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Community Perceptions of Transactional Sex with Children and Adolescent Girls, a Qualitative Study in Favelas of Rio de Janeiro

Caroline Ferraz Ignacio<sup>1\*</sup>, Danielle Araújo<sup>1</sup>, Edmund Ruge<sup>1</sup>, Linda Cerdeira<sup>1</sup>, Liz Cosmelli<sup>1</sup>, Victoria Page<sup>1</sup>, Beniamino Cislighi<sup>2</sup>, Giovanna Lauro<sup>3</sup>, Ana Maria Buller<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Instituto Promundo, Rua do Rezende, 80. Centro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ 20231-092 Brazil

<sup>2</sup>London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 15-17 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SH United Kingdom

<sup>3</sup>Promundo, 1367 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036 United States of America

\*Corresponding author: c.ignacio@promundo.org.br, Rua do Resende 80, Centro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil. CEP 20231.092

## **Abstract**

The sexual exploitation of children and adolescents is a frequently underestimated health problem which includes transactional sex (TS), or the practice of sexual activity based on an expected return of benefits, favors and/or support in some form. This qualitative study focuses on age-disparate transactional sex (ATS) in urban favela communities of Rio de Janeiro between adult men (over 18) and girls and adolescents (G/A) (under 18), involving a minimum 5-year age disparity. We have employed social norms theory as a framework to identify the prevailing social norms contributing to or protecting children and adolescents from these relationships. Data collection utilized semi-structured interviews (n=30) and ten focus groups with a total of 130 men/boys and women/girls selected through purposive sampling and varying in age from 15 to

65. Overall the findings identify factors, especially the essentialization of gender, which promote the acceptability of ATS. When ATS surpassed the acceptability threshold, social norms discouraged direct interference. Concluding remarks point to possible strategies for reducing the occurrence of ATS. These must include girls, boys, women and men with community involvement in the deconstruction of social norms involving gender, age and economic consumption.

*Keywords:* social norms; age-disparate relationships; gender norms; urban health; Brazil

## Introduction

The sexual exploitation of children and adolescents (SECA) is a frequently underestimated violation of human rights with health consequences at a global level. Its clandestine nature and the lack of consensus on its definition and measurement contribute to significant underreporting. For the purposes of this paper, we consider SECA to be a situation that involves a person in a position of power engaging in some form of sexual coercion of a child or adolescent under the age of 18, with or without some sort of material exchange (UK Dept for Education 2017; Hazeu and van Kranen 2014; UNICEF 2008<sup>a</sup>).

Different forms of SECA may include, but are not limited to: sex trafficking, sex tourism, child pornography, child marriage, and transactional sex. Transactional Sex (TS), the focus of this study, has been recently defined as “non-commercial, non-marital sexual relationships motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits” (Stoebenau et al 2016, p. 187). TS may occur in age-disparate relationships, or relationships where there is at least a five-year difference between the ages of the two sexual partners (Leclerc-Madlala 2008<sup>b</sup>), although in practice this gap is usually wider. Thus, the present study focuses on non-explicitly commercial age-disparate relationships between adult men (over 18) and girls and adolescents (G/A) (under 18) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It is important to note here that there exists a vast and comprehensive body of Brazilian socio-anthropological literature on prostitution, sex markets, adolescent participation within such markets (see, for example, Lorenzi 1987; Andrade 2004; Gomes 1996; Sousa 2001, 2002; Libório 2005, and many others) and the problematic homogenization/stigmatization resulting from labeling adolescent commercial sexual exploitation as a singular phenomenon. To that end, this study addresses a specific, non-commercial phenomenon as defined above, and one that, as a

function of its age-disparate nature and the power imbalances involved, promotes exploitation. Organizations such as Girls' Human Rights Projects launch campaigns to decouple the terms 'prostitution' and child sexual exploitation in the media and law system (Rights4Girls n/d). Child sexual exploitation is fueled by a sexist culture that creates desires and demands for children and adolescents bodies (Biderman 2018).

