

# A qualitative study exploring parent–daughter approaches for communicating about sex and transactional sex in Central Uganda: Implications for comprehensive sexuality education interventions

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Ugandan adolescent girls and young women are disproportionately impacted by human immunodeficiency virus, and this is largely driven by their engagement in transactional sex. Globally, parent–daughter communication about sex is associated with increased contraceptive use and delayed/decreased sexual activity, but research on parent–daughter communication about transactional sex is lacking. This paper elucidates local perspectives on, and experiences of parent–daughter communication about sex and transactional sex, to inform family-level comprehensive sexuality education interventions.

**Methods:** We conducted a secondary, thematic analysis of 13 focus group discussions ( $n = 119$ ) and 30 in-depth interviews collected between 2014 and 2015 with adolescent girls and young women aged 14+, and men and women in Kampala and Masaka.

**Results:** We found that parents used three approaches to discuss sex and transactional sex with their daughters: (1) frightening their daughters into avoiding sex; (2) being “strict”; and (3) relying on mothers rather than fathers to “counsel” daughters. Mother–daughter communication about transactional sex was common, but frequently unidirectional. Adolescent girls and young women bringing home gifts sparked conversations about the risks of transactional sex, although less in poorer households. Mothers felt they lacked control over their daughters' sexual behaviors and thus restricted their movements and friendships to try to prevent them from having sex. In contrast to previous research, we found some evidence of mothers encouraging condom use and father–daughter communication about sex.

**Conclusions:** Family-level comprehensive sexuality education interventions targeting parent–daughter communication about sex could further highlight the role that fathers might play, and emphasize communication about the inequitable power dynamics in transactional sex and condom negotiation skills, while reducing fear surrounding parent–daughter communication.

## KEYWORDS

adolescent girls and young women, adolescent health, comprehensive sexuality education, parent–child communication, transactional sex, Uganda

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a unique developmental period with specific sexual and reproductive health risks. In Uganda, adolescent girls and young women are disproportionately affected by sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and unplanned pregnancy, and have insufficient access to population-specific, comprehensive sexuality education. In sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent girls and young women account for 24% of HIV incidence despite constituting only 10% of the population (UNAIDS, 2020), and their HIV prevalence is almost four times that of their male peers (WHO, 2017). Additionally, 18% of women report early sexual debut (sex before age 15), and a quarter of 15–19-year-olds report current or previous pregnancies (UBOS and ICF, 2018), limiting their access to education and putting them at risk of pregnancy-related complications (Republic of Uganda, 2019).

Ugandan adolescent girls and young women, like others worldwide, are socialized with conflicting norms around sex (Mollborn & Sennott, 2015). Although 39% of never-married Ugandan adolescent girls and young women report engaging in premarital sex (UBOS and ICF, 2018), sex is portrayed as an “adult privilege” and adolescent sex is “forbidden” (Bell & Aggleton, 2013; pp. 102, 106). Adolescent sex, when it does occur, is characterized as “secretive” and “opportunistic” due to fear of stigma and discrimination, especially for in-school girls (Bell & Aggleton, 2013; p. 111). In contrast, emerging evidence suggests some adolescent girls and young women face social pressure from peers and coercion from men to engage in sex in exchange for goods that would boost their social status (Kyegombe, Meiksin, Namakula, et al., 2020; Kyegombe, Meiksin, Wamoyi, et al., 2020).

Transactional sex is defined as “noncommercial, nonmarital sexual relationships motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits” (Stoebenau et al., 2016; p. 187). Transactional sex is driven by the expectation that men are responsible for material provision and women should reciprocate with sex (Kyegombe, Meiksin, Namakula, et al., 2020). The experiences and meanings ascribed to transactional sex vary (Kyegombe et al., 2021; Kyegombe, Meiksin, Namakula, et al., 2020; Kyegombe, Meiksin, Wamoyi, et al., 2020); but transactional sex between younger women and older men is fundamentally shaped by socioeconomic inequalities, where adolescent girls and young women are at a gendered economic disadvantage (Kyegombe, Meiksin, Wamoyi, et al., 2020). Age-disparate transactional sex—transactional sex between adolescent girls and men at least 5–10 years older—is associated with early sexual debut, multiple, concurrent sexual partners and unprotected sex, and contributes to early, unplanned pregnancies, STIs including HIV, intimate partner violence, and sexual violence (Wamoyi et al., 2016).

