for the child to wait until the next wedding for her to try out what she has learned. Sometimes children take the ideas home and apply them, albeit perhaps incorrectly or incompletely, during their games.

Boy: They have wedding scenes with a bride and groom. So they get the man and the woman. And they begin to do the things that brides do. The bride is covered with flowers. Then after the church service, the bride and groom might lock themselves in a room and do it in the absence of the other kids. When they come out, the reception begins. (*Laughter*)

Facilitator: How does it happen? What takes place when they are playing?

Boy: They smooch or fondle each other.

The interviewees reported two other games that involved young children venturing into the realms of sexuality: ‘mother and father’ and, as described below, ‘hide and seek’.

Boy: Children have a variety of games that they play. There is this popular game called ‘hide and seek’ (*Laughter*). Usually the family that has more kids has the other family kids coming over to play ‘hide and seek’. When they hide in the house, some of them shut themselves in a dark room and begin touching each other.

Boy: In many cases the little kids will come and report that, ‘X did so and so to me’ (*Laughter*).

Boy: During ‘hide and seek’, they may take long to reappear after going off to hide. When they reappear they may each say that they have finished playing. Then as the rest of the kids continue these ones also go off to hide in a bush and then put into practice what they learned elsewhere.

Although our earlier example of the young girl at the wedding suggests that girls may initiate these games with their friends, some of the girls complained that it was the boys who ‘spoil’ young girls with their ideas and games.

Girl: The small boys bring up the idea. They get to know about it first and spoil the young girls.

Girl: They lie to the young girls saying that, “I will bring for you a sugar cane from home if you agree. They are now plenty since it is the season”.

Girl: Or that, “I will buy you many pancakes”.

Girl: And the little girls’ reasoning is very immature. The sugar cane is very tempting.

Nature: Whatever external socializing factors may be involved, respondents were also aware that knowledge and interest in sex is to a large extent innate. Children are naturally inquisitive about sex, and they connect what they see in nature with some of the questions they would like answered in their own lives.

Boy: Now, when a girl sees her father she asks herself, “why did he marry mother? Was it only to cook food?” Then she asks, “How does she produce kids?” So she goes on asking and may even see a cow mounting another, and a pregnant cow as well. So she says “oooooooooooo”. She finally judges and checks herself too, and she discovers her father didn’t only wed her mother to cook. So as she grows, she gets a fellow girl and practises it out saying “let us also give birth and see what will happen”. From that she learns more real things.

Without their own inherent curiosity and interest, no amount of external stimuli would encourage children to experiment by themselves and with each other.

Boy: If you look critically, this thing is in the blood. God created it in us. For example you might watch a young kid that only crawls touching funny areas and covering them shyly. That thing is in the blood.

The ssenga, and her diminishing role: The paternal aunt, or *ssenga*, of adolescent Baganda girls traditionally played a major formal role in socialising her nieces into womanhood, with respect both to sexual activity and broader married life (Kisekka 1973: 45). Her work included teaching about how to run a household, as well as the need to demonstrate submissive respect for a girl's future husband and his relatives. Girls were taught that a woman should not refuse her man if he wants sex. Information about female hygiene was also passed on.

In addition, the *ssenga* oversaw the process of elongating her niece's labia minora, an important Kiganda practice designed to enhance sexual attraction (Standing and Kisekka 1989: 215). This requires a girl in her early adolescence manually to pull her labia minora over a period of weeks until they have reached a length of 2–4cm. Unlike female circumcision, which is still practised in parts of eastern Uganda, labial elongation does not reduce a woman's sexual pleasure, and neither does it damage her health. In fact, its purpose is specifically 'to enhance pleasure and stimulation during sexual intercourse' (Kisekka 1973: 44). As long as the girl had satisfactorily elongated her labia and had retained her virginity until marriage, the *ssenga* would be rewarded for her efforts by the husband's family with a traditional dress and a goat.

Since she was one of very few sources of information and influence available in days when access to the outside world was limited, the *ssenga's* authority over girls was considerable. However, with the rapid social and economic changes that have recently characterized Uganda, *ssenga* culture has been obliged to evolve (Muyinda *et al.* submitted). For example, by the girls' own admission, it is quite rare these days for a bride to be a virgin on her wedding day, so the traditional gifts that the *ssenga* would have received are usually not presented. As a result, many of the girls said that they have received limited tuition—if any—from their *ssenga*.

