

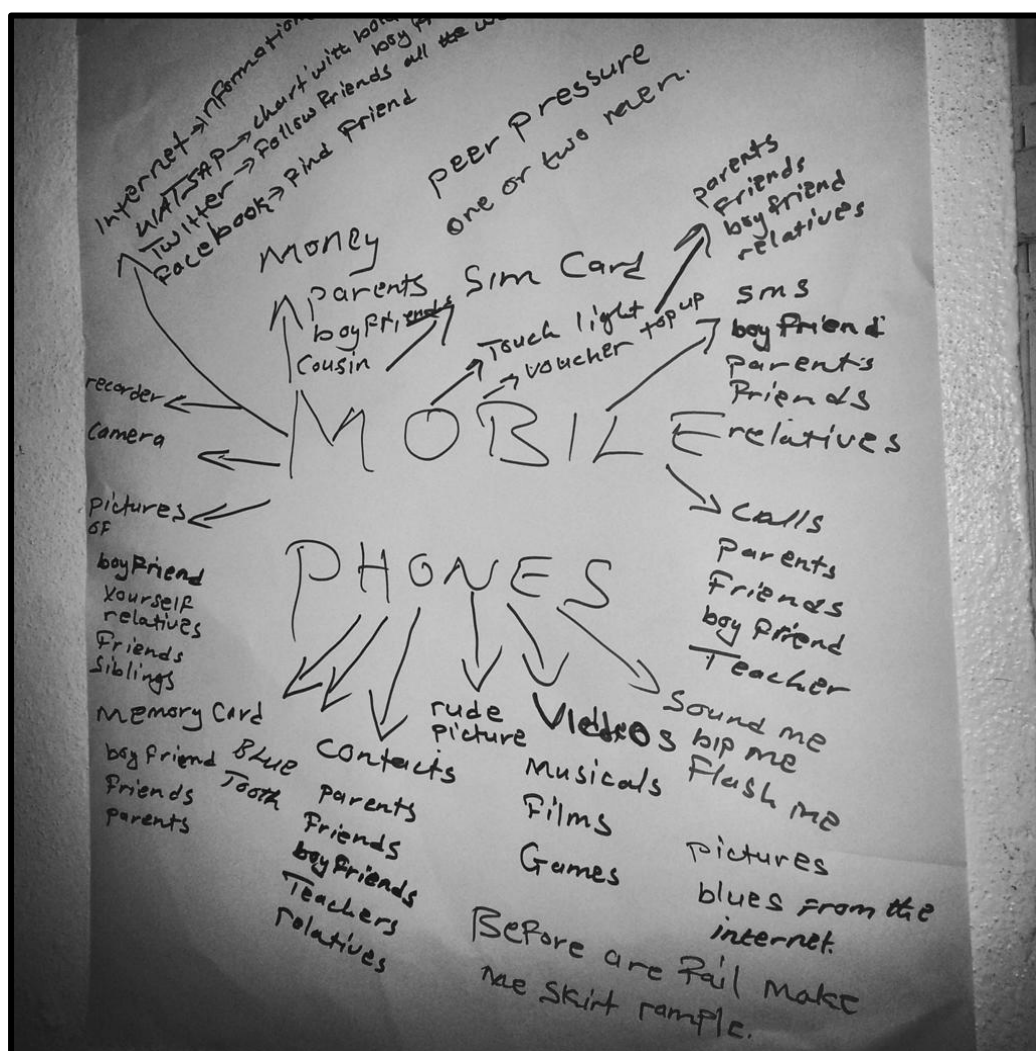


National Secretariat for the
Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy



A case study exploring the relationship between mobile
phone acquisition and use and adolescent girls in Freetown.

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This study is dedicated to each young girl who finds herself making life decisions in the toughest of situations.



Introduction

This study seeks to provide a platform of information-rich, qualitative data exploring the sexual behaviours of teenage girls in relation to mobile phone acquisition and use. The study objective is to gain an understanding of these behaviours in the Freetown context and to subsequently proffer recommendations that could contribute to controlling harmful behaviours. The findings of this study will contribute qualitative data to a body of evidence that will be used to inform national programs that endeavour to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy. This study presents itself at a critical time in Sierra Leone, given recent efforts recognizing the high rates of adolescent pregnancy in the country.

The relevant literature provides a wealth of data on transactional sex, including its causes and consequences, but provides little data on how this relates to mobile phone acquisition or use. Considering this significant gap in the literature, this review examines the relevant literature around transactional sex, as well as a rather separate body of literature on young people's relationship with mobile communications.

Background

Mobile phones: impact

In the last decade, mobile telephony has transformed communications, globally. Sierra Leone, like the majority of African countries has leap-frogged infrastructure demanding communication methods, such as the fixed line phone, and have opted instead for mobile phones (James 2007). In 2012, a report entitled “Sub-Saharan Africa Mobile Observatory” was commissioned by the GSM Association, and for the first time, focussed on highlighting mobile telephony advancements in the region (GSM Association 2012). The report identifies sub-Saharan Africa as having the highest growth rate in mobile phone connections internationally, with a 44% increase in the number of connections, since 2000 (GSM Association 2012).