Although available research most frequently addresses the association between TS, risky sexual behaviors, and negative sexual, reproductive and maternal health outcomes, TS may also result in a number of negative psychosocial consequences as well as ostracism from community members (Fielding-Miller et al. 2016). Up to a third of school dropouts among girls globally may occur due to early marriage or pregnancy (Wodon et al. 2017, Lloyd and Mensch 2008). The low educational attainment associated with adolescent pregnancy may lead to reduced income in later life and ultimately perpetuate cycles of poverty and violence (Meade et al. 2008). Adolescent pregnancy in Latin America presents strong associations with both low educational attainment (Giovagnoli and Vezza 2009; Kruger et al. 2009; Rios-Neto and Miranda-Ribeiro 2009; Alcázar and Lovatón 2006; Pantelides 2004) and poverty (Florez 2005; Chedraui et al. 2004; Pantelides 2004; Porras 2003; Guzman et al. 2001; Guijarro et al. 1999; Peña et al. 1999). In addition to these negative consequences, TS is associated with sexual or physical intimate partner violence (Fielding-Miller and Dunkle 2017; Stoebenau et al. 2016; Zembe et al. 2015). In turn, the children of such relationships may go on to perpetuate a cycle of violence and/or early motherhood (Fulu et al. 2017; Taylor et al. 2016; Rios-Neto and Miranda-Ribeiro 2009). Previous studies indicate that social norms may play a crucial role in influencing SECA practices (Segundo et al. 2012; Pulerwitz and Barker 2007), however few studies have examined the intersection between social norms and TS, and none of this type have been conducted in Brazil to

our knowledge. To address this important knowledge gap, this study explores social norms surrounding TS in *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro. A previous Promundo study in Rio de Janeiro *favelas* demonstrated that 14% of adult men interviewed reported having engaged in sexual relations with someone under 18 years of age (Segundo et al. 2012). Furthermore, the study sheds light into community perceptions of TS. We hope that this study, conducted in the context of the Learning Initiative on Norms, Exploitation and Abuse (LINEA, <http://www.lshtm.ac.uk/linea>), will contribute to the prevention of TS by constructing an evidence base for the transformation of community social norms contributing to TS specifically and SECA more broadly.

Social norms are people's beliefs about typical and appropriate behavior in a given group or society (Cislaghi and Heise 2018<sup>a</sup>; Paluck and Ball 2010). Different from personal attitudes, which reflect what individuals consider good or bad, social norms reflect beliefs of what individuals consider to be common and appropriate practices in their community (specifically, their reference group, or those community members whose actions and opinions they value). While several schools of thought exist within social norms literature (Cislaghi and Heise 2018<sup>b</sup>), this paper will adhere to the theory and terminology advanced by Cialdini and colleagues (Cialdini 1991; Mackie 2015), using the term “descriptive norms” to refer to beliefs about what others do and “injunctive norms” to describe beliefs about what others approve or disapprove of.

## **Methods**

### ***Study area***

The study was conducted between July and September 2017 in three *favelas* – socially, politically and economically vulnerable communities – in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: *Cidade de Deus* (CDD), *Complexo da Maré* (CM), and *Rocinha* (RO). The communities were selected according

to their geographical location in the city representing the west, north and south zones, respectively; and their score on an adaptation of the Social Vulnerability Index, a scale, ranging from 0 (absence of social vulnerability) to 1 (worst situation of vulnerability) (aSVI) aiming to provide data to support planning at increasingly local levels (Table 1) (IPEA, <http://ivs.ipea.gov.br/index.php/pt/>). Additionally, since previous research has shown important associations between exposure to urban violence and less equitable gender norms (Taylor et al. 2016), the three communities were selected for their frequent episodes of urban violence and their temporary occupations by Brazilian military or permanent occupations through the establishment of Rio state Pacifying Police Units.

[Table 1 here]

### ***Recruitment and sampling strategy***

In each community, non-probability purposive sampling through the snowball method was used. Community mobilizers were recruited and helped identify participants through civil society projects, residents' associations and other community organizations. Men, women, boys and girls, community residents from 15 to 65 years-old were eligible to participate in the study and our final sample included one hundred and thirty residents (n=130). Interviews and focus group were conducted with participants with similar profiles and topic guides to determine if there were major differences in answers when participants were in a group setting versus an individual setting (Tables 2 and 3). We conducted 30 semi-structured interviews and 10 focus groups in total. Each focus group contained an average of 10 participants.