Comprehensive sexuality education has been found to be important in providing adolescents with information about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sex, equipping them with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to make sexual decisions congruent with their health and relationship goals (UNESCO, 2018), but many Ugandan adolescent girls and young women have limited access. Traditionally in Uganda, paternal aunts known as *Sengas* taught girls about sex during marital rites of passage, but this practice is becoming less common (Muyinda et al., 2001), and does not guide adolescent girls and young women navigating modern, premarital relationships, including information on HIV/AIDS, and how to avoid early sexual debut and negotiate condom use (Nobelius et al., 2010). School-based sexual and reproductive health education on these topics is not uniformly available, and relies predominantly on abstinence-only messaging (de Haas et al., 2017). Furthermore, school attendance among 13–18-year-old girls is only 20% in some areas (UBOS and ICF, 2018), highlighting the need for reliable and authoritative comprehensive sexuality education for out-of-school adolescent girls.

Parents can provide another source for comprehensive sexuality education. Globally, parent–daughter communication about sex—and associated parent–daughter connectedness—is linked to increased contraceptive use and delayed/decreased sexual activity (Widman et al., 2016). Recent evidence also suggests promising reductions in sexual violence against children (Ligiero et al., 2019). In sub-Saharan Africa, parent–adolescent connection is associated with safer sexual practices and better mental health, educational, and developmental outcomes (Devlin et al., 2018), but numerous barriers to effective parent–daughter communication about sex persist. Discussing sex with parents is perceived as culturally inappropriate by parents and daughters (Bell & Aggleton, 2013), and parent–daughter communication about sex is often vague, unidirectional, and authoritarian, thereby promoting fear and preventing adolescent girls and young women from engaging in open dialog (Muhwezi et al., 2015). Parents report lacking the time, confidence, knowledge, or skills to deliver age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health messaging (Löfgren et al., 2009), while adolescent girls and young women fear that asking about sex will signal their sexual activity to parents (Muhwezi et al., 2015).

Interventions targeting parent–adolescent communication about sex have shown promising results in Uganda, for example, *Parenting for Respectability*, which targeted mothers and fathers (Siu et al., 2017), *PREPARE* implemented in schools (Katahoire et al., 2019), and other interventions implemented in sub-Saharan Africa (Cluver et al., 2018; Seif et al., 2019). No interventions to our knowledge, however, have specifically encouraged parent–daughter communication to prevent transactional sex (Bastien et al., 2011), which is the key driver of HIV among adolescent girls and young women. Additionally, no rigorous research to our knowledge has specifically investigated parent–child communication about transactional sex to inform these interventions. This is particularly pertinent now as emerging data suggests that rates of transactional sex among adolescent girls and young women have risen following COVID-19 pandemic school closures and

family-level income losses (Womankind, 2020). In this context, it is especially important to work with parents to recognize adolescent girl and young women's limited opportunities for generating income, and how combined with parental expectations that adolescent girls and young women contribute financially to the household, this can inadvertently promote their engagement in transactional sex (Kyegombe, Meiksin, Wamoyi, et al., 2020; Wamoyi et al., 2016).

Thus, this paper reports on research which aims to explore parent and daughter perspectives on, and experiences of parent–daughter communication about sex and transactional sex to inform family-level comprehensive sexuality education interventions and ultimately reduce transactional sex and HIV. Findings on parent–daughter communication about transactional sex can provide further evidence to an under-explored area of the literature, and have important implications for how comprehensive sexuality education programming can better support Ugandan adolescent girls and young women's sexual development. Towards these goals, this study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What approaches do parents employ to discuss sex and transactional sex with their daughters in Uganda?; and (2) What are parent and daughter's experiences with, and perceptions of these approaches in Uganda?

In this paper, we use Jaccard et al. (2002) conceptual framework as an analytical tool for assessing effective parent–adolescent communication about sex to enrich our analysis. We chose this conceptual framework as it is well-established in the communications field, and has been used widely to frame studies on parent–child communication about sex, including in diverse contexts from Kenya (Crichton et al., 2012) to India (Sandra Byers et al., 2021). We use two of the five key variables identified in the framework which are the most relevant to our study: (1) The source: the mother or father and their communication style; and (2) The message: whether it is framed positively/approvingly or negatively/disapprovingly, and the frequency and timing of the communication. Using this framework allows us to contemplate the most important dynamics in parent–daughter communication about (transactional) sex (according to Jaccard and colleagues), and identify key gaps to inform programming.