Mobile phone penetration rates, calculated from the number of subscribers per 100 inhabitants, is one of few parameters that can be used to assess mobile phone coverage. In Sierra Leone, the mobile phone penetration rate is 48% (GSM Association 2012). Critics argue that penetration rates considerably underestimate the actual number of users, given the way in which mobile phone subscriptions are often shared between family members or friends in African contexts, thus greatly increasing the actual usership (James 2007). Indeed, a household survey in Botswana found that as many as 62.1% of phone owners share their phone with other family members (James 2007).

The discourse around the impact of mobile telephony in sub-Saharan African countries has largely been positive. Academics and practitioners alike have heralded mobile telephony as being a positive contributor to economic growth, empowerment, and overall development (Waverman L. 2005; James 2007; GSM Association 2012). The recognition of the positive effects of mobile telephony has been reflected in a number of international development targets. Perhaps the most significant of these is the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which, under Goal 8F, seeks to “increase the number of cellular subscribers, per 100 population” (UN no date). In light of this, there are numerous programs being implemented internationally, claiming to reduce and ultimately, eradicate the ‘digital divide’.



While this study focuses on mobile telephony in urban areas, it is nonetheless interesting to note that the impact of mobile telephony is often even greater in rural areas, where mobile phones represent the first form of modern telecommunications (GSM Association 2012).

Mobile phone practices: beeping and flashing

There has been a considerable amount of research exploring specific practices around mobile phone use, including “beeping” or “flashing” – a practice involving terminating a call before the receiver answers (Donner 2008). It has been well documented that such practices, which are essentially free to engage in, are widespread, particularly in low-income country contexts. Experts suggest that it is due to such widespread, low cost practices that mobile phone accessibility has such far reach, regardless of the economic status of the individual (Ellwood-Clayton 2006; Donner 2008).

Research in Finland found beeping, or “bomb calling” as it is commonly referred to in Finland, to be a popular practice among teenagers as a money saving tactic (Oksman 2004). Nkrumah-Boateng’s (2004, in Donner 2008) study in Ghana, found beeping to be particularly attractive to teenagers, because it allows romantic expression of interest without having to compose a customised message. Following his study exploring mobile phone practices in Rwanda, Donner (2008) argues that preliminary evidence in mobile phone practices substantiate the need for further research to understand the prevalence and frequency of certain practices. In Sierra Leone, little is known about such behaviour practices; this study seeks to shed light on some of the mobile phone practices adolescent girls engage in.

Mobile phone practices: sexting

The UK based Mobile Life Report, argues texting is a safe and unthreatening medium of communication which allows “sexual advances to be made with the minimum of risk and the maximum of discretion”, particularly among young, often timid adolescents. Ellwood-Clayton’s (2006) study in the Philippines, revealed that texting resulted in “inversions of gender roles”, allowing women to express “erotic love” and initiate relations. In a study of 800 American teenagers, 30% of 17 year olds were found to have received a “sext”, or “sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images” while 8% admitted to sending such messages (Pew Research Centre. 2009).

While sexting itself may not be deemed as a risky sexual behaviour, studies have shown that there is a correlation between sexting and sexual behaviour. In Rice’s (2012) study, which considers a sample of 1839 adolescents in the US, 15% reported either sending or receiving a sext, and interestingly, sexting was associated with increased sexual behaviour and was found to be part of a cluster of risky sexual behaviours. Indeed, sexting is often considered to be the initial step in creating a sexual relationship. In a study conducted in 2002, 27% of Filipino males and 24% of females were found to have “flirted” through a mobile phone, with a stranger (Ellwood-Clayton 2006). In this study, most of the study participants who initially engaged in “text flirting” or sexting, reported building sexual relationships subsequent to this initial contact.



Transactional sex, a cash-channel to modernity?

“Transactional sex” is commonly characterised by age-disparate relationships, whereby money or gifts are transacted for sexual acts. There is a substantial and growing body of evidence that identifies the demand for mobile phones as being among the key drivers for young girls in low-income countries to engage in transactional sex. It is, however, important to consider that premarital relationships in many societies are deemed highly materialistic; the literature provides an array of case studies demonstrating the inextricable nature of sex and monetary transactions, with women expecting to be lured and kept with cash or gifts (Leclerc-Madlala 2003).

Relevant literature of the last decade has challenged earlier reports that purported transactional sex as the “only option” for poverty affected young girls to meet their basic needs (Hunter 2002). While earlier literature around transactional sex was closely linked to discourses of violence against women (VAW) and others that aligned poverty related abuse, there is now growing literature that identifies young women as “active social agents” who manage multiple sexual relationships to access the latest consumables and maximise material gain (Hawkins, 2008). Indeed, transactional sex is increasingly seen as a means of accessing goods and materials in what Leclerc-Madlala (2003) describes as the “*pursuit of modernity*”, be it alcohol in South African drinking venues (Watt M. 2012) latest fashion trends in Trinidad (Hawkins 2007), or cars in urban Atlanta (Rosenbaum J. 2012).

In Hawkins’ (2008) study, having the latest model of mobile phone was part of the social identity of the “modern urban woman” – an image that represents the prevalent aspirations of young women in Maputo. Whilst studies such as Coinco’s (2010), provide significant evidence to suggest that transactional sex is highly prevalent in Sierra Leone, in particular Freetown, little is known about the role that mobile phones are having in this interaction.