[Table 2 here]

[Table 3 here]

Despite the participation of community leaders and liaisons in facilitating focus groups and interviews, the fieldwork faced challenges during data collection when episodes of armed conflict erupted in the included communities. These conflicts delayed the study and hampered recruitment; hence, we were unable to conduct all focus groups as originally planned.

### ***Data collection***

The topic guide for focus groups and interviews was developed according to the literature on SECA, consultation with leading experts in the field, and previous meetings with key stakeholders, such as community leaders and members of grass-roots organizations. Using a social norms lens, the topic guide was created to include vignettes which stimulated the discussion on TS. Each focus group and interview included questions to address: community perspectives and social norms related to SECA; patterns of sexual exploitation in underprivileged neighborhoods in cities of the global South; social norms that protect against or foster SECA; if/how SECA is prevented / sanctioned / punished in the communities (mechanisms).

The data collection team included trained undergraduates and graduates in social sciences with previous qualitative data collection experience. The focus groups and interviews were gender-matched. During focus groups, notes were taken by a second trained research team member and discussions were audio recorded. Session notes were reviewed by both members of the team immediately after the focus group and audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts and field notes were made anonymous and merged for analysis. As with the focus groups, the interviews addressed the same themes using vignettes and followed similar processes.

### *Data analysis*

Analysis of the transcripts and field notes for each focus group and interview was conducted manually and independently by three members of the research team who open coded, compared codes and identified categories using a qualitative descriptive approach.

### **Results**

We identified a variety of social norms relating to TS which emphasized the complexity and dynamic nature of SECA in these urban communities. The norms focused on expectations involving G/A and men in regards to age-disparate, transactional sexual relationships.

#### *Community perceptions of girls and adolescents and their motivations for engaging in ATS*

While younger men and women seemed to question the involvement of G/A, placing at least some of the responsibility to the men who participate in these relationships, the older groups ultimately placed blame with the G/A.

She seduces the elderly man. Then (...) this girl (...), the beautiful girl, gorgeous, goes to the old man's house. Then it happens that the girl, at the age of 17, 16 years, 10 years, gets pregnant. Then, he fell into her trap. (Woman, 44, RO, interview)

The community saw G/A bodies as a source of pleasure for men and believed that G/A used their bodies as a means to exert their autonomy and agency since G/A willingly “decided” to participate in TS. The perceptions around G/A motivations for participating in these relationships were based on the community’s belief that the G/A are the deciding agents with ultimate control regarding the relationships’ existence.

If it were exploitation I would tie her up at home, all locked up. ‘You won’t leave my house anymore because I am exploiting

you. You will have sex with me all day long. I will pay your food, I will do this or that.’ But, no, that’s not it. It’s because she wants it. You get it? (Man, 32, CDD, interview)

G/A also perceived the difference in responsibility and maturity conferred to them compared to boys starting in adolescence; however, in contrast with the other groups, their increased maturity was seen as a burden instead of as a power.

[Speaker 2:] Yeah, the woman always is more worried, like the man doesn’t have to care about anything other than what he wants, like go out, hooking up with everyone. [...] [Speaker 1] Boys are freer. (G/A, 15-17, RO, focus group)

There are big differences because everyone is very *machista*. Boys can do what they want and girls have to behave. (G/A, 15, CDD, interview)

Overall, participants believed that G/A became involved in ATS because they expected it would confer increased status in relation to perceptions of their maturity level and increased stability, be it emotional or financial. Sex in exchange for material goods (including drugs) appeared as an important perceived motivation for G/A who entered these relationships, which were not interpreted as exploitative. The community members perception of G/A “choice” to participate in sexual relations with men was also a result of injunctive norms where pressure from other girl friends, the primary reference group for G/A, and family members was an important motivator for G/A to engage in ATS.