Girl: Long ago the aunties were the ones to bring up their nieces, and the girls remained with their hymen. Then the aunt was in a position to get goats and clothes from the husband's home. But now girls go to school and they are "destroyed" from there. Then the aunties say, "Ah, what am I going to gain from her?"

In addition, since many adolescent girls become sexually active at a relatively young age, some *ssengas* feel that their role as a sex educator is no longer relevant.

Girl: In the past, people really capitalized on the issue of virginity. Today nobody looks for a virgin because there are none. That is why I think *ssengas* no longer take interest in talking to their nieces. They know that the girls already know the things because they have done them.

Girl: Girls these days are informed. That is why the *ssengas* no longer tell them anything. How can you tell someone who knows much more than you?

Even though a girl's *ssenga* may not these days be closely involved in her upbringing, she—or another unrelated older woman who fulfils the symbolic role—may still be brought in at the ceremony which formally introduces the girl to her future husband and his family, as well as at the wedding itself. Her task is to verify that the girl correctly elongated her labia, and also to provide her with some last minute advice about the secrets of a stable marriage.

Girl: She checks to see if the girl is proper [that she has pulled her labia].

Girl: I heard that when a girl is going to get married, she is sent to her *ssenga* who tells her about how to run a home. She says, "My child, in your home you should behave like this. If you want to keep your husband happy, you treat him like this". They also teach the girls how to treat the relatives of the husband. The brothers or sisters in law can come to your place and instead of preparing tea for them, you just look at them as if you don't know them. *Ssengas* teach the girls how to look after those relatives as they look after their husbands.

One or two generations ago, this teaching would have included lessons on the importance of demonstrating deferential respect for her husband, her in-laws, and other elders. Even though the *ssenga's* influence today is much less than it was then, however, this practice remains an important activity for a Muganda woman. One of the most meaningful ways of showing respect is to kneel down when greeting people or serving food. Failure to kneel at the appropriate moments implies indifference or even scorn.

Girl: You might come across your husband talking with your father-in-law. Then you come towards them walking straight and upright. You stand while talking with your father-in-law! Eh! What kind of respect is that? Your father-in-law will ask his son, "Eh, what kind of woman did you marry? How come you married her? She has got no respect at all. Send her away and get one that will respect people. Will you be two men in the house? Will she stand when talking to you as if you are equals, and stay married to you? Send her away". So your father-in-law decampaigns you before your very own husband because you are bad mannered. However, had you seen him and then knelt in respect to greet and then talk with him, he would feel that you really respect him. He will always praise you among people.

This unequal status of husband and wife is also exemplified by the problems many women face in trying to convince their husbands to use condoms.

Girl: It is difficult [to insist on condom use] if you are married. If he is just a boyfriend, it is okay. In case I am going to have sex with him, I ask him to use a condom. If he refuses, it is up to him—then we leave out the sex. However I do not see how a married woman can tell her husband to use a condom. The husband can refuse.

Peers: Although some of the girls were strongly opposed to premarital and extramarital sex, the broad consensus was that early experience of sex is important, not only for its own enjoyment but also because it permits membership into a sort of informal girls' peer group, or 'club'. Within the club, members share knowledge and experiences, and they develop a mutually supportive value system. Furthermore, those who refuse to engage in sexual activity tend to be stigmatized by the larger group. The pressure from peers to become sexually active can be so strong that determined and publicly acknowledged virgins require quite substantial reserves of inner strength to overcome the demand to conform.

The few girls who declared that they were virgins did not argue that the state of virginity is in itself a good thing. Rather, they looked at the issue from the opposite, and perhaps more practical point of view, stating that premarital or early sex can damage one's health, mental equilibrium and reputation, and it can also ultimately bring about marital discord. Virginity was felt to be a good thing, therefore, because it is a state in which certain undesirable events cannot occur, not because its proponents have an inherent dislike of or lack of interest in sex. For these girls, denying themselves the pleasure and excitement of sex was clearly worth the sacrifice.

Girl: It is good for a girl to be a virgin because if she gets married when she isn't one, every guy who has ever had sex with her goes around telling people about the worthlessness of the bride.

Girl: If the disease [AIDS] gets into their home, he will doubt she is the one who brought it. However if he found you an already used vessel at the time of marriage, he will be right to suspect you could have brought it. I believe that being a virgin is a good thing.