Increased rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, have been attributed to age-disparate transactional sex. In transactional sexual relationships, economic power is unbalanced, and thereby influences bargaining power around condom use. In Hawkins’ (2008) study of transactional sex in Maputo, refusing sex without a condom ran “counter to the explicit economic goal” of the transaction.

The consequences of transactional sex are grave. In seven of 35 countries covered in a recent review of DHS reports, at least one in five female adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 who ever had sexual intercourse indicated that they had an STI or symptoms of one in the past 12 months (Kothari, Wang et al. 2012). In many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, elevated HIV rates among young women in the 15-24 years bracket has been attributed to age disparate sexual relationships between young girls and older men (UNAIDS 2004; Lalor 2008). Various studies have revealed that young women in this age bracket have HIV infection rates of up to three or four times that of their male counterparts (Hawkins, Price et al. 2009).

It is plausible that transactional sexual relationships are also the cause of increased rates of teenage pregnancy. UNFPA’s Motherhood in Childhood (2013) report asserts teenage pregnancy as a human rights issue, arguing that childhood pregnancies reduce girls’ opportunities and increase vulnerabilities to poverty and exclusion. From a human rights



perspective, the report asserts that “a girl who becomes pregnant – regardless of the circumstances or reasons – is one whose rights are undermined” (UNFPA 2013). For teenage mothers, the health risks are severe, particularly when social barriers act to reduce the likelihood that timely health care is sought. The risk of maternal death for mothers under the age of 15 years in low and middle income countries is double that of older females (UNFPA 2013).

International actors have recognised the pertinence of reducing the prevalence transactional sex. In 1994, at the International Conference on Population and Development, 179 governments agreed on the need to promote the rights of adolescents to reproductive health education, information and care and greatly reduce the number of adolescent pregnancies. In Sierra Leone, the Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy was established in 2013, and informants reveal that this is an issue closely monitored by the President himself, Ernest Bai Koroma. The Secretariat have been instrumental in the authoring of the national strategy for the reduction of teenage pregnancy, entitled “*Let Girls Be Girls, Not Mothers!*”

In regards to age disparate transactional sex, the Sexual Offenses Act of Sierra Leone defines anybody aged under 18 years as a child, and identifies any form of sexual relationship with a child as an offense warranting between 5 to 15 years imprisonment (Government of Sierra Leone 2012).

Child protection and parental control

In most societies, young people tend to be faster adopters of technology than older generations, and can indeed drive the market to produce new concepts and products. Rapid uptake of new technology coupled with an acceleration in technological advances, results in young people often finding themselves navigating risks involving technology that were largely unknown to previous generations. Various studies show that while mobile phones increase the freedom of adolescents by providing a private means of communication, mobile telephony has also extended parental control by providing a constant channel of communication between parent and child (Williams 2005). This can have important implications for parental monitoring of mobile phones (Bond 2010).

While there is a plethora of available data and subsequent programming around the protection of children from the social dangers of mobile telephony in Europe, and the United States, little has been done in low-income countries such as Sierra Leone. The research on the potential harm facilitated by mobile phones is scant, and there is largely an absence of programming around child protection and mobile telephony. Furthermore, there is a significant lack of data exploring how mobile phones are acquired and maintained in the region.



Conclusion

The introduction of more affordable smart phones to the African market means that many people, including adolescents, can now access a variety of internet applications, not just conventional calls and SMS. In what Giddens coined as the “double edged sword of modernity”, modern communications, including mobile telephony has brought a multiplicity of benefits, but not without drawbacks. Few data exist concerning the potential social harm associated with mobile phone use, in particular, smart phone use in low-income country contexts. The determination to achieve a sense of modernity is driving adolescent girls to engage in risky sexual behaviours. Moreover, ownership of the latest mobile phone technology is considered fundamental to being “modern”, and adolescent girls face multiple familial and peer pressures to engage in this lifestyle. There is a dearth of data that examines the man’s role in age disparate transactional sex, however, these root causes of early sexual debut of adolescent girls and subsequent risky sexual behaviour need to be addressed if meaningful solutions are to be proposed. This study seeks to highlight some of the potentially harmful behaviours associated with mobile telephony, including transactional sex, and suggest ways in which mobile telephony can be used to combat these.



Research Methods

The fundamental objective of this study was to provide a preliminary snapshot of sexual behaviours associated with adolescent girls' access to and use of mobile phones in Freetown. A qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate to generate information rich data to produce this snapshot, because of the sensitivity of the topic, and because of the nature of the data required.

As an operational piece of research with a relatively short time allocation, it was not feasible to conduct traditional methods of qualitative research – typically lengthy anthropological based data collection. While in-depth interviews and focus group discussions can be used as rapid data collection tools, they require a significant level of trust to be built prior to data collection to ensure data reliability. This is particularly true when researching behaviours of adolescents, who often feel a heightened need to conform with prevalent behaviours, and may consequently provide invalid or inaccurate narratives (Brady 2011; UNFPA 2013). Qualitative researchers have argued that the validity of adolescents' responses, particularly those aged 10 – 14 years, can be flawed due to difficulties in obtaining accurate information in contexts where stigma exists around premarital sexual activity (Chong, Hallman et al. 2006; Brady 2011). In order to negate against this effect, studies whose objectives pertain to adolescents and sexual health must employ methodologies that acknowledge the importance of building trust to increase study validity (Brady 2011).