In terms of the profile of the G/A believed to engage in ATS, generally, participants found the participation of girls under 12 years-old in sexual relationships with adult men more unacceptable than 14 to 17-year-old G/A, but these distinctions were extremely fluid, depending more on visible physical markers of puberty. The majority of the participants highlighted the importance of the G/A bodies (e.g. how developed the body was, how it was dressed, or where it was seen) in determining the acceptability of ATS.

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, 54, RO, interview)

### ***Girls and adolescents' readiness for sex and agency***

Attached to the notion of G/A bodies mentioned above was that of clothing. References to the G/A choices in terms of clothing were constantly present among the participants' accounts across communities, usually describing clothing choices as visual signals emitted by G/A, therefore serving as manifestations of their autonomy. This signal could be interpreted to denote the girl's entrance into a new life stage (adolescence), her desire to get men's attention and ultimately her consent in terms of men's sexual advances.

Similarly, the spaces where G/A circulate were identified by members of all sampled communities as an important element for influencing G/A participation in TS. Areas of the community identified as places where ATS occurs were those where drugs were sold or consumed.

She has to be decent, nowadays the way you see a child on this side is not the same way you see the girls on the other side of

the alley, the child from this side is quieter, she stays more at home, the girl from the other side doesn't do that, she stays on the street all the time, she goes to the beach, she's all about the beach, the rooftop, if it's sunny, she goes to the roof slab. How come ain't nobody going to flirt with her? It's hard. (Man, 32, CDD, interview)

The *bailes* are traditional parties in communities of Rio de Janeiro with music, generally Brazilian funk, which serve as important social spaces in *favelas*. Also, rooftops are often used in Rio de Janeiro for barbeques, parties and sunbathing. As such, there is an expectation that young people will go to these spaces as part of the lifestyle of a young *favela* resident and, for G/A, participation in these spaces serves as a means of conforming to the norms of their reference group to avoid social isolation. However, attending these spaces implied to the participants that these G/A were consenting to participate in sexual activities.

[...] you see those girls that way, and, “oh, I went to the *baile*, I went to...”, we know it... we know that there are certain environments that we know what happens in there. (Woman, 33, CM, interview)

On the other hand, involvement in churches or other social / educational / athletic projects were expected to protect against ATS by maintaining G/A in ‘secure’ spaces or out of the community and providing them with tools to avoid entering these relationships.

Sports can keep you busy [and off the streets] because you start liking what you're doing, you start establishing a commitment to it. You have to go train and you see that a person that has that

commitment, who wants to have that commitment, through sports gains maturity and responsibility.... so, I think there needs to be more of that here. (Girl, 15, CDD, interview)

They should offer these kids not work but I think there needs to be classes and workshops for these kids about sexuality, talking about sexual exploitation, talking about the importance of self-acceptance. (Woman, 27, CM, interview)

### *Community perceptions of men and their motivations for age-disparate transactional sex*

The involvement of adult men in ATS was strongly related to what was expected of them as a “natural”, biological response in relation to young, G/A bodies. Men, from a young age, were expected to attempt to conquer G/A.

Normalizing, simplistic, binary stereotypes - referred to as essentialization of gender because it parallels the reasoning wherein gender differences are considered innate and attributed to biological sex - regarding behavior were present in the social norms regarding gender and childhood when discussing motivations for participating in ATS. On the one hand, there was an assumption that G/A naturally mature faster than boys and become what participants termed *interesseiras*, or calculating and self-serving. On the other hand, boys and men are considered innocent because they act upon “uncontrollable biological impulses” even in adulthood.

I always think that there is the essence of the boy and the girl, they have different essences (Adolescent boy, 17, CM, interview)

[...] women like to see older guys, because many women in some ways even consider women to be a bit more mature than men

(Man, 23, CM, interview)

Thus, men's behavior was expected to be an instinctive response to G/A bodies, which - as seen in the previous section - signaled maturity and readiness for sex.

The body is a sexual object, right? A little girl of 10, 12 years is already wanting boobs, has a nice ass, the man has an animal instinct, he really does charge, and, if she lets down her defenses, it's worse for her, right? She doesn't know how to say no. (Man, 54, RO, interview.)

