

Health Systems Research Unit:
Research Briefs

The HERStory Series

Understanding why South African Adolescent Girls and Young Women engage in Transactional Sex and Relationships

THE CONTEXT

- Motivations for engaging in transactional sex and transactional relationships (TSR) are complex and diverse, ranging from economic deprivation, hunger and poverty, to desires for social approval, prestige, glamour, and luxury.
- Socio-cultural norms normalise transactional sex and transactional relationships amongst adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in South Africa, and practices of using sex as a currency for exchange.
- Our study included data from a range of urban, semi-urban, and rural communities across six provinces of South Africa, all characterised by high rates of HIV and teenage pregnancy. Combining quantitative survey data with qualitative narratives from AGYW and their male peers, we sought to deepen understanding of these complex risk behaviours, and the factors that influence AGYW decision making around TSR, helping to inform interventions that seek to address sexual and reproductive health challenges among AGYW in South Africa.
- Considering the range of motivations for AGYW to engage in transactional sex and relationships in these communities in South Africa, and the associated HIV risks, addressing these behaviours is critical as part of South Africa's HIV response.

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These research briefs were developed by scientists at the South African Medical Research Council's Health Systems Research Unit to share findings from studies conducted by the organisation.

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THE ISSUE

- Gendered socio–economic power disparities are a key driver for AGYW's vulnerability to HIV infection. **Participation in transactional sex is associated with condomless sex and HIV seropositivity among AGYW in South Africa.**
- AGYW who engage in transactional sex are **more likely to experience poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes, including unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), and sexual coercion.**
- AGYW risk behaviours intersect and overlap. Engaging in engaging in transactional sex and transactional relationships is also associated with having multiple concurrent sexual partnerships, drinking alcohol, and having condomless sex.
- Although AGYW may exercise some agency in choosing to engage in age-disparate partnerships (where there is large age gap between partners) that are transactional in nature, unequal gendered power dynamics are heightened with age-disparity, exacerbating AGYW HIV risk by negatively impacting their ability to negotiate condom use.
- While engaging in transactional sex and transactional relationships is influenced by structural factors, including poverty, gender inequality, and lack of education, it is also influenced by psychosocial factors, including societal/familial/peer pressure, aspirations for social mobility, and material consumer goods, as well as romantic notions of love and security.

TRANSACTIONAL SEX AND TRANSACTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

- **Transactional sex:** a specific set of behaviours, labels and identities, distinct from commercial sex work, characterised by the exchange of financial or material support, which occurs outside of the context of marriages, or 'formal' sex work.
- Key feature distinguishing transactional sex and transactional relationships from other non-marital romantic or sexual relationships, is that they are not only characterised by material exchange, but motivated by it.
- Transactional sex and transactional relationships are judged by those who participate in the exchange to be more morally acceptable than formal sex work, because the exchange occurs within the context of a relationship (no matter how temporary or ambiguous its nature).
- BUT distinction between transactional sex, sex work, and romantic/sexual relationships is challenging, as the boundaries are very blurred.

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW: THE HERSTORY₁ STUDY

The HERStory₁ study was an evaluation of combination HIV prevention intervention for AGYW in South Africa. We undertook a mixed-methods study comprising in-depth qualitative interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), combined with a cross-sectional survey. Data collection took place 2017-2019 across communities characterised by high rates of HIV and teenage pregnancy in 6 South African provinces: Western Cape, KwaZulu Natal, Mpumalanga, North West, Eastern Cape, and Gauteng. We conducted 63 IDIs and 24 FGDs with a total of 237 AGYW aged 15-24 years. A total of 4,399 AGYW participated in the survey. Further information about the intervention and the overall evaluation can be found at: <https://www.samrc.ac.za/intramural-research-units/HealthSystems-HERStory>

WHAT WE FOUND

- Among sexually active AGYW aged 15-24 years, 12.1% reported engaging in transactional sex
- Reporting of transactional sex was higher amongst older AGYW (20-24 years) than younger girls, higher amongst HIV positive AGYW than amongst HIV negative AGYW, and higher amongst AGYW who also reported high alcohol use.
- AGYW who were between the ages of 20-24 years, reported higher food insecurity, had a high alcohol use, and a sexual partner older than her by 5 years or more, were more likely to report having transactional sex
- Motivations for engaging in transactional sex and transactional relationships reported by AGYW ranged from economic deprivation, hunger and poverty, to desires for social approval, prestige, glamour, and luxury. Motivations for AGYW to engage in TSR are not mutually exclusive and often AGYW are driven by a combination of subsistence needs and consumerist desires.
- Poverty and food insecurity were key drivers for engaging in TSR. Those AGYW from poor families, who have to provide support to siblings and family members, and with few opportunities for income generation, regarded TSR as a valid means of attaining material and/or financial support.
- However, AGYW are not passive, hapless victims, but are often active social agents in these relationships, realising the