Taking this into consideration, and following a discussion with one of the method's designers on the appropriateness of the method in the study context, our research employed the peer ethnographic method. The peer ethnographic methodology was created by UK based Options Consultancy and is an innovative, participatory approach to qualitative research. The method is an anthropological approach of ethnographic fieldwork, which perceives trust to be central to the extraction of reliable data, particularly when researching sexual behaviours of young people (Price 2002).

Peer researchers are trained to conduct “in-depth, conversational interviews” with members of their social network, through a process where they are supported in designing interviews and data collection and analysis. Peer ethnography is a rapid methodology that provides a means of gaining in-depth understanding of sensitive issues such as reproductive and sexual health, and among hard to reach groups (Options Consultancy Services Ltd. 2012).

Peer Ethnography in Freetown

For our study, six peer researchers underwent two days of intensive training using participatory learning methods. Peer researchers were trained on the basics of peer ethnography, and enacted role-plays prior to data collection.

Peer researchers then commenced a data collection period of two weeks, where each researcher engaged five adolescent girls, aged 13 – 18 years, in their social network. A peer researcher met each respondent on three separate occasions. The theme for each meeting comprised a list of up to 15 questions. The study facilitator compiled each theme, with heavy input from peer researchers. Preliminary data from each theme was used to inform

questions for the subsequent theme. Each peer researcher debriefed with the study facilitator after each theme was conducted. These debrief notes form the data set for this study. At the end of the data collection period, the peer researchers came together for a final workshop. This workshop provided space to share overall findings and interpret data.

Results

This section is divided into three sections, according to the research themes discussed in the previous section. Whilst quotes have been translated and written here in English, some particular phrases or words are provided in both languages to avoid meaning being lost in translation.

Theme I: Relationships and daily life

Theme I served as a conversation starter, where respondents were asked to speak about their relationships and how they coped with financial problems.

Problems faced by adolescent girls

Young girls identified social issues relating to high poverty levels as the most important issue affecting them, and other girls in their community. Respondents were able to identify poverty as a driver of transactional sex, and a subsequent cause of public health concerns such as teenage pregnancy and early marriage.

“Poverty is a problem because families don’t have enough money to give them [girls] so they have to go the extra mile to get things they want”

“My friend dropped an onion, she didn’t have money to replace it, so she had to beg from a boy. The boy gave her Le1 000 and then he asked for sex. She lost her virginity to buy an onion”

“Teenage pregnancy is a problem. Some parents bring their children to Freetown from up-country, telling the child that they will come to have a better life, but when they arrive in Freetown, because of poverty, the parents will give the child to marry instead”

The need to satisfy materialistic desires identified as being a social problem among adolescent girls in Freetown, who are exposed to costly material goods on a daily basis. Girls describe this as “mille”, in Krio, which roughly translates as having ambitions related to greed. One respondent described what she saw happening in her community: “fashion and mobile phones and all those things make young girls ‘mille’ and then they do all sorts of things to satisfy their own minds”.

Coping mechanisms of adolescent girls

Engaging in some form of sexual relationship was the most common coping mechanism mentioned when respondents were asked what adolescent girls do when they have money problems. The scope of a sexual relationship described at this stage is wide; some respondents mentioned prostitution, while others mentioned asking boyfriends for cash.



One respondent gave the impression that the problem would have to be assessed, and solutions given appropriately.

“Some go to relatives or boyfriends. Later they have sex with them as payment. But like, for school fees, they go to their teachers for sex so they can continue their education.”

Some mentioned having more than one boyfriend to help in such situations.

“most girls have more than one boyfriend – so if one cannot solve the problem, the other one will”

Overall, this seemed to be a common and accepted practice.

“you have to give what you have to get what you want”
“gi wetin yu get fo wetin yu want”

Motivations for engaging in “man business”

Results from this study suggest that adolescent girls target men who are at least ten years older than them. Respondents also spoke of the importance of aesthetics when finding a boyfriend – a man well presented and dressed was deemed as important in gaining respect from peers. While aesthetics were deemed important, wealth was seen as paramount. Most respondents associated men being older and well dressed with wealth.

“They don’t like boys their own age – they want to be with older men who can help them to solve their problems”

“girls want a ‘big man” – those are the older ones who have money. They are usually aged 25 and above”

“Older men have that intention to spend money on girls, not like the young ones”

While not all respondents equated an age differential with financial capacity to provide in a relationship, all respondents reported that girls want to be with men who have money to spend on them.

“Men should be an answer to financial problems – some men even help whole families to get out of poverty”

Apart from material gain, one of the other most significant motivating factors for girls to be in relationships with older men is peer pressure, though this is not necessarily completely separate from material gain. Girls reported that pressure from other girls within their peer group pushed them to find boyfriends to fit in. Many girls reported that other girls would show off goods that their boyfriends had furnished them with, at school or in the broader community, to jeer other girls into doing the same.

“Peer pressure makes girls have boyfriends. Girls admire girls with boyfriends”



“If your friend comes and shows you a new phone that her boyfriend bought her, and you don’t have, you will want too. Anyway, girls show off these things, because it shows that their boyfriends love them.”

Concurrent Partners

The predominant reason given for having concurrent sexual relationships was related to material gain; one boyfriend could not satisfy all the needs of one girl.