Men believed that to exercise their heterosexuality, characterized as virile and controlling, they must perform public conquests of young, G/A bodies, which in turn, community members also expected of them. Exceptions occurred when the acts were considered physically violent or when the men were "much older" (e.g. 40 years-old or older) or when girls were deemed still children. However, it was unclear at exactly what age G/A were seen as adults. Furthermore, G/A were expected to not react to men's public advances unless they intended to get sexually involved.

[...] there are some who will say "relax, girl, he just flirted with you, he didn't touch, didn't do anything to you" (Woman, 28, CDD, interview.)

About older guys, it isn't cool, right? Guys much older than the person. But everything also depends on the approach. Because if the person is giving permission you don't have to say anything. I

can't judge the person if she likes the other (Man, 28-24, CM, focus group).

In order to conform with traditional notions of masculinity, men appeared to have greater pressure to pursue sexual relationships than vice-versa. This led to the constant search to meet these expectations regarding displays of virility. Men's virginity was stigmatized and, although the social norms established men's preference for G/A over women, this preference was not based on a desire for sexual relations with virgins *per se*. When relating with virgins, there was a fear of being pressured to commit to the G/A and, therefore, limit men's ability to attain the greatest quantity of sexual partners.

I think that for them it's an issue of masculinity: I did it, I conquered one more, conquered her, the young one. So, I think that's it, think it's his ego. (Woman, 33, CM, interview)

Boys have a gigantic influence, for you to be a man you can't be a virgin. You have to hook up with lots of girls. (Woman, 27, CM, interview)

They don't want them because they're virgins, you see? They don't want commitment. They go, fool around, and set [the girls] aside. (Woman, 53, CM, interview.)

However, there was an important contradiction in how men involved in ATS with G/A were seen: at times they were considered "stallions" while at other moments as "fools" since the G/A may have been taking advantage of them. Although some participants – especially boys – interpreted these exchanges as G/A taking advantage of men (financially), with men in particular

frequently framing themselves as potential victims of G/A (especially if the relationship were discovered by his family or if she becomes pregnant), others considered these transactions as more disadvantageous for the G/A. Therefore, there were inconsistencies in expectations and interpretations of who benefits more from these relationships, with adult participants justifying the view that men may be considered “victims” in ATS.

## **Discussion**

ATS is conditioned by both descriptive and injunctive norms involving G/A and men. Among these norms, we found that similar to other contexts, there is an acceptance and expectation that G/A bodies are a source of pleasure for men. Men’s “biologically heightened” need for sex, in addition to the perception of men’s delayed maturity and their role as economic providers, allows for the use of G/A bodies as assets for transactions with men (Stoebenau et al. 2016). The expectation that men should fulfill the role of financial provider enables these relationships, however, unlike most of the international literature reviewed, such an expectation was not determined to be the leading motivator in this study. The views expressed by the participants were not conditioned by the format of data collection, suggesting that the views are entrenched in the community.

Although this study adds to the evidence base of community social norms contributing to TS specifically and SECA more broadly, some important gaps still remain, specifically regarding: the involvement of boys in SECA; SECA involving G/A or child or adolescent boys in non-heteronormative relations; and, how harmful constructions of men’s and women’s sexuality contribute to perpetuating SECA. Additionally, this study provides greater community insight into these relationships than insight from the G/A themselves.

For community members, the G/A involvement in ATS is a choice, where the G/A actively utilize their perceived “agency” to seduce, select or accept men as partners, either by “choosing to emit indirect signals” of interest such as wearing “provocative” clothing, accepting gifts or going to certain places, such as public spaces and *baires*. This notion of perceived agency and “indirect signals of consent” through clothing and the use of public spaces promotes a sense of entitlement to G/A bodies, is used to justify ATS and transfers blame to the G/A. However, social norms influence both clothing and social activities, through peer pressure and the absence of socially acceptable alternatives among the reference group. Simultaneously, the interpretation that G/A who occupy public spaces are those who signal their sexual availability propagates the expectation of public spaces as the domain of men and the home as the domain of women and G/A. These findings resonate with those of Guimarães and Villela (2011), who found that the primary location for physical and sexual violence against adolescent G/A in Brazil occurs in public roads and spaces.

