

Attitudes, beliefs and normative influences linked to transactional sex: Insights from LINEA formative research in Brazil, Tanzania and Uganda

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SUMMARY

This brief provides an overview of research conducted by the [Learning Initiative on Norms Exploitation and Abuse \(LINEA\)](#) on transactional sex from 2014-2017 in Brazil, Tanzania and Uganda. Through in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) aged 14-24, adolescent boys and young men aged 14-24, as well as adult women and men from the same communities, we explored participants' attitudes, beliefs and normative influences linked to transactional sex.

In alignment with LINEA's aims we gained critical insights into: 1) individuals' motivations for engaging in transactional sex and their perceptions of the risks and benefits of this practice; 2) community perceptions on the extent to which transactional sex is considered to be exploitative; and 3) normative influences underpinning the behaviour.

The research presented in this brief (Evidence Brief 2) builds on LINEA's global research on sexual exploitation presented in [Evidence Brief 1: Systematic review of social norms linked to the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents](#). The evidence presented in Briefs 1 and 2 have directly influenced the development of the LINEA intervention to prevent age-disparate transactional sex in Tanzania, defined as transactional sex between AGYW and men at least 10 years older than them. The LINEA intervention development process is detailed in Evidence Brief 3.

WHAT IS TRANSACTIONAL SEX?

Although transactional sex may happen in and outside marriage, we focus on transactional sex outside marriage. Transactional sex relationships differ from sex work and are based on the implicit understanding that material support or other benefits will be exchanged for sex.ⁱ Globally, the majority of relationships include elements of exchange.

KEY FINDINGS

1 Motivations and perceived costs of transactional sex

AGYW's motivations for taking part in transactional sex related to perceived financial, emotional and social benefits. AGYW were aware of the potential negative impacts of transactional sex, but for many the perceived benefits outweighed their concerns about the potential negative impacts.

2 Community perspectives on the extent to which transactional sex is considered exploitative

While not necessarily supportive of transactional sex, in general AGYW and members of their communities did not view transactional sex as inherently exploitative because it represented one way for AGYW to access resources which may not otherwise have been available to them. Transactional sex was, however, considered exploitative if (among other factors) the man was having sex with a particularly young girl; the AGYW was considered particularly vulnerable; or if her housing situation or position in society were harmed because of her participating in the relationship.

3 Social norms that drive transactional sex

We identified a number of social norms that underpinned transactional sex: three key norms influencing AGYW's participation, and two key norms influencing men's participation.



KEY NORMS THAT INFLUENCE AGYW'S PARTICIPATION

- AGYW are expected by community members to receive money, gifts or other benefits from their sexual partner.
- AGYW are expected by community members to gain social status through ownership/possession of material items.
- AGYW who receive money, gifts or other benefits from men are implicitly expected by men to reciprocate with sex.



KEY NORMS THAT INFLUENCE MEN'S PARTICIPATION

- Men are expected by community members to have heightened sexuality and sexual prowess.
- Men are expected by community members to provide economically in sexual relationships.

Age-disparate transactional sex, however, is characterised by inherent inequities between AGYW and adult men based on age, gender and access to resources.ⁱⁱ

Transactional sex contributes to negative social, developmental and health outcomes for AGYW such as child marriage, sexual coercion, unplanned pregnancy, school dropout,ⁱⁱⁱ intimate partner violence and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV.^{iv} Notably, AGYW are 2.4 times more likely to contract HIV than their male peers, and they account for 25% of new infections in sub-Saharan Africa despite making up only 10% of the population.^v

DESCRIPTION OF THE LINEA STUDIES

The LINEA formative research took place in Brazil, Tanzania and Uganda. Local and LSHTM ethics approval were obtained for all studies. Through IDIs and FGDs, we included more than 500 participants across the three countries.