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | Data collection

Nineteen focus group discussions and 44 in-depth interviews were conducted in 2014–2015 across the urban district of Kampala and peri-urban district of Masaka, Uganda, with the aim of exploring adolescent's (aged 14–17 years), young adult's (aged 18–24 years), and adult's (aged 35 years and over) perspectives on conceptualizations of transactional sex and its acceptability in the community. In Kampala and Masaka, in-school adolescents and young adults were purposively sampled from a secondary school, while out-of-school adolescents, as well as young adults and adults were purposively sampled from the community to maximize heterogeneity. Out-of-school adolescent girls and young women in Kampala were also recruited for a focus group discussion through an NGO that works with disadvantaged young people to promote education and develop vocational skills.

Four sex-matched researchers with experience interviewing and conducting focus group discussions with young people and adults about sensitive topics collected the data. Two researchers conducted each focus group discussion with between 7 and 10 same-sex participants. In addition to using topic guides, researchers presented participants with short stories about adolescent girls' transactional sex relationships with older men, and then altered details of the scenarios (e.g., ages, socioeconomic status) and asked questions to explore which factors changed participants attitudes about whether the situation was exploitative. For the in-depth interviews, participant and researcher jointly choose interview locations to ensure privacy, safety, and convenience. The topic guides covered: (1) aspirations and peer influence, (2) motivations for, and consequences of transactional sex, (3) normative views of transactional sex, (4) perceptions of young people's readiness for sex, (5) sexual consent, and (6) views on sexual exploitation. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Luganda, audio recorded, translated, and transcribed verbatim into English. See Kyegombe et al., 2021; Kyegombe, Meiksin, Namakula, et al., 2020; Kyegombe, Meiksin, Wamoyi, et al., 2020 for more information on study context and data collection.

During initial coding of the data researchers noted that parent–daughter communication about transactional sex emerged as a key theme despite not being asked directly and not being part of the original study objectives. Themes also emerged around adolescent girls and young women being expected to support themselves financially in a context in which they had constrained opportunities to earn independent incomes, highlighting a gap in parent–daughter communication about how adolescent girls can meet their own needs (i.e., transactional sex). Parent–daughter communication about sex was not a topic guide theme but it came up repeatedly across almost all transcripts. Questions in focus group discussions that organically elicited information about parent–daughter communication about transactional sex included general questions such as: “What can we do [as parents] so that our daughter's do not find themselves in transactional sex relationships,” while questions asked in in-depth interviews were typically about personal experiences such as: “Is your mother aware of your

relationship with your boyfriend?” As the focus of our secondary analysis was on parent–daughter communication about (transactional) sex, data from adolescent boys and young men were excluded.

## 2.2 | Secondary analysis

We thematically analyzed 13 focus group discussions (Table 1) and 30 in-depth interviews (Table 2) with adolescent girls and young women, and adult men and women, using a hybrid inductive and deductive approach (Braun & Clark, 2006). We began by familiarizing ourselves with the interviews and highlighting sections addressing parent–daughter communication about (transactional) sex. The first author (M. P.) then thematically coded the 10 richest transcripts to develop a preliminary coding framework, before refining emerging inductive codes with deductive evidence from past literature on parent–daughter communication about sex in the region (e.g., Muhwezi et al., 2015; Wamoyi et al., 2010). By beginning with this inductive analysis, it allowed us to stay close to the data, immersing ourselves in participant experiences before using a deductive approach to explore its relationship to the existing literature, comparing and contrasting key findings.

M. P. and two senior authors (A. M. B. and N. K.) then discussed and further refined the coding framework based on study aims. M. P. coded the remaining transcripts, while the second author (L. H. M.) dual coded a subsample of transcripts to ensure consistency of coding. The first and second authors discussed emerging codes, grouping these codes under thematic areas, and reconciling them thematically into parent codes such as “mother’s responses to their daughters bringing home gifts” and “adolescent girls fear of communicating with their parents about sex.” The researchers compared findings by age, sex, and location.

This study is rooted in an interpretivist epistemology (O’Reilly, 2009), and throughout the paper, we report on participant’s perceptions, how they described and interpreted their perceptions, and how these related to their experiences. Throughout data collection, the senior author, who is Ugandan, and the Ugandan research team conducted regular, reflective team debriefs in which the emerging data were discussed. The senior author brought this reflective process into supporting the interpretation of the data for this paper. In reporting the results, the authors included quotes from a wide spread of the sample (15 in-depth interviews and 9 focus group discussions) to ensure the evidence presented reflected a breadth of participant perspectives.

