

PERFORMANCE MONITORING FOR ACTION

GENDER & COVID-19: TRANSACTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS & SEX TRADE

Transactional partnerships and sex trade among adolescent and young adult women in Nairobi during the COVID-19 pandemic

November 2020



Why This Matters

- Transactional relationships can serve as a way for women and girls to obtain resources they may not otherwise be able to afford.
 - Transactional or exchange partnerships are those in which sex is implicitly exchanged for material support or other benefits; these relationships are often ongoing.
 - Transactional relationships can serve as a way for women and girls to obtain resources they may not otherwise be able to afford (commercial sex, sex work or sex trade is distinct and differentiated from transactional partnerships.)
- Transactional partnerships, often known as “sponsors”, are common among adolescents and young adults in Nairobi.^{1,2}
 - In our 2019 baseline study³, the majority of young women (85.7%) had received money or resources from their current/recent partner; 85.0% of young men had given money or goods to a their current/recent partner.
- Exchanging sex for resources outside of an ongoing relationship was less common (19.4% among women).
- Underlying gendered economic disparities that disadvantage women, together with gendered social norms that emphasize men’s provider roles can contribute to transactional partnerships and sex trade.
- The economic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has created new financial hardships that can increase financial pressure on young women, and may further shape transactional sex dynamics.

Spotlight on Gender Analysis

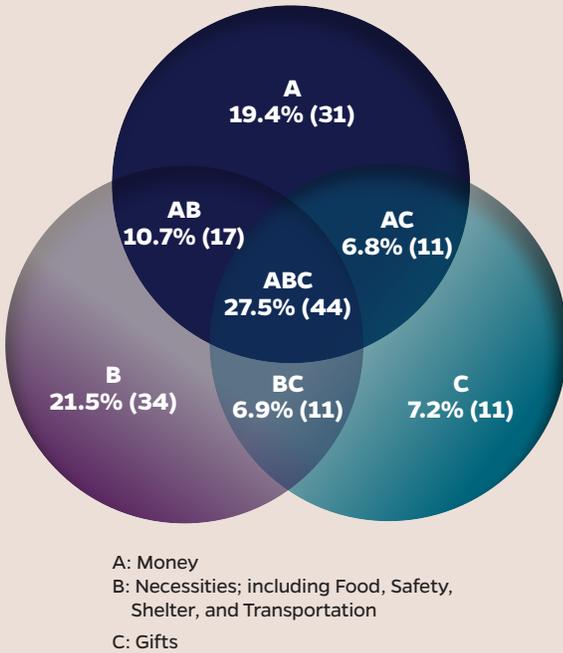
A gender analysis is critical, inclusive of gender-stratified quantitative analysis and attention to gendered social and economic power dynamics, norms, and underlying inequities.

Transactional Partnerships

- In the past 12 months, 35.5% of young women started or continued a sexual or dating relationship in order to receive goods or resources.
 - Of those involved, over a quarter of young women received a combination of money, necessities, and gifts (27.5%).
- The majority (57.3%) of adolescent and young women in transactional partnerships over the past year were involved both pre-COVID and during COVID; while 27.5% began these partnerships since COVID-19 restrictions.
- Among those involved at both time points, **financial dependence on these partnerships increased for 49% since the beginning of COVID-19 restrictions.**

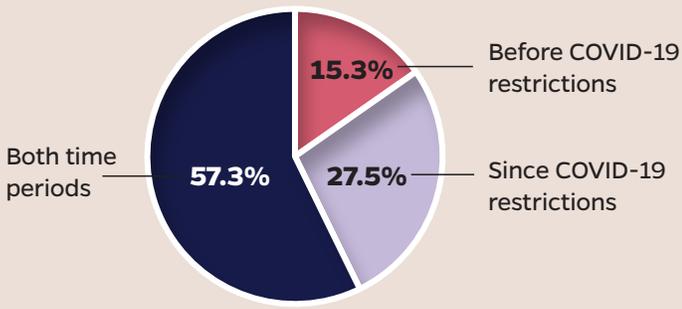
Transactional Partnerships

Figure 1. Items received within transactional partnerships, among young women involved since COVID-19 restrictions