Girl: There is a time I got very ill. I was in Primary class 7 and every one around thought I was pregnant. I was taken for several medical check ups to see if I was pregnant. But inside me I was firm and very confident because I knew I was not pregnant. I had never had sex with anyone. Even though I was ill, I knew I was not pregnant. I was proud and confident. I was not scared. I was sure that I was innocent. Whenever my aunts asked, there was no boy I could mention because I had never had sex. If I was not a virgin, I would have got into a panic wondering which of my last lovers was responsible. I would have got frightened and so would my parents.

Although these arguments in favour of virginity are compelling, the opposing view—that premarital sexual experience is a good thing—was far more pervasive. This is consistent with what was reported in the 1970s, that few Baganda people reach their wedding day with their virginity intact (Southwold 1973: 165, Kisekka 1976). Not only was a positive opinion of early sex held widely among our interviewees, but there was also a very strong feeling of 'us and them' within the non-virgin group, and they criticized virgins on the basis that they are simply not good people. Similar findings have been reported in another Ugandan study (Busulwa 1995: 50), and elsewhere in Africa (Renne 1993: 128).

Girl: Virgins have bad hearts. Once they find you talking to their brothers, they will report you to their teachers.

Girl: They are gossips and rumour-mongers.

Girl: They are arrogant for nothing.

These same girls also claimed that virgins are largely ignorant of female matters because they refuse to participate in discussion about them. Hence they supposedly have problems, for example, dealing with their menstruation.

Girl: Virgins are usually dirty. They reach their periods when they don't know what to do because they are not aware of the days. She will get leakages and won't know how to go about everything.

Girl: In addition she does not discuss such matters with fellow girls. We get to learn a lot in groups.

Future marital stability is said to be another casualty of the virgins' determination to retain their status. It is said, for example, that virgins' refusal to learn about sex before they marry means that they will not be able to satisfy their husbands. Furthermore, it is believed by members of the non-virgin group that men despise women who are virgins when they marry.

Girl: She pretends that she is well informed but when she gets married, she does the opposite of what should be done. She cannot please her husband in bed.

Girl: It is not good if she marries a boy when she is a virgin. They may quarrel and he shouts at her, "I found you a "goat" [virgin] and came to your rescue".

Girl: I know that boys say that girls who get married when they are virgins bring a curse.

Clearly, such girls have a very low opinion of those who determinedly retain their virginity. Those with sexual experience, however, are deemed to be 'better' people, and they command more credibility and respect at school.

Facilitator: What do you think of having a friend who is not a virgin and is ever with boys?

Girl: I think that is a better person.

Girl: That is why such girls have many friends in school. Even if it is elections for the prefects, it is such girls that get most votes.

In general, the publicly acknowledged virgins appeared quite happy and confident with their status, despite the outspoken prevailing attitude of the non-virgins. Furthermore, they did not attach a particularly high value to sex at this point in their lives, and they seemed relatively immune from the peer pressure to conform. However, for the majority who held that retaining one's virginity serves no purpose, the peer group was vital in offering a mutual support network of advice and information, as well as in providing a sense that their being sexually active was entirely legitimate. Peers, as a socializing influence, were far more important for the non-virgins in this study than for the virgins.

School: Most of the formal school-based sex education that the girls had received was given in primary school, mainly by the senior women teachers, and sometimes by the science teachers. The subjects ranged from pregnancy and menstruation to STDs, HIV/AIDS, condoms and delaying sex.

Girl: We were girls of Primary Class 6. She told us that we are not supposed to spend a lot of our time with boys. The problem is that you never know when the devil can come and you agree to have sex.

Girl: She told us the methods we can use to be free from STDs like abstaining from sex and using of condoms, but she didn't advise using condoms because we were still young.

Girl: In my primary school, we had a woman teacher. She would collect the girls alone. Then she would talk about the problems we encounter as growing girls. She would talk about hygiene that is necessary for the periods. She also talked about the problems that might arise out of periods. She is the one who advised us about counting our days well. We should know which days are safe to have sex on and which are not. She taught us how to count the days of our cycle. She also taught us how to wear sanitation towels. She mostly dealt with the changes that happen to a girl.

The senior women teachers of these primary schools were in effect taking on the mantle of the *ssenga*. Given the latter's demise, and the fact that girls are increasingly attending school in Uganda, the senior women's new *ssenga* role is of great importance. However, the advice she gives is not always in accordance with currently accepted doctrine.