## 2.3 | Ethical considerations

All adult participants provided written informed consent, and participants under age 18 provided written assent and parent/guardian written informed consent. Participants who required support following study participation were referred to appropriate services. The original study obtained ethics approval from the Uganda Virus Research Institute, the Uganda

TABLE 1 Characteristics of focus group discussions ( $n = 119$ )

Focus group discussion	Participant’s sex and stage of life	Age in years	Location	Number of participants	School status
1	Adolescent girls	14–17	Kampala	10	Out-of-school
2	Adolescent girls and young women	14+	Kampala	10	In-school
3	Young women	18–24	Kampala	10	
4	Young women	18–24	Kampala	8	
5	Women	35+	Kampala	10	
6	Women	35+	Masaka	10	
7	Young women	14–17	Masaka	7	Out-of-school
8	Adolescent girls and young women	14+	Masaka	9	In-school
9	Young women	18–24	Masaka	7	
10	Young women	18–24	Masaka	9	
11	Men	35+	Kampala	10	
12	Men	35+	Kampala	10	
13	Men	35+	Masaka	9	

**TABLE 2** Characteristics of in-depth interviews ( $n = 30$ )

Participant group	Kampala	Masaka	Total
Adolescent girls and young women aged 14+ (in-school)	1	2	3
Adolescent girls aged 14–17 (out-of-school)	1	2	3
Young women aged 18–24 (out-of-school)	4	2	6
Adult women aged 35+	4	4	8
Adult men aged 35+	6	4	10
Total	16	14	30

National Council for Science and Technology, and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) (for more information see Kyegombe, Meiksin, Wamoyi, et al., 2020). Additional ethics approval for this secondary analysis was obtained from LSHTM (Ref: 14731).

### 3 | RESULTS

We identified three main parental approaches from the data for discussing sex and transactional sex with their daughters: (1) frightening daughters into avoiding sex; (2) being “strict”; and (3) relying on mothers rather than fathers to “counsel” adolescent girls and young women. For each approach, we explore parent–daughter communication about sex, before focusing on transactional sex, and comparing the perspectives of adolescent girls and young women and parents.

#### 3.1 | Frightening daughters into avoiding sex

Many mothers stated that they emphasized risks and negative consequences to dissuade their daughters from engaging in sex, often by using examples of others in their community. For example, one woman reported purposefully giving her daughter false sexual and reproductive health information:

They used to tell us that if you have sex at an early age your uterus is damaged, and you may even fail to give birth. They would even tell us, “do you see that girl with big breasts, that is because she had sex at an early age” [...] So that is what I also tell my daughters. (Woman aged 40, Masaka, in-depth interview 8)

Other mothers reported sharing their own negative experiences to begin conversations about sexual risks with their daughters:

I told [my daughter] “come with me so that you can have a blood test.” She laughed, and told me [...] “do you see me as a sick person?” Then I told her “even if you are not sick, people go for a blood test [...] my dear you see me here but I am also infected [with HIV].” (Woman aged 35, Kampala, in-depth interview 4)

Some parents also stated they encouraged their daughters to “go for family planning services” when discussing potential risks (Woman aged 35, Masaka, in-depth interview 5). For example, when asked what she would say if she learned her daughter was in a relationship a woman replied.

“I [would] talk to her [...] ‘do you use condoms when having sex? [...] You must be very careful because it will only be the two of you’.” (Woman aged 37, Kampala, in-depth interview 1).

Focusing on negative consequences of sex during parent–daughter communication caused some adolescent girls and young women to report fearing and avoiding sex. For example, when asked about the drawbacks of being in a relationship one young woman replied:

Sex is the one bad thing [...] you might have unprotected sex and you end up contracting diseases [...] the other bad thing is pregnancy [...] people [also] say that it is painful [...] I cannot have it [sex], because it scares me to even think about it. (Young woman aged 18, Kampala, in-depth interview 4)

This participant demonstrates an accurate understanding of some of the risks of having sex, but due to the fear tactics used in her education about sex, she appears to understand it as bad and painful, rather than something that can be positive and pleasurable.