While the terminology of agency and autonomy were not used directly by participants, their choices were commonly given as examples of why G/A (especially when we refer to adolescent girls) are active agents who are responsible for their involvement in ATS. At the same time, many participants contradicted the notion of G/A as completely free and autonomous subjects, recognizing social vulnerability in terms of financial and familial difficulties alongside lack of opportunities as key influencing factors. These conflicting understandings of ATS as the result of a G/A agency or determined by structural factors requires us to problematize not only the notion of girl and adolescent that we are using but also the way in which “agency”, “choice” and “autonomy” are referred to. The “choices” and “agency” of G/A are heavily influenced by structural inequalities including social, economic and political inequalities. *“Meta-norms of*

*hierarchy, adultism, patriarchy and heteronormativity bundle together to reproduce conceptions of childhood and adolescence with differing gender role and identity expectations, producing gender disparities in the distribution of resources and opportunities, disadvantaging girls while reinforcing boys' higher perceived value in society. Social hierarchy norms define who decision-makers identify as valuable and worthy of investment based on intersectional identity markers of age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, class or other local identifiers of social status. (...) At the same time, norms around adultism include expectations for obedience to adult authority, affecting children's and adolescents' right to have a say – according to their evolving capacities – in decisions that affect their health and life options. Finally, patriarchy as a meta-norm engenders processes of social hierarchy and obedience to male authority. To survive, patriarchy requires girls' inequitable socialisation into becoming women who lack equal access to and control over resources, and overall decision-making power.” (AM Buller, MC Schulte. Reproductive Health Matters 2018;26(52):3)*

The social and economic vulnerability of these communities in combination with the absence of public services, limits meaningful opportunities for G/A, therefore promoting ATS. Leclerc-Madlala (2008) and Hawkins et al. (2009) highlight the role of neoliberalization and globalization in normalizing extravagant lifestyles that do not typically align with local realities, therefore promoting changing social norms and SECA as a mechanism for attaining the seemingly “unattainable”. Such inequalities likewise affect men. However, study participants disproportionately assigned responsibility to G/A rather than men for these relationships, perceiving girl's “choice” as individualized and de-contextualized from broader structural factors.

Particularly when we talk about adolescent girls we find specificities within each local context which condition the boundaries around age and evolving capacities. Although G/A have agency in the choices they make, we identify that they are strongly conditioned by the structural norms built within the communities where they live. Not only the local norms condition their evolving capacities but also often the absence of policies and programs tend to strengthen the inequalities that somehow disempower them or condition their power of negotiation.

*“Creating a new norm of “adolescence” as a critical biological, cognitive and psychosocial developmental stage between childhood and adulthood – one that involves increased autonomy and capacities, but also heightened vulnerabilities – offers a clear first step towards shifting local attitudes, beliefs, practices and norms in which all family and community members can play a role in upholding ASRHR.”* (AM Buller, MC Schulte. *Reproductive Health Matters* 2018;26(52):4). The vulnerabilities attached to this developmental stage within a patriarchal, sexist, conservative and often religious context need to be taken into account when we consider ATS relations, because this undermines G/A power to negotiate on an equal basis with their partners.

The fear expressed by G/A is another important inhibitor of choice: the decision to enter, leave or intervene in another’s age-disparate relationship is not made freely when direct, physical consequences are considered a real possibility. Fear in the context of the study areas was linked to gender norms and violence associated with police and drug trafficking activities. Even if ATS relationships are not approved of by the community, in general, people feel no one will speak out against them, with women particularly believing they cannot speak out due to fear, and none are expected to speak out. Therefore, the influence of organized crime on the social norms involving ATS is complex and deserves separate study.

Over- and under-estimates of agency of G/A and men, respectively, have been found in previous studies in this context (Borges and Nakamura 2009; Cockcroft et al. 2010) and pave the way for blaming G/A when these relationships result in negative consequences, such as unintended teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), intimate partner violence, or social sanctions, despite their limited age in comparison with their partners.