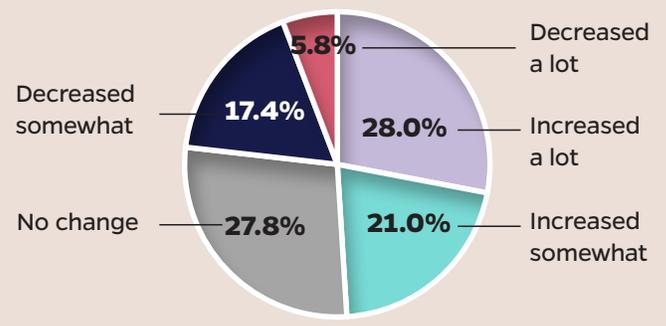
“ People are dating many people... We girls look at the needs... **Let this one [partner] do this, this one [partner] will be for the hair, this one [partner] for rent, I mean someone who can be able to back us up.** ”
 - 19-year-old female FGD participant

Figure 2. Timing of transactional partnership relative to COVID-19, among those engaged in past year (n=160)



“ COVID-19 as first, it has affected the economy. And because of that, **maybe in our relationships most of them are [built] on money** and because you do not have money, our relationships are not very healthy. There is not that nourishment **because the money is there to nourish our relationships.** ”
 - 18-year-old male FGD participant

Figure 3. Dependence on transactional partnership since COVID-19 restrictions, among those engaged both before and since COVID-19 restrictions (n=160)



Sex Trade Outside of Relationships

12.0% of young women received goods or services in exchange for sex, outside of their primary relationship in the past 12 months.

Money, gifts and necessities were all approximately evenly traded.

Of young women who reported engaging sex trade in the past year,

36.5% reported this exchange began after COVID-19 restrictions and

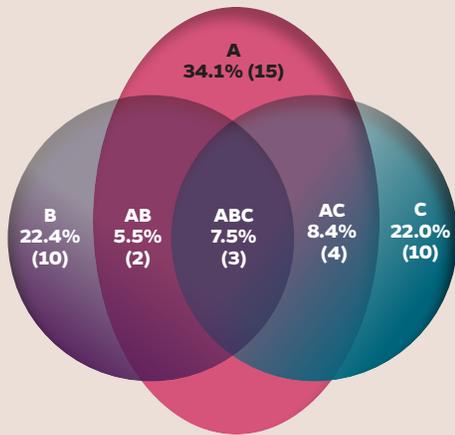
48.1% reported it occurred both before and after restrictions.

Among young women who reported sex trade at both timepoints,

36.0% reported increased dependence since COVID-19 restrictions.

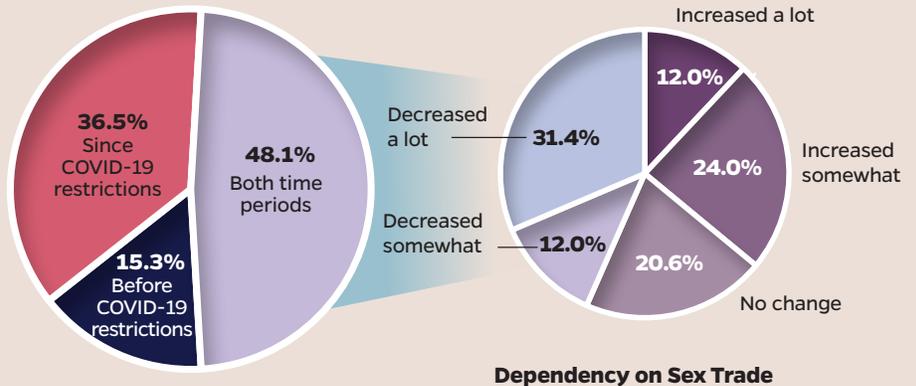
Sex Trade Outside of Relationships

Figure 4. Items exchanged for sex outside of primary relationship, among those who trade sex, since COVID-19 restrictions



A: Money
 B: Necessities; including Food, Safety, Shelter, and Transportation
 C: Gifts