Conversely, for the majority of adolescent girls and young women having parents who emphasized the negative consequences of sex did not prevent them from engaging in sex. Instead, they reported that it only deterred them from talking to, or seeking advice and help from their parents about their relationships or sexual and reproductive health problems. For example, a young woman described her experience with an unplanned, adolescent pregnancy: “I first asked myself, how can I explain [the pregnancy] to my mother [...] I was so scared [...] then I got a miscarriage” (Young woman aged 18, Kampala, in-depth interview 5).

Older adolescents and young women overwhelmingly reported wanting more open conversations with their parents about sex and relationships before they entered relationships and became sexually active. One young woman stated:

It would be good if a parent realizes that their child has turned 15 years they should give them [sexual health] counselling [...] so that right from childhood the child can know the consequences of early sexual relations and having relationships with boys. (Young woman aged 18–24, Masaka, focus group discussion 10)

Open parent–daughter communication about relationships also appeared to comfort and reassure adolescent girls and young women. For example, a young woman who expected her mother to react negatively to the disclosure that she had a boyfriend, described her relief when she did tell her.

“I was happy, I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, I used to have a heavy chest before she got to know about [my relationship]” (Young woman aged 18, Kampala, in-depth interview 4).

On occasions where adolescent girls and young women came home with gifts from men, their mothers reportedly felt compelled to “counsel” their daughters about sexual health and risks. Responding to a question about parents' reactions to transactional sex, an adolescent girl said:

If a [mother] realizes that her daughter has started having [transactional sex] relationships with men, she gets worried and starts counselling her. She tells her that this [...] is not good you will get pregnant, or even syphilis and other diseases. (Adolescent girl aged 14–17, Kampala, out-of-school, focus group discussion 1)

This underscores how when parent–daughter conversations about sexual and reproductive health risks are delivered through fear, they tend to occur only in response to adolescent girls and young women entering sexual relationships, rather than as a preventative measure.

### 3.2 | Being “strict” when talking to their daughters

Most participants reported that parents were “strict” when talking to their daughters about sexual and reproductive health issues. This included aiming to prevent their daughters from having boyfriends:

Most [adolescent girls] are not allowed by their parents to have boyfriends; they do not want to embarrass their siblings and parents [...] that is why they do not have boyfriends. (Young woman aged 18, Kampala, in-depth interview 6)

The data are contradictory, however, suggesting some internal conflict as both adults and adolescent girl's reportedly saw relationships to be—to some extent—a normal part of coming of age. To navigate this contradiction, mothers sometimes tolerated their daughters' relationship if they were conducted secretly. One woman explained:

A child starts to disrespect you with such issues [adolescent relationships], and you should not show this [relationship] to your parents [...] we also had boyfriends and our parents knew about it, but we would never show them to our parents [...] even my own child can have a boyfriend as long as I do not get to know about it. There comes a time when one wants to have a boyfriend and you cannot prevent her from having one [...] if the boyfriend is not a wrong character, then I do not care to know. (Woman aged 35+, Kampala, focus group discussion 5)

The participant's reference to her parent's attitudes suggests a long-standing, culturally engrained belief that it is disrespectful for adolescent girls and young women to discuss their boyfriends with their parents. During the same discussion

about their knowledge of their daughter's boyfriends, another woman responded: "She no longer respects you because she feels that you know about it [her boyfriend] and you cannot beat her" (Woman aged 35+, Kampala, focus group discussion 5). These quotes highlight how parents perceived adolescent girls' openness about boyfriends as disrespectful, and a threat to parental authority. Some parents—mainly mothers—believed that parental authority came from being "tough" or "strict," and feared that openness about sex might cause them to lose authority. Hence, many parents reported limiting their conversations about sex to unidirectional, abstinence-only messaging, as a single mother explained:

I am tough because I tell her not to do it [sex] and I am also tough because I cannot sit down with her to talk about such [...] I am the mother and I am the father, I am the one who has to work for her school fees [...] I do a lot of jobs to get money to take care of that girl so I have to be very tough about [sex]. (Woman aged 35, Masaka, in-depth interview 2)

"Tough" parents were reportedly especially difficult to talk to about relationships. For example, one adolescent girl said:

There is no way that I can [...] tell her "mother this is my boyfriend" [...] she is a bit tough [...] she can listen to you, but I am scared of her. (Adolescent girl aged 17, Kampala, out-of-school, in-depth interview 1)

Adolescent girl and young women's motivations for not telling their parents about their sexual relationships reportedly ranged from fear of hurting or angering them, to being beaten or chased from home.