Girl: [We were taught] that if anyone has got AIDS, we must avoid them. If he is a man and you are a girl you must never go near him. If this patient is at home, his things must not be used by other people. He must be isolated.

Senior woman teachers do not necessarily restrict themselves just to health and hygiene matters. Some have even taken up the *ssenga's* traditional task of overseeing the elongation of their pupils' labia.

Girl: When we were in primary boarding school, we took things into our own hands. The senior woman would speak to us in Primary 4. Then she would assign each of the young girls an older girl from Primary 6. Then these big girls would teach us and supervise us for two terms. Sometimes they would pull us themselves. If you joined the school in a middle class, you would be assigned a prefect to be your mentor. She would bring you to us, the stars at pulling, and we would introduce you to the system. Then we would watch over the growth of your labia minora. And if you did not want [to pull], we would organize and come to your bed one night. We would cover your mouth with a bedsheet and pull you ourselves and show you that it is important. It is for your own good.

Pornography and the media: A significant proportion of Uganda's wide-ranging media is to some degree sexually oriented. Our interviewees described a recently emerged and locally produced genre of magazine which contains semi-pornographic fictional stories, as well as a variety of *ssenga*-style agony columns in some newspapers. They also referred to hardcore pornography, which is illegal in Uganda. Most of this is imported from Western countries, but it is increasingly locally produced. Local pornography includes graphic illustrations of elongated labia, which presumably serves to reinforce the attraction of the practice.

Recently emerged magazines with names such as *Chics*, *Spice*, *Ssenga* and *Secrets* have pushed back the boundaries of what is acceptable, and even legally publishable in Uganda. They have proved controversial, however, and many people oppose them on the grounds that such 'immoral' material should not be readily accessible to the public, and particularly to the youth. None the less, despite this—or perhaps because of it—they were very popular among young people, especially when they first started to appear in mass circulation during 1996. While their specific purpose may not be to educate, our interviewees felt that they do play a teaching role for young people.

Facilitator: Why do young girls go in for such material?

Girl: We are out to learn what is in those magazines.

Girl: We want to be well equipped with the techniques we shall need in the future.

Girl: For us, the vulgar way in which it is written is more accurate in describing what you know. Like the words used in *Ssenga* bring out the actual picture more clearly than these decent words. In fact sometimes you feel your heart beating faster when you read *Ssenga*.

Hardcore pornography appears to be surprisingly common, especially given the rural context of the girls' backgrounds, and their relatively low economic status. They reported having seen such films in video halls in one of the low income townships near Masaka, and they spoke of more wealthy people who have their own pornographic videos at home. Magazines from Western countries and locally produced individual pornographic photographs were also mentioned.

Girl: There is a photo that circulated round the school. Most students fought to look at it. There was a naked guy who had put on a condom and was at the point of entering his woman who was bent over. If a young child comes across it, he will learn and try it out himself. He will be influenced to practise what he saw.

Girl: Older children like those at Makerere [University] create a problem by bringing pornographic tapes which are very interesting to the home. When the father is not around, during the day the kids watch these tapes. The older brother [from Makerere] cannot chase the kids away because the dad banned such tapes from the home, and if the kids are chased away they will report him to the dad. So they also sit and watch and learn the process.

These photographs, magazines and videos show and discuss things in a way that traditional Kiganda culture would consider abhorrent. Yet in the two cases cited above, the interviewees described both considerable general interest in the photograph or video, as well as the 'problem' that hardcore pornography can create, especially when seen by young and impressionable children. They were concerned that if young people have access to such material, it may negatively influence the development of their views and values concerning sex.

Discussion

This paper has described an attempt to elicit information from rural Baganda adolescent school girls about how and from where they learn about sex, and the values they attach to it. Although the findings we present are in-depth and detailed, they should not be over-generalized due to the small sample size we used, as well as the fact that the participants were initially identified specifically on the basis of their likely enthusiasm to take part in the study. Furthermore, the context in which data collection took place was made as conducive as possible to the unimpeded and open discussion of sex, so some exaggeration may have occurred. The comments of these girls should therefore be seen as broad indicators of the general themes which may be experienced by girls and young women in this part of Uganda rather than as definitive of all female rural Baganda adolescents.