Figure 5. Dependence on Sex Trade Before and Since COVID-19 Restrictions



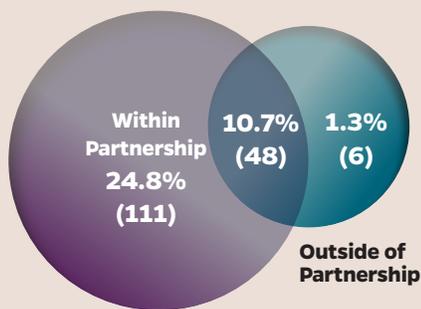
Timing of Sex Trade

Dependency on Sex Trade

“ So, they look for a boy, even if he is not a boy, a sponsor somewhere so that he can provide for... maybe for [these] sanitary pads or anything else. Maybe even food. Most of us, in our families maybe we are poor and I want food, they sponsor us in giving us money to buy clothes or for other small things that we may lack in our families. ”
 - 18-year-old male FGD participant

Extent of Transactional Sex Within and Outside of Relationships

Figure 6. Overlap in Transactional Partnership vs. Sex Trade Outside of Relationships, Among All Women



Trading sex primarily occurs within relationship or both within and outside of relationships

“ Most girls [obviously] will have sponsors and the main person whom they are dating, okay, being in a relationship you should use your brain, you should use your mind because if you don't use your brain and your mind...For sure your body parts will suffer the most. So, people see that if they have a problem they go to sponsor. ”
 - 17-year-old female FGD participant

Synthesis and Action Steps

- While transactional relationships are normative for young women in Nairobi, COVID-19 has increased dependence on these relationships.
 - **Dependence** on these relationships increased since COVID-19: 49% of young women reporting increased dependence on transactional sex.
 - Of those with transactional relationships in the past year, 57.3% of young women report a transactional partnership both **before and during** COVID-19.
- Similarly, dependence on sex trade appears to have increased for the smaller portion of women involved.
 - Only 12.0% of young women received goods or services in exchange for sex, outside of their primary relationship.
 - Of the 48.1% of young women reporting engaged in sex trade and reporting it both before and during COVID-19, over one-third reported increased dependence on these transactions since COVID-19 restrictions.
- While transactional relationships are normative for young women in Nairobi, COVID-19 has increased dependence on these relationships in the past year.
- Economic supports for adolescent girls and young women are essential within COVID-19 recovery efforts. These include food, shelter, transport, and sanitary napkins to ensure young women's economic autonomy, and relieve their economic dependence on transactional partners.
- Transactional sex can introduce risks for compromised sexual and reproductive autonomy, unintended pregnancy, and STI/HIV, particularly where multiple concurrent partnerships exist. Sexual and reproductive health providers must be prepared to address and respond to these relationships in a nonjudgmental way to ensure access to necessary health supports for young women involved.

Methods

In 2019, Performance Monitoring for Action (PMA) Agile carried out a Youth Respondent-Driven Sampling Survey (YRDSS) among adolescents and youth ages 15-24 (N=1357, male N=690 and female N=664) in Nairobi, Kenya between June and August. In 2020, a fully remote follow-up study was conducted with the study cohort (now ages 16-26) to track changes in contraceptive dynamics, and assess the gendered impact of COVID-19. The quantitative surveys were conducted by phone in two distinct sessions to limit participant burden: YRDSS Follow-up (N=1223, male N=610 and female N=613) and Gender/COVID-19 Survey (N=1217, male N=605 and female N=612). Sampling weights accommodate the RDS study design, post-estimation adjustment and non-response adjustment. Virtual qualitative methods included focus group discussions (FGDs) with unmarried youth ages 15-24 (N=64, over 8 groups), FGDs with youth-serving stakeholders (N=32, over 4 groups), and key informant interviews with higher-level stakeholders (N=12). Data collection was conducted from August to October 2020.

Suggested Citation

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References

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2. Stoebenau, et al. Revisiting the Understanding of 'Transactional Sex' in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review and Synthesis of the Literature. *Soc Sci Med.* 2016;168:186-197
3. International Centre for Reproductive Health-Kenya (ICRHK) & PMA Agile. Nairobi Youth Respondent-Driven Sampling Survey: Final Report. 2019. Performance Monitoring for Action Technical Report. Baltimore, Maryland, USA: Bill & Melinda Gates Institute for Population and Reproductive Health, Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health.