Parent–daughter conversations about transactional sex were often sparked by adolescent girls and young women bringing home gifts, implying that they were—or would soon be—engaged in transactional sex. This provides another example of responsive rather than preventative communication about sex. Some mothers, therefore, reported closely monitored their daughters' gifts. For example, when asked what she would do if her daughter brought home sugar or soap, a woman responded: "I have to ask her where she got those things from, because who would give her those things... unless she started involving [herself] in these acts of promiscuity [transactional sex]" (Woman aged 35, Masaka, in-depth interview 5).

There were, however, a few cases where women stated that they would not confront their daughters about gifts and/or transactional sex, for example, a woman explained:

These days people are poor, and it is said that "omwana omuwala sukaali" [a girl is sugar (meaning a girl is an asset)] [laughter] if she brings you the sugar you have to start wondering what the boy is like [...] but you do not say no to the sugar. (Woman aged 35+, Masaka, focus group discussion 6)

This suggests that families living in poverty sometimes regard adolescent girls and young women as a resource for attaining material items through transactional sex. This was reported by a few participants recounting their own experiences, but was more often described in a stigmatizing way in reference to people living in poorer communities.

To conceal relationships from their parents, some adolescent girls and young women refused gifts from their boyfriends. For example, a young woman said:

Usually [my boyfriend] buys me a necklace or clothes but I tell him that I do not want them because [my parents] will ask me where I got them from. (Young woman aged 19, Masaka, in-depth interview 10)

Although some parents were successful in preventing transactional sex by being "strict," as suggested by this quote, the vast majority of adolescent girls and young women reported that they continued to engage in secret transactional sex relationships. For example, when discussing transactional sex in her community an adolescent girl said:

At times he can even give you his things [gifts...] then you romance every day in the darkness when your parents are not around. We girls like kissing a lot and this at times lands us into problems. (Adolescent girl aged 14–17, Kampala, out-of-school, focus group discussion 1)

Gifts were evidently not the sole motivation for adolescent girls and young women to engage in relationships, and desire for intimacy and sexual pleasure also played a role.

The perceived role of peers in influencing adolescent girls' sexual behaviors reportedly caused some mothers to restrict their daughters' interactions with other adolescent girls. Beliefs about peer influence were widely held, especially related to transactional sex:

Most parents talk to their children [about transactional sex] but it is the children who become wild; there are some girls whose parents provide them with everything that they need but because she has a friend who has a

boyfriend, she also gets one. (Adolescent girl or young women aged 14+, Kampala, in-school, focus group discussion 2)

This narrative made some women express doubt in their ability to influence their daughter's sexual behaviors. One woman said:

Most of these girls are those who do not listen to advice, you sit and talk to them [about age-disparate transactional sex] but they think that “my mother or auntie or even grandmother is lying to me...” by the time that they realize [the risks], it is already too late. (Woman aged 37, Masaka, in-depth interview 6)

A few women reported rejecting “strict” parenting and explained that by providing friendly advice adolescent girls and young women could be guided into making the right decisions:

[I would] talk to her about the problems of having a man who is older than you, if she is to understand she [would end the relationship]. If not I [would] just leave her, but I am not satisfied with that. (Woman aged 41, Masaka, in-depth interview 7)

Even in this example, however, the concern persisted that her daughters may not heed her advice.

### 3.3 | Relying on mothers rather than fathers to “counsel” daughters

Participants reported a widely-held expectation that mothers were responsible for “counselling” their daughters about sex, relationships, transactional sex, and the risks of unprotected sex:

You cannot be raised by your own mother and she does not talk to you [about transactional sex], unless it is your stepmother, it is your stepmother who may not talk to you about such things. (Adolescent girl or young woman aged 14+, Kampala, in-school, focus group discussion 2)

Although most participants felt that mothers were responsible for “counselling” their daughters about sex, some participants described occasions where they sought help from female family members, including adolescent girls' aunts, grandparents, or cousins to educate adolescent girls about sex and relationships. An example of this was mothers asking other women to help them reinforce previous conversations with their daughters, or to broach difficult topics:

I try very much to talk to [my daughter]. Sometimes I ask her to go to my sisters, then they also talk to her. I have a sister who is a counsellor, so I always tell her to go and visit, but I always tell my sister prior what I need her to talk about. (Woman aged 37, Masaka, in-depth interview 6)