The intense interest in their own sexuality expressed by many of the girls highlights the need for follow-up studies to examine further the nature and extent of these feelings in this and other high HIV prevalence areas of sub-Saharan Africa. Similar work should also be undertaken with boys. In addition, it would be useful to study the views of parents with respect to their adolescent children's emerging sexuality, and how they discuss—or not—these matters with them, as well as how they perceive things may have changed since their own youth. By understanding these changes in the broad process of social development, important light could be shed on why the situation is as it is today, which in turn would help inform the design of appropriate and relevant health messages for this population.

One of the more striking features of what has been presented is the wide range of influences to which these girls are subjected, beginning almost from birth, and becoming increasingly complex and diverse as they grow up. The girls recognized that elements of sexuality are innate, but they also saw how some influences (such as unfaithful parents, pornography or 'naughty' children) can 'spoil' a child, as well as how other influences (such as 'good' parents or teachers) can instil 'good' values. In combination with her own predisposition, these various influences will shape the way a girl's value system develops, and to some extent determine at which point she may decide to become sexually active. Notable by their absence from this paper, however, are older men or teachers, who have previously been identified as initiating some adolescent girls into early sexual activity (Twa-Twa 1997: 68, Kinsman *et al.* 1999: 598), and religious influences, which may inhibit it (Twa-Twa 1997: 70). Since neither of these possible influences were mentioned by the girls during the course of the study, it must be assumed that they did not play a large role in their sexual socialization.

Even our small sample of 15 girls displayed a great diversity of opinion about the relative values of sex and virginity. While a few were adamantly determined to retain their virginity—apparently for reasons of health and stability more than a lack of interest—the majority felt that sex benefits them, both in terms of the pleasure they derive from it, and also from the status and authority that it confers upon them within their peer group. This wide range of feelings illustrates the difficulties of attempting to design a sex or AIDS education programme which would be relevant to all

sections of even a relatively homogenous target population, such as rural school pupils.

These girls have a clear advantage over their mothers in terms of the information about sex that is available to them. When they were young, their mothers would have had to rely far more on their *ssengas*, and would not have had access to the educational materials currently available through the media and at school. This is partly because they would have been less likely to be able to read or to have attended school, but also because such sources of information simply did not exist 20 years ago or so. AIDS has of course been one of the major catalysts for producing these materials, but other changes in Ugandan society have also contributed to an overall improvement in the quality and accessibility of general sex education as compared to the situation one generation ago.

By contrast, the peer pressure to engage in sexual activity at a young age is probably far stronger than it was for their mothers, precisely because they are at school. Instead of spending their days working in the banana plantation or helping their mothers at home—as most of *their* mothers would have done—they spend hours each school day surrounded by other teenage girls, with whom they discuss sex, and for many of whom it is an important part of life. In other words, the whole social context in which decisions about sex are made has changed, as has the process of social development. This is clearly demonstrated by the weakening of traditional authority and the simultaneous strengthening of peer influences.

The demise of traditional influences is best exemplified by the *ssenga*, who is no longer the primary authority for adolescent girls on sexual matters. While traditionalists may mourn her decline, this change may in fact benefit many girls. One of the *ssenga's* main jobs was to teach her nieces to act submissively towards their husbands, and not to refuse their demands for sex. The obedience required of her also extended to general reproductive health matters, such as the number of children she would have, and in recent years, therefore, the extent to which modern family planning methods, including condoms, might be adopted. While it would be quite wrong to imply that gender inequities in rural Masaka are vanishing along with the *ssenga's* demise—as evidenced by the girls' universal acceptance of the need to kneel before husbands, fathers or in-laws as a largely unreciprocated mark of respect—the fact that the main cultural institution which promoted such subservient behaviour no longer has the authority it once did suggests that the balance of power between men and women may be shifting.

As explained in the introductory section above, Twa-Twa (1997: 79) identified four environmental influences which may serve either to promote or suppress sexual activity among Ugandan adolescents: parental care, peer influence, economic factors and STD/AIDS education. Of these, economic factors were not mentioned by the girls at all in the context of socializing influences, but rather in association with the sexual negotiation process (see Nyanzi *et al.*), during which boys often approach girls with small gifts or money as part of their attempt at seduction. The absence of economic factors from this paper should not therefore be seen as an indication that they are not relevant.