This interpretation of ATS as a result of G/A choice also relies on the assumption that their maturity level is comparable to older men's maturity – an assumption shared by Brazilian adolescents (Borges and Nakamura 2009) – combined with a set of perceived differences between G/A and men that are innate and justified biologically. This assumption regarding innate differences in the rate of maturity in boys versus girls also promotes families' support of ATS as boys and girls of the same age would not be expected to have comparable maturity levels. Older men are therefore considered more appropriate mentally and socially because they provide material gain and stability by taking relationships more seriously.

As part of the essentialization of gender, men's behavior is perceived as animalistic and based on primal desire, eliminating adult men's responsibility for involvement in ATS, turning them into passive and helpless participants (Cockcroft et al. 2010). Although men also face social norms related to their economic obligations (Yount et al. 2017), in this study the need to assert heteronormative hypersexuality was the most pressing for men. In this context and in the literature, the essentialization of gender links masculinity to sexual conquests (Gibbons and Luna 2015; Borges and Nakamura 2009), with a girl's body serving as a trophy. Therefore, engagement in sexual relations with G/A is an opportunity for men to reaffirm their masculinity and the transactional aspect of the relationship serves to facilitate a man's chances with G/A.

For G/A, notions of essentialization orient the construction of female sexuality as something that should be controlled to use as an instrument of trade. As such, boys learn to be men who prefer G/A because they are more submissive and easier to control, and G/A learn to seek older men to provide stability and possibly protection (especially in high violence settings). However, unlike in other settings where virgin G/A were preferred by the men, the virginity of G/A presented the possibility of contradictory pressure to establish committed relationships. Although this contradiction provides, in theory, an important protective counterpoint against ATS, in practice the expectation for men to conquer many G/A was more pervasive. Hypersexuality as a principle characteristic of masculinity and the double standard of sexual expectations among men and women (prowess among men and preservation of chastity among women) were attributed to *machismo* and placed as a prominent characteristic of Latino societies by Gibbons and Luna (2015). The pressures to conform to negative models of masculinity reinforces the importance of the call for the identification and visibility of empowering men who portray alternative models of masculinity as reference groups to cultivate “positive peer norms and new culturally recognized markers of manhood” (pg.S24, Leclerc-Madlala 2008<sup>b</sup>). As such, efforts to redefine manhood in these communities are particularly important to preventing ATS.

The essentialization of gender supports the construction of the social norms where G/A are expected to gift sex to a man who is “entitled to it” because she did not immediately rebuke him – by default a sign of consent – or because of the principle of reciprocity where he has provided a “gift” which must be paid back. This finding goes beyond the three communities included in this study with the principle of reciprocity also playing an important role in other settings (Borges and Nakamura 2009; Leclerc-Madlala 2008<sup>b</sup>).

In addition to these community expectations regarding G/A and men, specific reference groups are seen to promote and/or prevent ATS. For G/A, girl friends are identified as an important reference group regarding TS. Our findings that G/A influenced each other to engage in TS and the role of social status as a major driver of TS was supported by the literature, highlighting the importance of including this group in interventions addressing ATS (Stoebenau 2016; Potgieter et al. 2012; Leclerc-Madlala 2008<sup>b</sup>; Leclerc-Madlala [n.d]).

It should be noted that the likelihood of social sanctions increased with the size of the age gap between the participants and how young the girl is. ATS between men and girls 12 years or younger were more likely to not be supported by the community, whereas relationships with adolescent girls 16 years or older were seen as acceptable. The acceptability (or not) of these ages is supported by the literature: when analyzing reported cases of sexual abuse against G/A, Aded et al. (2007) identified no reported cases against 15 to 17-year-old adolescents girls, possibly because sex with adolescents in this age group is not seen as a crime or inappropriate and “notions of physical or sexual abuse are inversely proportional to the age and capacity of resistance of the victims” (pg.1972). While girls in very early adolescence are more protected by social norms, social norms are silent regarding adolescent girls between 13 and 15 years old, creating an invisible risk group. Instead of age, some social norms in this study were based on the G/A physical development and the growth of breasts and widening of hips. The literature supported this finding: Borges and Nakamura (2009) identified the importance of sexual initiation as a ticket to the adult world which is preempted by a sense of maturity based on physical development, first employment or another socially important milestone. These findings highlight that addressing social norms involving markers of G/A entrance into womanhood and maturity, associated with the essentialization of gender, has important potential to limit ATS.