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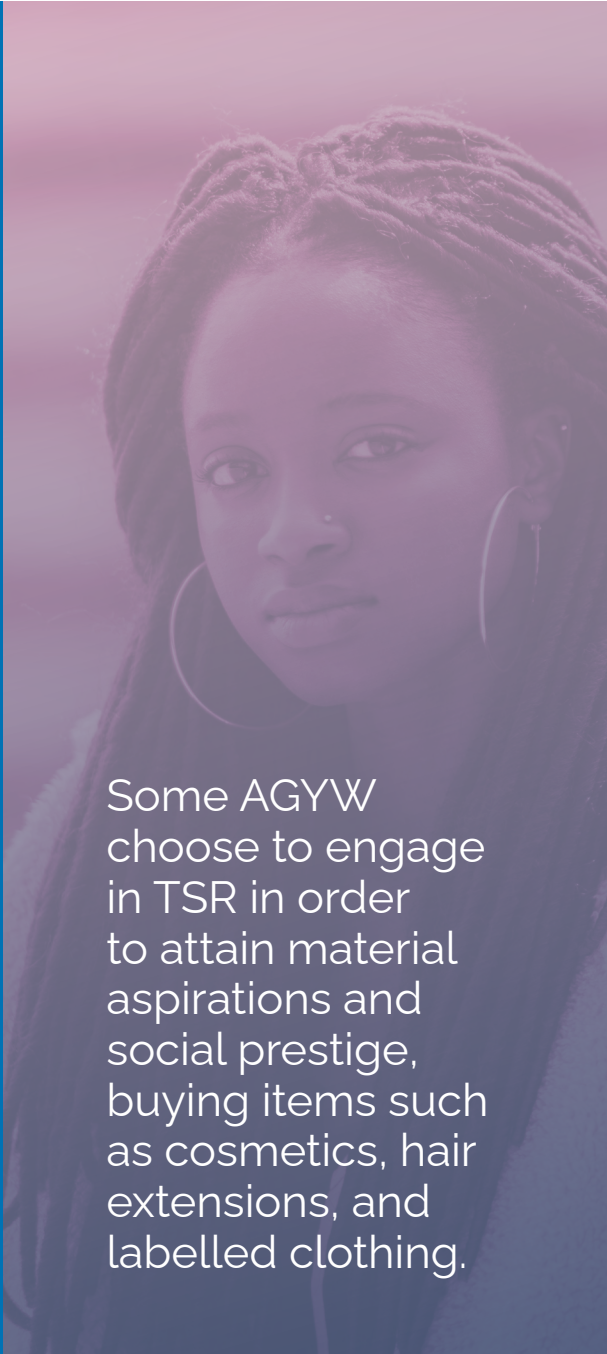


economic potential of their sexuality and cognisant of the personal gains to be made, some AGYW exploit men's lust to uplift themselves and attain their material aspirations.

- Not all AGYW who engage in transactional sex do so out of desperation, and a need for basic material necessities. Some AGYW choose to engage in TSR in order to attain material aspirations and social prestige, buying items such as cosmetics, hair extensions, and labelled clothing.
- Although AGYW have some agency in TSR, there is also a need to recognise the reality of the South African context and gender inequity in which AGYW have reduced access to economic resources which create conditions in which TSR is considered a viable income generation option.
- The exchange of material/financial compensation for sex informs the unequal power dynamics in transactional relationships. While AGYW may feel a sense of power and actively seek multiple partners to meet their needs or desires for material support, at the same time, the unequal power dynamics inherent in these economically asymmetric relationships enhances their risk. Men, as the financial providers, are entitled to dictate sexual interactions (such as whether or not a condom is used, and the timing of sex).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Combination interventions that address multiple mechanisms of risk, and multilevel and intersecting social factors are needed to address the multiple structural and behavioural factors that create situations in which transactional sex and transactional relationships are considered a valid and attractive option to AGYW in South Africa.
- Combination HIV prevention interventions should include economic empowerment activities to reduce the extent to which AGYW need to rely on male providers. However economic empowerment interventions need to be combined with programmes that address AGYW's self-agency, to ensure sustainable long-term impacts on AGYW's economic self-reliance, and therefore lead to behaviour change around sexual risk-taking.



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- Interventions need to encourage AGYW to critically reflect on their own agency and choices in transactional sex and relationships, their aspirations for consumer items that symbolise a better life as motivation for sexual exchange, and the norms and beliefs that sustain gender inequality in transactional sex relationships.
- Instead of simplistic framing of TSR as inherently risky and wrong, interventions need to consider the driving motivations, and the realities of negotiating the complex dilemmas of risk versus gain, helping AGYW to identify and navigate risks safely, and protect themselves, while maintaining some of the benefits.
- Interventions should address the HIV risks associated with transactional sex, and integrate measures into broader empowerment and health interventions, rather than attempt to intervene on transactional sex alone.
- Young men and women also need to be encouraged to reflect on relationship and sexual values, and the gendered expectations of male provision and what it "buys" men in return.
- 'Gender transformative interventions' should critically address shared societal expectations that women should have sex with men in return for their material/financial support, and work to challenge provider norms, masculinity and the concept of control of women in heterosexual relationships.
- Another important aspect to include in interventions relates to age-disparate partnerships; efforts should be made to engage AGYW and older men in order to build skills in critical reflection on the short-, medium- and longer-term benefits and costs of engaging in age-disparate sexual relationships.

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