In Brazil, [Promundo](#) engaged people living in favela (low-income) communities in the densely populated capital city Rio de Janeiro, marked by drug cartel violence and military and police occupation. (3, 9)



In Tanzania, the [National Institute for Medical Research \(NIMR\)](#) selected community members to participate from one urban and one rural setting in the Mwanza Region. (1, 2, 6, 8)



In Uganda, participants were sampled from the capital city, Kampala, and rural areas around a town in southern Uganda, Masaka. Participants were identified and recruited with the help of the local NGO the [Uganda Youth Development Link \(UYDEL\)](#), and through the local government, and data were collected by the [Medical Research Council/Uganda Virus Research Institute](#). (4, 5, 7, 8)

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. Community perspectives on the motivations, costs and benefits of transactional sex

LINEA's research has established the motivations of AGYW who take part in transactional sex, and their awareness of the risks of these relationships. Understanding AGYW's perspectives helps us remember that they are not passive victims in transactional sex relationships. AGYW always have some level of decision-making power, although it is constrained by social and structural factors.

Motivations for AGYW to participate in transactional sex included:

- **Financial support:** Transactional sex relationships were an important way for AGYW to meet their material needs in a constrained environment. Older men were considered able to provide better and more reliable resources to AGYW than younger men.

You can't have a relationship with a boy [...] and all he wants from you is sex and does not care [provide material resources] for you... You can't continue being with him.

ADOLESCENT GIRL AGED BETWEEN 14-17, TANZANIA (8)

- **Emotional support:** In addition to financial support, AGYW saw money and gifts as a form of expression of love from men.
- **Gaining social status:** Through their participation in transactional sex, AGYW were able to gain social status among their peers through their acquisition of material items that represented modernity.
- **Security and protection:** In Brazil, AGYW secured status and protection in their community by engaging in transactional sex with men involved in drug trafficking. This could enable her to leave a situation of violence and/or financial vulnerability at home.

Participants also described costs associated with transactional sex:

- **Sexual and reproductive health risks:** AGYW and men believed that having transactional sex increased their risk of HIV and other STIs.
- **Social risks:** In both Tanzania and Uganda AGYW described social costs of transactional sex, including potential reputational damage, shame and embarrassment from being seen with an older man.

I have never told anyone I am having sex with an older man... It is embarrassing to tell people.

YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 20, TANZANIA (8)

In Tanzania, we compared **AGYW's long- and short-term aspirations** to understand how they could influence their decision to participate in, or avoid, transactional sex.

- AGYW's **short-term aspirations** related to obtaining material items such as fashionable clothes or smart phones.
- Their **long-term aspirations** included finishing their secondary education, having a professional job, being respected by people in their community, and getting married and having children.
- AGYW's **aspirations had an important influence on their sexual decision making**. AGYW's aspirations were shaped by their socio-economic context. Consequently, many AGYW had limited ability to meet their long-term aspirations.
- AGYW's constrained environment meant that they **engaged in higher risk sexual behaviours** such as transactional sex, age-disparate sex, and condomless sex to achieve their short- and long-term aspirations.

We also identified **motivations and costs of transactional sex for adult men** in all three locations. Men perceived younger girls to be more physically attractive and adventurous in bed than their wives and assumed that having a developed body signified adolescent girls' readiness for sex. The perceived costs of transactional sex for adult men were economic (financial pressure through provision and gift giving), psychological (regretting giving AGYW resources or being unfaithful to their wives), social (being perceived by community members as 'fools' who were taken advantage of by AGYW) and sexual health related.

2. Community perspectives on the extent to which transactional sex is exploitative

Global academic, programmatic and legal definitions of sexual exploitation tend to frame transactional sex as inherently exploitative. But to successfully prevent transactional sex it needs to be understood within the context of the various social norms and structural realities which shape the experiences of those involved. Our research has shed light on when, and what aspects of transactional sex relationships are seen as exploitative in the three country contexts.

When is transactional sex not considered exploitative?

In line with the existing literature, one of AGYW's key motivations for participating in transactional sex was the perceived opportunity to access material items that may otherwise be unavailable to them. AGYW in Brazil, Tanzania and Uganda did not necessarily see transactional sex as unfair, even when they were economically or otherwise vulnerable, and instead thought that AGYW benefitted from transactional sex. They said they were entitled to gifts and services by virtue of being in a relationship, or that they were 'savvy' for getting what they needed through transactional sex. In Brazil, people felt that AGYW chose to take part in transactional sex, and that they were using their bodies to exert their agency and get what they wanted.

People in all three contexts felt that transactional sex was not exploitative if AGYW were actively seducing or pursuing a man, if she was deemed greedy or discontented with what she had, if she benefitted substantially from the relationship, or if she was physically mature, and therefore considered ready to have sex.