## Conclusion

Our findings suggest that the acceptance of ATS by the community hinged upon 1) the man's nonviolence, 2) a certain age gap (much older men with much younger girls was seen as pedophilia), 3) the girls and adolescents' perceived readiness for sexual messages (which may manifest in her choice of clothing, responses to catcalls, or mere presence in the street), and 4) the principle of reciprocity. The essentialization of gender contributes to the construction of these characteristics and social norms where men assert hypersexuality and women are socialized to submissively adhere to men's sexual preferences. These expectations offer convoluted interpretations of girl's agency and portray ATS as "normal" instead of exploitative. When ATS surpassed the acceptability threshold, social norms discouraged direct interference.

In order to overcome social norms that promote ATS, these findings must be incorporated into interventions focused on addressing community change. The findings point to possible strategies for reducing the occurrence of ATS which must include girls, boys, women and men with community involvement in the deconstruction and transformation of social norms involving gender, age and economic consumption. These strategies cannot be reduced to acting on individual beliefs or behaviors to not risk ignoring the structural and collective nature of ATS. Reference groups are decisive for determining the acceptance and replication of ATS. Therefore, prevention strategies must appeal to these groups to participate in the defense of the rights of children and adolescents, without utilizing paternalistic, controlling or fear-based rhetoric. Based on these findings, possible strategies for preventing ATS include, but are not limited to: the identification and promotion of reference group members that can serve as role models of alternative forms of masculinity and relationships, reinforcing gender norms that promote equality; improved opportunities for attaining social and economic security and mobility for both

girls and boy to address underlying structural factors contributing to ATS; and, community action to stimulate debates on gender equality. Further studies could advance these findings by: addressing the gaps included in the limitations; investigating the influence of other actors, such as civil society, government (including state security forces) and religious institutions; the influence of religion, race, class, family dynamics and migration patterns on ATS; and/or developing a psychosocial scale to measure social norms associated with ATS.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

This study was funded by the Oak Foundation, but they did not influence in the design, implementation nor analysis of this study. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. For this study, Ethical approval was obtained from the Committee for Ethics in Research of the Philosophy and Humanities Center of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (CAAE 65254917.0.0000.5582) and from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (Ethics Reference no. 11958). All participants were provided oral explanations of the study, their rights, including their right to not answer questions or to leave the study at any moment, measures of confidentiality, and information regarding the supervising ethics board, all available on the Terms of Free and Informed Consent (TFIC). The TFIC was signed by all participants, and guardians provided additional signed consent for minors.

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## Tables

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the study areas.

Characteristics	Communities		
	CDD	CM	RO
<b>Zone</b>	West	North	South
<b>Estimated population</b>	36,515	129,770	69,356
<b>aSVI</b>	0.46 (High SV)	0.54 (Very High SV)	0.65 (Very High SV)
<b>Presence of Pacifying Police Unit (established)</b>	Yes (February 2009)	No	Yes (September 2012)

**Table 2.** Characteristics of the interview participants.

Age group	Community			Total interviews per age group
	(Boys and men interviewees / Girls and women interviewees)			
	RO	CM	CDD	
15-17	1 / 1	1 / 1	0 / 1	5
18-24	1 / 1	2 / 1	3 / 2	10
25-34	1 / 1	0 / 2	1 / 1	6
35-44	1 / 1	0 / 0	0 / 0	2
46-65	1 / 1	1 / 2	1 / 1	7
Total interviews per community	10	10	10	30 total interviews

**Table 3. Characteristics of the focus group participants.**

Age group	Community			Total focus groups per age group
	(Boys and Men groups / Girls and Women groups)			
	RO	CM	CDD	
15-17	0 / 1	1 / 0	1 / 0	3
18-24	0 / 0	1 / 0	0 / 1	2
25-34	0 / 0	0 / 0	0 / 1	1
35-45	0 / 1	1 / 0	1 / 0	3
46-65	1 / 1	0 / 0	0 / 0	2
Total focus groups per community	4	3	4	10