When asked about men's role in protecting their daughters from negative sexual health risks, women and adolescent girls and young women stated that rather than educating their daughters, a father's key role was to provide financially for the family so their daughters did not rely on sexual partners for material items. Only one man reported that “counselling” his daughters about sex was an important aspect of being a father:

[My daughters] once told me, “Dad, we studied many things about sex, but what is it?” I told them, “sex is good but only after you have fully grown [...] if you go into sex when you are not ready you will get children or catch HIV and we will bury you in the fields.” So, I learned that it is important to show children that you like them... you like them even more than the other men who want to sleep with them. (Man aged 35+, Kampala, focus group discussion 12)

In this quote this man highlights how speaking with his daughters about sex could prevent them from seeking affection from other men through sexual relationships.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

This study's first aim was to elucidate parental approaches for discussing sex and transactional sex with their daughters, and we identified three key approaches presented by participants in our data: (1) frightening their daughters into avoiding sex; (2) being “strict”; and (3) relying on mothers rather than fathers to “counsel” daughters. These approaches are well established in



the literature on parent–daughter communication about sex in Uganda (e.g., Bell & Aggleton, 2013; Muhwezi et al., 2015), but our findings provide novel information on parent–daughter communication about transactional sex specifically. Our second aim was to elucidate parent and daughter's experiences with, and perceptions of these approaches. Our study revealed diverse experiences, and a wide gap in parent and daughter's perceptions of which approaches are effective in promoting safe sexual behaviors.

Previous research has shown that parent–daughter communication about sex is associated with decreased risky sexual behaviors (Widman et al., 2016), which is critical for Ugandan adolescent girls and young women who are disproportionately affected by HIV (UNAIDS, 2020). As transactional sex is a major contributor of HIV (Wamoyi et al., 2016), parental-communication about it also has the potential to play an important role in promoting adolescent girls and young women's health. Previous findings also suggest that parents sometimes expect their daughters to support themselves financially, despite living in a context in which they have constrained opportunities to earn independent incomes (Kyegombe, Meiksin, Wamoyi, et al., 2020; Wamoyi et al., 2016), highlighting a gap in parent–daughter communication about how adolescent girls and young women can meet their own needs without engaging in transactional sex. We discuss these novel findings on parent–daughter communication about transactional sex and their implications for family-level comprehensive sexuality education interventions first, and then compare our findings on communication about sex more generally to past research.

Our results suggest that participants believed it was not unusual for mothers to speak with their daughters about transactional sex, but these conversations were often sparked by adolescent girls and young women bringing home gifts when they were already involved in transactional sex. Jaccard and colleague's (2002) conceptual framework highlights that timing and frequency of parent–adolescent communication about sex plays a critical role in their ability to influence their daughter's behaviors. Thus, comprehensive sexuality education interventions could inform parents that adolescent girls should be warned at a young age, and frequently, of the risks of transactional sex, explaining why this exchange is inequitable. Consistent with the literature, we also found that some parents reported they would not ask about their daughter's gifts (Jones & Norton, 2007). This lack of questioning is a form of communication as the silence condones transactional sex, and interventions could also target this by helping parents gain the skills to tackle this difficult subject, learn more about the specific risks of transactional sex, and unpack victim blaming attitudes towards adolescent girls and young women who engage in it.

We found that mothers presented themselves as being “tough” or “strict” with their daughters to keep them from engaging in transactional sex, characterized by unidirectional communication that stems from a belief that daughters do not head their parent's advice. Conversely, two-way dialog was described as being antithetical to “strictness.” Being “strict” was underpinned by a lack of trust between mothers and daughters, and “strictness” was built on disciplinary tactics that participant's believed commanded respect, including corporal punishment. Mothers also reported feeling unable to control their daughters' sexual behavior and instead, sought to prevent them from having friends who might pressure their daughters into engaging in transactional sex. Jaccard and colleagues' (2002) conceptual framework suggests that parents may have more success influencing their daughter's sexual behavior if they are perceived as “reasonable” and “effective” communicators, and allow for turn-taking in conversation. This could be highlighted in comprehensive sexuality education interventions. Some women also reported providing sexual and reproductive health information to guide their daughters to avoid age-disparate transactional sex themselves; an approach likely to be more effective than being “strict” as it allows adolescent girls and young women to make decisions in line with their evolving capacities (Buller & Schulte, 2018).