Because of the [bodily] development of a very young girl. She's got firm tits, with a bubble butt, then she puts on a bikini, goes to the beach, gets a tan line. It catches a man's attention.

MAN, AGED 54, BRAZIL (3)

When is transactional sex considered exploitative?

People felt transactional sex was exploitative if the adolescent girl or young woman was particularly vulnerable or unable to meet her own needs, and if an adolescent girl was very young. For example, sex with a girl under 12 years-old in Brazil was considered exploitative, but this was less clear cut for adolescent girls older than 12 years-old. In Tanzania and Uganda, the cut off age was usually higher than in Brazil.

That is child abuse, she is only 15 years and has not yet got to the age of consent. [He] is only using her, he is defiling her.

YOUNG WOMAN AGED BETWEEN 18-24, UGANDA (5)

There were also certain characteristics of transactional sex relationships that community members felt were exploitative. This included circumstances where the adolescent girl or young woman was misled, if it worsened her housing situation or position in the community, or if she was unable to refuse to have sex with the man. In Brazil, community members were particularly disapproving of men who were physically violent in transactional sex relationships. In Tanzania and Uganda, community members felt that transactional sex was exploitative if the man clearly had harmful intentions towards the adolescent girl or young woman, such as to infect her with an STI.

Men who are interested in young girls have an objective, there is no way that a 30-year-old man can be attracted to a 14-year-old girl. He might have diseases like gonorrhoea which he wants to spread to her so that she also suffers.

YOUNG WOMAN AGED BETWEEN 18-24, UGANDA (5)

In contrast, some community members in Tanzania said that sexual relationships were exploitative when adolescent girls or young women did not receive material or non-material benefits in a relationship. This related to the idea of provision and reciprocity as forms of respect and care, meaning that not giving gifts in sexual relationships is demeaning to AGYW.

I wouldn't like it if he was just to play with my body without helping me. After we meet as partners and he has finished his problem [satisfied his sexual desires], he should also help me with my problem [material needs]. It is unfair for him to just have sex with me while he sees me walking with bare feet [...] If you care for somebody he is supposed to care for you too.

ADOLESCENT GIRL, AGED 18, TANZANIA (2)

Similarly, in Uganda sometimes men were portrayed as being exploited by AGYW who used their bodies to get what they wanted from them. This argument was framed within the belief that men have a heightened sexuality which makes them unable to resist the advances of AGYW.

3. Social norms related to transactional sex

LINEA research identified the social norms in Brazil, Tanzania and Uganda that relate to transactional sex, and the attitudes and beliefs that underpin them. We considered norms which drive and protect against transactional sex and identified relevant reference groups and sanctions.

LINEA identified **3 key norms linked to transactional sex for AGYW**. These norms were the same in all settings, although the beliefs and attitudes underpinning the norms varied across contexts.

1. **Social expectation that AGYW should benefit from their sexual partners by obtaining money, gifts or other benefits from them.** People believed that adolescent girls and women should receive material items and other benefits from their sexual partners. In Tanzania, community members felt that AGYW who had sex without receiving gifts were demeaning themselves.
2. **Social expectation that AGYW can gain status through material items and other benefits.** In Brazil, AGYW in age-disparate transactional sex relationships with powerful men in their communities were seen to be emotionally stable and mature, affording them status among their peers. AGYW in Tanzania and Uganda described peer pressure to have modern lifestyles, and therefore participated in transactional sex to access consumer items that might not otherwise have been available to them because of the social and structural context. AGYW's peers encouraged them to be 'strategic' in choosing sexual partners who could provide them with what they wanted.
3. **Social expectation that AGYW who receive money, gifts or other benefits from men must reciprocate with sex.** AGYW often had little opportunity to refuse sex once they had accepted gifts or other benefits from a man. In Uganda, AGYW who deliberately avoided fulfilling this expectation were said to have 'de-toothed' a man putting them at risk of physical or sexual violence from the man. In Brazil, this extended to include AGYW having to reciprocate with sex if powerful men in their community 'paid attention to them', even if they had not given material items or other benefits.

LINEA identified **2 key norms linked to transactional sex for adult men**.