“if you have just one man, you can’t manage to get everything you want. You need one for school fees, one for clothes....”

“one girl at school was in love with three boys. One of them did her assignments, one would buy her clothes, and the other one bought her phone and other things like money. One man won’t do”

Krio: *“wan man no de ful op boks”*

Some respondents reported that often, a girl would use a “big man” to gain money to support not just her, but also her boyfriend that she loves – these boyfriends tend to be younger, often boys their own age.

“one girl has sugar daddy and uses his money for top up that she then sends to her boyfriend that she loves”

Girls also reported that oftentimes girls are unsure if they are their partners’ sole girlfriend, therefore as a means to secure their own emotional wellbeing prefer to also keep several boyfriends.

“You can’t be sure that your boyfriend is only having one girlfriend, so you have to also keep more than one boyfriend. That way, if he has another one, it won’t hurt you because you have a backup plan.”

KRIO: *“wi kip tik bihen dormot”*

“girls don’t want to look stupid. So if they find out their boyfriend is cheating, she can say ‘well, I was expecting that, that’s why I had another one [man].”

One respondent summarised the need to have more than one sexual relationship:

“One man can’t fulfil all your financial needs. And that one man won’t be faithful anyway.”

Theme 2: Getting the goods

Theme 2 sought to shift the conversations more towards mobile phone acquisition and use, including maintenance, and how this affects sexual behaviours of young girls.

Transactional sex, a means to acquisition

Mobile phones are seen as a status symbol. One respondent commented that, “if you don’t have a phone, you’re not part of the civilised world”. The demand, then, to be part of this



'civilised' world of modernity, drives girls to engage in transactional sexual relationships. The research findings suggest that the level of interaction and sexual engagement varies according to the category of man that is involved in the transaction; and the amount of cash required by the girl. Overall, study findings indicate that young girls are engaging in multiple forms of sexual relationships, concurrently, in order to access cash to purchase mobile phones.

"she had a boyfriend, but he wasn't able to buy it, so she had to sleep with three other men for this phone."

"there are different types of man. The 'old pa' can be over 50 or 55 years old, the 'big man' is between 25 to 50 and then there are the young guys – those are they ones the girls actually love. The 'old pa' asks for touch, they ask the girls to just touch them (KRIO: touch en lef) but usually no sex. The 'big men' ask for everything, kiss, oral sex (mot sex) and sex."

Other girls reported a prolonged engagement with the same man in order to access cash.

"depending on the kind of phone that you want or how much cash you need, you will go Monday 6pm after the man is home from work will 12 in the night – then you come back the next day. Sometimes they get paid in tranches."

Girls are more inclined to ask and take money from men who they do not love because these are the men who have financial capacity, but also because they do not want to burden their boyfriends who they actually love with financial demands.

"girls don't ask the boyfriend that they like for phones because they don't want to bother or burden them"

"it's not the boyfriend they like that buys the phones. They would rather take money from the one that they don't like because they don't want to chop the money of the one they like"

Girls reported that sex was not a good way to access financial support, but that ultimately, it remained a means to an end. Some also reported that it has become a habit, albeit an unhealthy one, in order to generate an income.

"most girls don't think transactional sex is ok, because when they do it, they feel regret, because they are scared of those sicknesses and pregnancy. But they still do it."

"now it's a habit for them, whenever they want anything, they have to do this, they don't care anymore. This is what they depend on, they don't go to school, they don't do business, they just use their bodies"

Phone maintenance costs

In terms of maintaining phones and buying top up, most girls reported that they manage to save money from lunch money given by their parents. They rarely go to boyfriends for this because the cash needed does not warrant a sexual act. Some girls save money from what their 'big man' or "sugar daddy" gives them to buy top up.



Some girls reported that having a mobile phone greatly increased opportunities for young girls to find men in which to engage in transactional sex.

“the better your phone, the easier it is to find a man. Like if you have a iphone, it is easier because you have Facebook. Then you can chat online. At one point, he will definitely say ‘let’s meet up’.”

“phones make it easy to just meet without even planning anything. The man just calls the girl and says let’s meet at this place...”

Parental influence

Theme two also sought to examine parental management of transactional sex. Most respondents reported that there was a divide between mothers and fathers, with fathers being completely intolerant of these behaviours, but mothers often times ignoring it, and sometimes even encouraging it.

“some of the mothers who don’t have money will say it’s good because they can’t afford it, so at least someone else will buy it for their child”

Some girls also commented on parental pressure to find money to support the household as a motivation to engage in sexual behaviours. One respondent explained that when a mother asks her daughter to go and “find something” she means to go out and find money, in whichever way possible.

“If there is nothing at home, the mother will ask the girl to go out and find something. This word is very common in the community. If your mother says this, you know what she means.”

Theme 3: Different, different ways

Theme 3 engaged girls in more in-depth discussions concerning their mobile phone use and associated risky behaviours.

Communication codes

Adolescent girls circumnavigate the wide range of features on basic smart phones to communicate with parents, boyfriends and friends in the most appropriate and cheapest way.

“Most girls have to use units to call their parents because they can’t read SMS. Girls also have to think about how much battery they have and the amount of units they have...”

There is a specific set of social norms associated with how adolescent girls communicate to different types of men that they are engaging sexually.

“for the sugar daddies, girls just flash them. They have wives so they don’t like to be disturbed.”



