

Adolescents, Sex and the City in Southern Tanzania

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Young people constitute the majority of African societies. From the point of view of development experts and policy makers a key challenge is risks related to the sexual and reproductive health of young Africans. Focusing on a small but rapidly growing district capital in Southern Tanzania called Mtwara town, this study examines what dimensions of urban sexuality youth experience as risks and whether young women and men develop ways of anticipating, avoiding or overcoming and thus building resilience to these risks.

Background

Promoting the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) of adolescents in Africa especially of female adolescents, has moved to the top of the national and international development agenda. While many international and national organizations target adolescents with their interventions, surprisingly little is known about how these young people live their sexuality, particularly in rapidly changing urban contexts.

Research objectives

- 1.) To explore how adolescents in Mtwara town conceptualise and deal with their lived sexual and reproductive health risks.
- 2.) To describe and examine representations of adolescents and their sexuality in the changing contexts of Southern Tanzania.



Photo 1: Adolescents in one of the night clubs in Mtwara town
(Photo by R. Sambaiga)

Approach

This ethnographic study concentrates on young people in adolescence (aged 15-19 years) in Mtwara town and employs a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods entailed administering questionnaires to a total of 500 female adolescents. While qualitative methods included 20 female adolescents drawn from the main sample together with 20 male adolescents who were visited and interviewed every month over a period of 6 months.



Photo 2: A research assistant in an interview session with a respondent
(Photo by R. Sambaiga)

Progress and achievements

Completed both quantitative and qualitative fieldwork. Currently working on quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The thesis will be submitted by October 2013.



Photo 3: A 19 year old unmarried mother of two children who is 4 months pregnant in August, 2011 (Photo by R. Sambaiga)

Preliminary findings

- Sexuality is one of the key elements in the everyday life of adolescents in Mtwara town. Sex is not the only component of adolescent sexuality but it is considered to be crucial in sexual relationships. Almost half (48%) of the 500 interviewed female adolescents are sexually active and 15% had started child bearing.
- Being in a sexual relationship is conceived as critical aspect to the adolescents' sense of being and belonging even though it is not approved by significant others. Thus, most adolescents strive to conceal their sexual relationships and find it difficult to turn to parents for reproductive health information and support.
- Magazines, Radio and TV are seen to be key sources of reproductive health information because the media do not compromise adolescents' interests of keeping their sexual relationships secretive.
- Adolescents' agency reflected in their abilities to shift between identities enable them to practice and live their sexuality.

Significance for policy and practice

- ☞ Interventions towards improving sexual and reproductive health of the adolescents need to be sensitive to the everyday practices of the young people.
- ☞ Programmes targeting adolescents should not ignore their creative potentials.

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