1. **Social expectation that men should have heightened sexuality and sexual prowess.** Men were expected to want to have sex often and with multiple partners, be able to attract AGYW, and be 'good' at having sex. In Tanzania, men bragged to their peers about their sexual encounters and ridiculed men unable or unwilling to take part in transactional sex. In Brazil, men aligned with this norm by pursuing AGYW in public spaces.

2. **Social expectation that men should provide economically in sexual relationships.** In all three contexts men were valued for their ability to earn and provide, and transactional sex represented an opportunity for men to achieve this expectation. In Tanzania, men competed for transactional sex relationships by aiming to provide more desirable gifts, and being out-competed through gift giving was a source of shame.

LINEA identified 4 key norms that emerged from the data from all three contexts that **protected against transactional sex**.

1. **The social expectation that community members did not tolerate transactional sex if the girl was particularly young.** Transactional sex with a particularly young girl was widely condemned in all settings. Some participants believed that a young girl providing sex in return for material items was an unfair exchange, and some AGYW described relationships with a wide age gap as shameful and embarrassing.
2. **The social expectation that men should protect and provide for children.** Some men who engaged in transactional sex were chastised for failing to prioritise providing for their families. Men were expected to be responsible and respectable leaders in their families and communities, guiding their own children and others in their communities.
3. **The social expectation that community members did not tolerate transactional sex if the man appeared to be taking advantage of the poor circumstances of an adolescent girl or young woman.** AGYW could be perceived as vulnerable by community members if, for example, they came from a poor family or had a disability. In Tanzania and Uganda some also felt that older men purposefully aimed to 'destroy' vulnerable adolescent girls.
4. **The social expectation that women have a responsibility to educate young girls to avoid premarital sex, including transactional sex and other harmful behaviours.** In all three locations it was seen as a mother's responsibility to educate their daughters about sex and warn them of the risks of engaging in transactional sex relationships. Little evidence was available on the role of fathers in educating their daughters about sex.

You cannot be raised by your own mother and she does not talk to you [about transactional sex], unless it is your step mother, it is your stepmother who may not talk to you about such things.

ADOLESCENT GIRL, AGED 14 OR OVER, UGANDA

CONCLUSION

The LINEA formative research provides important insights on transactional sex across Brazil, Tanzania and Uganda. Our results contribute towards efforts to go beyond the victim-agent binary and recognise AGYW's agency by exploring their perceptions of the risks and benefits, as well as their motivations for taking part in transactional sex. Our research highlights the importance of understanding local perspectives of exploitation and how these might diverge from global conceptualisations of sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. LINEA also provides new and important insights into men's perspectives of age-disparate sex and transactional sex, which tend to be overlooked in research and practice. Our focus on men sheds light on the social norms and reference groups which influence men's participation (or not) in age-disparate sex and transactional sex. Notably, LINEA has shown that many of the social norms which drive transactional sex are the same across contexts, although the attitudes and beliefs that underpin them tend to vary between settings.

PROGRAMMATIC IMPLICATIONS

The LINEA research was designed to inform interventions to prevent transactional sex. The key recommendations from this research are to:

- **Shift focus to long-term aspirations.** Programme designers need to recognise the perceived benefits of transactional sex for men and AGYW to ensure that interventions resonate with the intended beneficiaries. Programmes can help guide individuals to reflect on how, despite some short-term benefits, transactional sex can jeopardise their long-term aspirations.
- **Make power visible.** Interventions must be cognisant of communities' understanding of what constitutes sexual exploitation to ensure relevance and acceptability. Interventions should help participants critically reflect on the power dynamics, social expectations, and issues around consent and coercion that drive exploitative and harmful transactional sex.
- **Promote alternative masculinities.** Gender transformative interventions should address the social norms that are linked to men's participation in transactional sex, to unpack rigid understandings of men's heightened sexuality, or their obligation to provide in relationships.
- **Capitalise on existing positive norms.** Social norms interventions can capitalise on existing social norms which protect against transactional sex, for example building on parents' obligation to provide for and protect their adolescent daughters, and other AGYW in their communities.

The Learning Initiative on Norms, Exploitation and Abuse (LINEA) is an international and multi-component project exploring how social norm theory can be used to prevent the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and adolescents globally.

More information: www.lshtm.ac.uk/linea

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