“girls never text or call their sugar daddy. The wives might see and get angry and then they cannot see the sugar daddy again”

“for the boyfriends that they [adolescent girls] really like, the girls will call them as often as they can, to show their concern and love”

“sometimes, girls just have a secret way of speaking to their boyfriends to let them know that they are thinking of them. Like flashing.”

Camera Phones and Blues Pictures

Respondents reported that sharing pornographic pictures – commonly referred to as “blues” in Freetown – was common amongst their peers. These pictures, taken of the sender, by the sender, are usually sent to boyfriends via SMS or Bluetooth upon request. Some peer researchers suggested that this practice was elevated amongst girls who had boyfriends and were in situations that did not allow for sexual encounters.

“the man asked her to send a picture of her whole body naked. He said that it was just because she was too far away from him.”

“this girl had such strict parents, so no chance to have sex. The boy asked her to snap her vagina and send it.”

While girls have to trust the person they are sending “blues” to, occasionally, this system of trust is betrayed, and this, according to peer researchers, is seen as the ultimate form of embarrassment.

“one of the boys she had sex with asked for her naked picture. So she sent it. Then the boy shared the picture widely! All over. The girl nearly wanted to kill herself. She locked herself inside for three days.”

Bluetooth and Pornography

Internationally produced pornographic materials, including films, are shared widely amongst adolescents of both sexes. Bluetooth facilities, available on even the most basic of smart phones, are used to share pornographic material for free.

“it’s everywhere. They get them through Bluetooth. Some boys download them at a comm centre and then they share. Or they get the DVD plates on the street.”

“there are boys in town who do different technical things, you can go to them in town and they will send you whatever you want”

“in my school, anyone who has a memory card, has a phone with Bluetooth, definitely must have some of these things [pornography].”

While peer researchers reported that many girls within their social network are asked to watch pornography by their boyfriends, there are three other predominant motivations for adolescent girls to watch pornography. Peer researchers described a sense of peer pressure



among girls, who do not want to be marginalised for being the anomaly who has not engaged in this behaviour. Others reported that pornographic films are the main medium in which adolescent girls learn sexual techniques, including positioning, in order to satisfy men. Nearly all peer researchers commented that girls “learn styles” from pornographic films. And lastly, adolescent girls reportedly watch pornography to be aroused, as one girl mentioned, “Some young girls watch blues because then they feel like they’re having sex too”.

Most girls access pornography from their boyfriends who, in an attempt to arouse their girlfriends, share films via Bluetooth.

“some men make their girlfriends watch so they get that feeling”

“boys want the girls to initiate the sex, and the blues help with the feeling”

Internet and making ‘new friends’

Facebook and Whatsapp were repeatedly quoted as being favourite Internet downloadable applications for smartphone users; though there was some evidence suggesting that younger adolescent girls engaged less with these applications.

Adolescent girls are using mobile telephony in a range of ways to initiate contact with men they do not know. Two peer researchers gave details of a common game, popular among adolescent girls. The game involves a group of girls writing random phone numbers on a piece of paper – and then between them, they call every randomly generated number. If a man answers, the girl will try to meet up with him, depending on the information that he provides about himself. This information can detail his geographic location, employment situation and subsequent wealth level. According to peer researchers, “they call it phone love”.

Peer researchers also detailed stories of adolescent girls actively seeking male relationships through social networking and communication applications – as aforementioned, the most common being Facebook and Whatsapp, respectively.

“Facebook is a place to meet old friends and make new friends”.

On Facebook and Whatsapp, adolescent girls “target” men who are Sierra Leonean, living overseas, usually in the UK or USA. These men are perceived to be wealthy by adolescent girls. As in many African countries, December is a popular month for members of the Sierra Leonean Diaspora to return to their countries. Adolescent girls capitalise on this, making demands on men in the Diaspora, with promises of sexual engagement upon their arrival.

“Girls target men who are out – the number one target is Salone man who is out. In December, when they come as JC they meet and have sex. A lot of girls ask these men for money or phones when they come.”*

*JC is a common slang term for those from the Diaspora, who have “Just Come”.

The marital status of Diaspora men returning to Freetown is not a point of consideration for most girls, and in fact is a point of celebration for most girls. One respondent explained how adolescent girls perceive this practice:

“some are married, and then they come in December for their ‘Salone baby’. The other young girls will be jealous! They will say ‘you have luck o!’.”

Many respondents described how adolescent girls initially identify men on Facebook whom they wish to engage:

“Girls browse through men’s profile pages. They look at where they work, and if they have good jobs, they use sweet words to make the man fall in love.”

Many respondents recalled stories of girls in their social groups who “got lucky” by finding a man on Facebook who then facilitated visas and eventual transitions to Europe or the USA. This experience was seen to be the pinnacle of adolescent girls’ aspirations.

“The best case is when you find a man on Facebook and then they come and take you over there. This is what all the girls want! All the girls will say – well done, you found the one to pull you from poverty!”



Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that adolescent girls in Freetown use sex as currency to access a range of material goods, including mobile phones. While mobile telephony was the focus of this particular study, findings reveal that girls are also engaging in transactional sex to access a range of other amenities and merits including, for example, school grades – in the aptly termed “sexually transmitted grades (STG)”. Transactional sex is also seen as a reliable coping mechanism in times of financial hardship. These results echo study findings in other sub-Saharan African countries, including for example, Tanzania, Mozambique and South Africa, (Silberschmidt 2001; Hawkins, Price et al. 2009; Watt M. 2012).