However, the data presented in this study strongly support Twa-Twa's hypothesis that the other three influences are crucial to the process of creating a social environment in which an individual girl decides either to delay sex or to engage in it, and in which she holds certain opinions about the value of sex. One possible modification to his model, however, would be to expand the 'parental care' category to include a broader sweep of home life, in which other children, animals on the homestead, and social occasions are added. According to our respondents, these all play a significant role in awakening the young child to her own sexuality. However, the absence of the *ssenga* from his list is probably justified, given that these days her authority is so much reduced.

These findings illustrate the wide range of opinions and values about sex that rural adolescent Baganda girls can hold. While some are content to maintain their virginity, sexual experience is valued highly by many others, who believe that their being sexually active brings them a whole swathe of social and personal benefits. Furthermore, it is likely that a relatively high proportion of the sexual contacts had by these girls are not protected by condoms. In terms of reducing unwanted pregnancies and preventing STD/HIV infection, therefore, this widely held attitude presents a significant challenge to health educators and policy makers, who need to consider how best to design safe sex messages that are both relevant and applicable to these girls.

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Notes

1. Prefixes are attached to the root *ganda*—which identifies the ethnic group—in order to produce a desired meaning. For example, *Muganda* refers to one individual while *Baganda* refers to many. *Luganda* is the name of the language, and *Kiganda* describes the culture.

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Résumé

Le but de cette étude était d'explorer les influences socialisantes ayant formé les opinions et les valeurs d'écolières adolescentes en ce qui concerne les rapports sexuels, dans une région rurale de l'Ouganda à forte prévalence du virus du SIDA. Nous avons collecté des données qualitatives sur une période d'un an, auprès de 15 écolières (âgées de 14 à 17 ans) choisies parce qu'elles avaient accepté de participer activement à une série de jeux de rôle, de discussions de groupe et d'entretiens individuels. Nos résultats suggèrent que ces adolescentes ont été l'objet d'influences très diverses, induisant celles de leurs parents, des fonctions socialisantes, des autres jeunes enfants, de la nature, de leurs *ssengas*, de leurs pairs, de l'école et de divers média, notamment la pornographie. Elles n'étaient cependant pas d'accord sur la valeur relative à attribuer aux rapports sexuels et à la virginité. Certaines étaient déterminées à garder leur virginité, mais la majorité pensait que les rapports sexuels leur étaient favorables socialement et personnellement. Pour beaucoup d'entre elles, la pression exercée par leurs pairs était un facteur déterminant dans la formation de leur opinion, alors que les influences traditionnelles étaient en déclin. À cause de la petite taille

de l'échantillon, il faut être prudent avant de généraliser ces résultats. Néanmoins, ils suggèrent que les rapports sexuels ont une grande valeur pour au moins une minorité substantielle des adolescentes de la région rurale du Masaka en Ouganda. Les décideurs et les éducateurs responsables de la santé publique devraient donc considérer la meilleure façon de produire des messages sur les rapports sexuels qui soient à la fois pertinents et applicables à ce groupe particulièrement vulnérable.

Resumen

Para explorar las influencias sociales que han dado forma a las opiniones y valores en cuanto a la sexualidad de chicas de una zona rural de Uganda, con un alto porcentaje de seropositivos, se obtuvieron datos cualitativos y pormenorizados durante un año de 15 chicas en edad escolar (de 14 a 17 años), elegidas por su interés en participar activamente en una serie de juego de papeles, discusiones en grupo y entrevistas personales. Los resultados indican que las chicas habían recibido influencias muy diversas por parte de padres, factores sociales, otros jóvenes, la naturaleza, sus *ssengas*, compañeros, la escuela, y medios de comunicación, entre ellos de pornografía. Hubo una discrepancia sobre los valores sexuales y la virginidad. Algunas estaban convencidas de guardar su virginidad pero la mayoría pensaba que el sexo era un beneficio tanto en el aspecto social como personal. La presión de sus coetáneos era el factor principal que formaba la opinión de muchas chicas y las influencias tradicionales estaba en declive. No podemos generalizar porque el estudio se ha hecho a partir de un grupo bastante reducido. Sin embargo, los datos indican que una minoría importante de muchachas adolescentes en la zona rural de Masaka, en Uganda, conceden gran valor a la sexualidad. Por consiguiente, los responsables de la política y educación sanitaria deben estudiar la mejor manera de dar mensajes en cuanto al sexo seguro, que sean importantes y puedan ser aplicados a este grupo especialmente vulnerable.

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