There is often an expectation that adolescent girls and young women in poor circumstances, especially out-of-school adolescent girls and young women, should help provide financially for the household (Buller et al., 2020), and in communities with limited job opportunities, transactional sex may be perceived to be the only way for them to meet this expectation (Stoebenau et al., 2016); a risk that appears to have been elevated during COVID-19 related loss of employment and school closures (Womankind, 2020). Thus, programming that encourages participants to critically reflect on the expectation that adolescent girls and young women provide financially could complement structural interventions. There is evidence that parenting interventions are more effective at reducing risky sexual behaviors when delivered alongside cash transfers (Cluver et al., 2014), and building resilience to negative economic shocks (including global pandemics) can prevent adolescent girls and young women from engaging in risky sexual behavior, including transactional sex in sub-Saharan Africa (Cust et al., 2021).

In contrast to findings from Muhwezi and colleagues (2015) where parents told their daughters condoms were “defective” to keep them from having sex, we found that some parents reported encouraging condom use. As found previously, participants also reported expecting mothers to discuss sex with their daughters (Muhwezi et al., 2015), although there was some evidence of father–daughter communication about sex. This places a large burden on women who already bear the brunt of household responsibility, while fathers are often absent from family life. Hegemonic masculinities that center on repressed emotions are in direct conflict with connection and intimacy, acting as a barrier to father–daughter communication (Kirkman et al., 2002). There is evidence to suggest, however, that fathers have an important role to play in their daughter's sexual and reproductive health; adolescent girls and young women who live with their fathers have been found less likely to engage in transactional sex (Ajayi & Somefun, 2019) and more likely to use contraception

(Biddlecom et al., 2009). Our results suggest that father–daughter communication may also provide adolescent girls and young women with affection from men they might otherwise seek through risky sexual relationships.

#### 4.1 | Limitations and strengths

Data were only collected in two sites of a diverse country; thus, findings may not be transferable to different regions. Many of our results, however, correspond with previous research from Uganda and sub-Saharan Africa, and we did not find any differences between locations. Despite the relatively large sample size for a secondary qualitative analysis, the data were collected to gain insight on perceptions of transactional sex more generally, not parental communication. Therefore, we carefully indicated the strength of evidence when reporting results, and most reported findings emerged over multiple transcripts. The data provided insight into what participants said their behaviors were, and this may differ from their actual behaviors, which would not be possible to elicit through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. These methods, however, do allow us to better understand how participants would like to present themselves, providing insight into their beliefs and attitudes. Lastly, data from fathers and about fathers were limited, and more research is needed exploring their roles, responsibilities, and experiences communicating about (transactional) sex with their daughters.

#### 4.2 | Implications for research and practice

Participants reported that there is demand from Ugandan adolescent girls and young women for two-way mother–daughter communication to help them navigate sexual risks and relationships, but parents may find these conversations challenging. Comprehensive sexuality education interventions aimed at increasing parent–daughter communication about sex (including transactional sex) must begin by addressing these challenges, encouraging parents to allow adolescent girls and young women to retain agency in sexual decision-making in line with their evolving capacities (Buller & Schulte, 2018). Our analysis of parental approaches for discussing (transactional) sex, and parent and adolescent's experiences and perceptions of these approaches, suggest that parental fear surrounding conversations about (transactional) sex should be minimized, and communication encouraging questions and open dialog should be promoted (Jaccard et al., 2002). With the goal of reducing transactional sex, parents could also be provided with skills and knowledge to deliver high-quality, age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education, emphasizing condom negotiation skills, and “sex positive” messages.

Our findings suggest that interventions targeting parent–daughter communication about sex should also explicitly promote conversations about transactional sex. These could encourage talking to adolescent girls frequently and early, before they are offered gifts for sex, and explaining why this exchange is inequitable and potentially risky for their sexual and reproductive health. Complemented with structural interventions, parents could also eliminate the expectation that adolescent girls and young women help provide financially for the household if they do not have access to appropriate income generation opportunities. Furthermore, a gender-transformative component to interventions tackling traditional masculinities, which have been found to act as a barrier to father–daughter communication about sex could be beneficial.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

#### ETHICS STATEMENT

A favorable opinion for this study was provided by the Ethics Committee of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine [reference number 8656], by the Research and Ethics Committee of the Uganda Virus Research Institute [reference number GC/127/14/10/478]. Regulatory approval was provided by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology [reference number SS3654]. All participants aged 18 and above provided written informed consent to participate in this study. Participants aged between 14 and 17 provided written informed assent. Written informed consent was provided by parents for the participation of those who were aged under 18 years.

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