Even in so-called ‘love relationships’, adolescent girls in Freetown are attracted to men with an ability to provide financial support and material gifts. This was also the case in a study conducted in Dar es Salaam, where it was found that girls saw little point in initiating relations with a man who could or would not dispense cash on demand (Silberschmidt 2001). Findings assert that adolescent girls assess men according to their dress sense, which gives an indication of wealth. Hawkins’ (2008) study findings reflect this, with young girls in Maputo making similar assessments in nightclubs.

Peer pressure, parental pressure

In Freetown, adolescent girls gain respect from their peers by ‘bluffing’ with material goods gifted by ‘boyfriends’. Here, love is measured by the cost of the phone acquired, or by the amount of cash dispensed. As documented by Silberschmidt (2001) and colleagues in Tanzania, men who are willing to provide give prestige among peers as a status of a girl is often dependent on having the latest fashion or mobile phone. This behaviour has become socially acceptable to the extent that girls who do not partake are seen to be anomalies and, as our study finds, good for ridicule in the school yard.

In Freetown, 15.5% of girls in the Western region live in a single parent household headed by their mother (Population Council 2010). Study findings suggest that poor households headed by single-mothers could be considered a risk factor for early sexual debut or transactional sex. Mothers who feel inadequate because they cannot furnish their children with sufficient cash to access desirable material goods turn a blind eye to the practice of transactional sex, while some in more desperate situations drive their daughters to the street in search of cash, and inadvertently sex. This was also the case in Dar es Salaam, as Silberschmidt (2001) writes “they choose to close their eyes because it relieves them of their financial responsibilities”. Similar findings were reported by Chatterji and colleagues, who reviewed studies from twelve sub-Saharan African countries, and found that parental pressure to engage in transactional sex is often implicit rather than explicit (Chatterji, Murry et al. 2004). However, analysis from Freetown based data suggests that there is a difference in reaction between mother and father; the data suggests that parental pressure comes only from the mother of the adolescent, and hardly from the father. Additionally, findings suggest that while mothers may turn a blind eye, fathers are more likely to take a more forceful approach to disciplining daughters out of this behaviour. This finding was not reflected in other studies, though is an important point for further research.

Different behaviours, different types of relationships

Data from this study suggest that girls proactively seek partners in which to engage for transactional sex, using internet applications on their phones. Study findings suggest that the girl is often the one to call the man when she is in need of cash, and thus controls, to some extent, the relationship. Girls talk about transactional sex using terminology such as “you must know how to play the game”, and “give what you have to get what you need” to demonstrate their control over these relationships. Our findings suggest that girls have a certain amount of power to influence situations with men through texting or calling at times to show affection, or by using “sweet words”. Similar reports come from Mozambique, where girls were seen to be in control through “exploiting a man’s wealth under the guise of a relationship”.

Girls manage concurrent partners in order to maximise material gain. In these situations, they manage a complex, unwritten set of rules around how communications should occur with each partner. Such practices, particularly around the nature of ‘flashing’ are well documented by Donner (2008), in his seminal piece, ‘the Rules of Beeping’. Often times, it is the girl who is in control of choosing when to communicate, depending on when the need for cash arises.

Adolescent girls in this study demonstrated a low, and often incorrect, understanding of the health risks surrounding concurrent sexual relationships. Unlike findings from a similar study in Maputo (Hawkins, Price et al. 2009), this study indicates that girls in Freetown have a relatively low level of knowledge regarding STIs including HIV. This study found that girls are much more concerned with avoiding pregnancy, and try to take precautions against this; however, findings suggest that girls do not have accurate knowledge on how to use modern contraceptives correctly. Findings suggest that adolescent girls may be taking the ‘morning after pill’ as a contraceptive following oral sex – a behaviour which suggests significant inaccuracies in knowledge of basic modes of conception and contraception. Some narratives also suggested traditional contraceptives, including bathing in salt water following sexual intercourse, and the use of ‘waist beads’ – a string of beads worn around the waist to prevent pregnancy.

Though not specifically examined in this study, findings suggest that adolescents’ perceptions of other risk are also relatively low. Girls in Freetown meet men who are, at a minimum, ten years older in private spaces, usually hotel rooms. Within these private spheres, girls put themselves at serious risk for sexual abuse. In a setting where rape and coercion often go unrecognised, further research is needed to ascertain how adolescent girls perceive sexual risk, and what constitutes sexual abuse for them.

Mobile phones, the internet, and risky sexual behaviours

Sexting, is commonplace in Freetown, predominantly between boyfriend and girlfriend. While studies from high-income countries (Pew Research Centre. 2009) indicate that sexting is a practice that both boys and girls engage in, our study indicates that girls are the senders and boys the receivers of such messages. Adolescent girls in Freetown send sexts when requested to by their boyfriends, and further, see sexting as a way to please their partners. While some studies suggest that sexting is a compromise for young adolescents who are not yet ready to engage in sexual intercourse, this is not the case in Freetown.



Though some adolescent girls send sexts because there are barriers to accessing spaces in which to have intercourse – strict parents or long distance, for example – most engage in this behaviour in addition to actual sexual intercourse. Data from Sierra Leone's Demographic and Health Survey reveal that some 69% of girls have had sexual debut by age 18, confirming that mobile phone related sexual activity is probably happening in parallel to actual sexual intercourse (Statistics Sierra Leone and ICF Macro 2009).

As Bond's (2010) study found, Bluetooth has enabled fast and free sharing of sexually explicit material, including pornographic films made internationally. There is a dearth of data concerning adolescent girls' motivations to view pornography in African country contexts. Our data indicates that pornographic material is prolific in Freetown, with adolescent girls consuming for personal pleasure, or to arouse themselves for their boyfriend's pleasure, but also to learn 'styles' including sexual positions. This study does little but scratch the surface of young people's consumption of pornography; further research must be conducted on the types of pornography being shared, and how this is impacting the sexual behaviours of adolescents. This will further reveal the gravity of the child protection issues that need to be managed.

Internet applications on mobile phones, including Whatsapp and Facebook are common sites that adolescent girls use to connect with men previously unknown to them. Here again, there are low levels of perceived risk, and instead adolescent girls celebrate being given opportunities to meet men from overseas who are willing to have sex with them whilst holidaying in Freetown. This study also revealed evidence suggesting that impoverished parents would also welcome such opportunities for the daughters. There is a lack of data that examines risk around internet use for young people in low-income settings; in particular, there is a dearth of data on how internet use is facilitating sexual interaction. While internet speed in Freetown is rapidly improving, it is still not sufficiently fast for the use of web-cameras. When this does happen, it is plausible that adolescent girls will start engaging in 'internet sex' through web-cameras, thereby opening doors to further abuse, including paedophilia. Further research is urgently needed to gain a deeper understanding of adolescent's use of the internet, and associated risky sexual behaviours to safeguard against further abuse.

Conclusion

This study provides a snapshot of some of the behaviours and practices of adolescent girls in relation to mobile phone acquisition and use. The narratives generated by this study demonstrate the intricate web of behaviours at the intersection of poverty and modernity. While mobile phone access is deemed an essential component of economic empowerment and development, little is known about the negative consequences of mobile telephony. This study highlights some of the adverse effects of mobile phone use, and presents the ensuing child protection and public health concerns.

Adolescent girls, who wish to engage in popular consumerism, see transactional sex as the most rapid and assured way to acquire cash. Considering the concurrency of relationships had by adolescent girls, coupled with a lack of accurate knowledge around contraception, it is plausible that transactional sexual relationships are contributing significantly to the high

prevalence of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone. For effective behaviour change communication programs to be developed, it is essential that stakeholders gain a thorough understanding of the motivation of young girls to engage in risky sexual behaviours, including transactional sex.

Study Limitations

1. PEER ethnography provides rich qualitative data, which illustrates some of the practices that Freetown adolescents engage in. This study does not, however, provide any estimate of the prevalence of such behaviours in Freetown. Follow up quantitative data should be conducted to provide such statistical data.
2. Due to the sample population being selected by peer researchers themselves, it is possible that a respondent bias was introduced. Having said this, the objective of this study was to generate information rich data, in the form of narratives, which we believe this methodology succeeded in providing.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made in light of the study findings and seek to address issues pertinent to the reduction of harmful sexual behaviours among adolescent girls in Freetown.

- **Harness the role of mobile telephony as a communication channel:** Adolescents are used to sharing data and information with peers rapidly through Internet applications such as Facebook or Whatsapp and Bluetooth. To maximise impact, Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) programs that seek to reduce risky behaviour associated with mobile phone use, should harness the use of mobile telephony. Agencies wishing to engage adolescents must harness these technologies to communicate through youth friendly channels for increased efficacy.
- **Ensure that behaviour change communication messaging does not stigmatise girls:** An effective BCC strategy should recognise the roles of both adolescent girls and men in transactional sexual relationships. Adolescent girls should never be the sole focus in communication campaigns that seek to reduce transactional sexual relationships, as this perpetuates the idea that girls are to blame for this practice.
- **Work with justice sector to reduce impunity:** BCC campaigns should reinforce that legally; men can be fined or imprisoned in Sierra Leone for having sexual relations with a child (any person aged 18 years or under). Effective BCC campaigns must seek to change the social norm around sex with minors, and create an environment where this is no longer seen as acceptable. Particular attention should be drawn to community members who are theoretically recognised as ‘child protectors’, eg teachers and police.
- **Incorporate positive deviance strategies:** positive role models should be incorporated to provide an alternative vision for adolescent girls who are facing peer pressure to engage in transactional sex. Social norms need to be altered in order to change attitudes towards early sexual debut.

- **Further research on behaviour prevalence:** while this study provides a snapshot of sexual behaviours around mobile telephony in Freetown, further research is necessary to estimate prevalence of these behaviours. In order to gain relevant data, from which strategies can be built, we must seek to understand more about the men who chose to engage in this practice.
- **Ensure youth friendly sexual health service provision for adolescent girls:** MoHS and NGO services must be confidential, whilst perceptions of confidentiality must be increased. Services should have opening hours that are respectful of young people's routines and staff must be trained on creating a non-judgmental atmosphere.

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This report is made for external stakeholders in Sierra Leone. If you have any require any further information, please contact Save the Children.

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