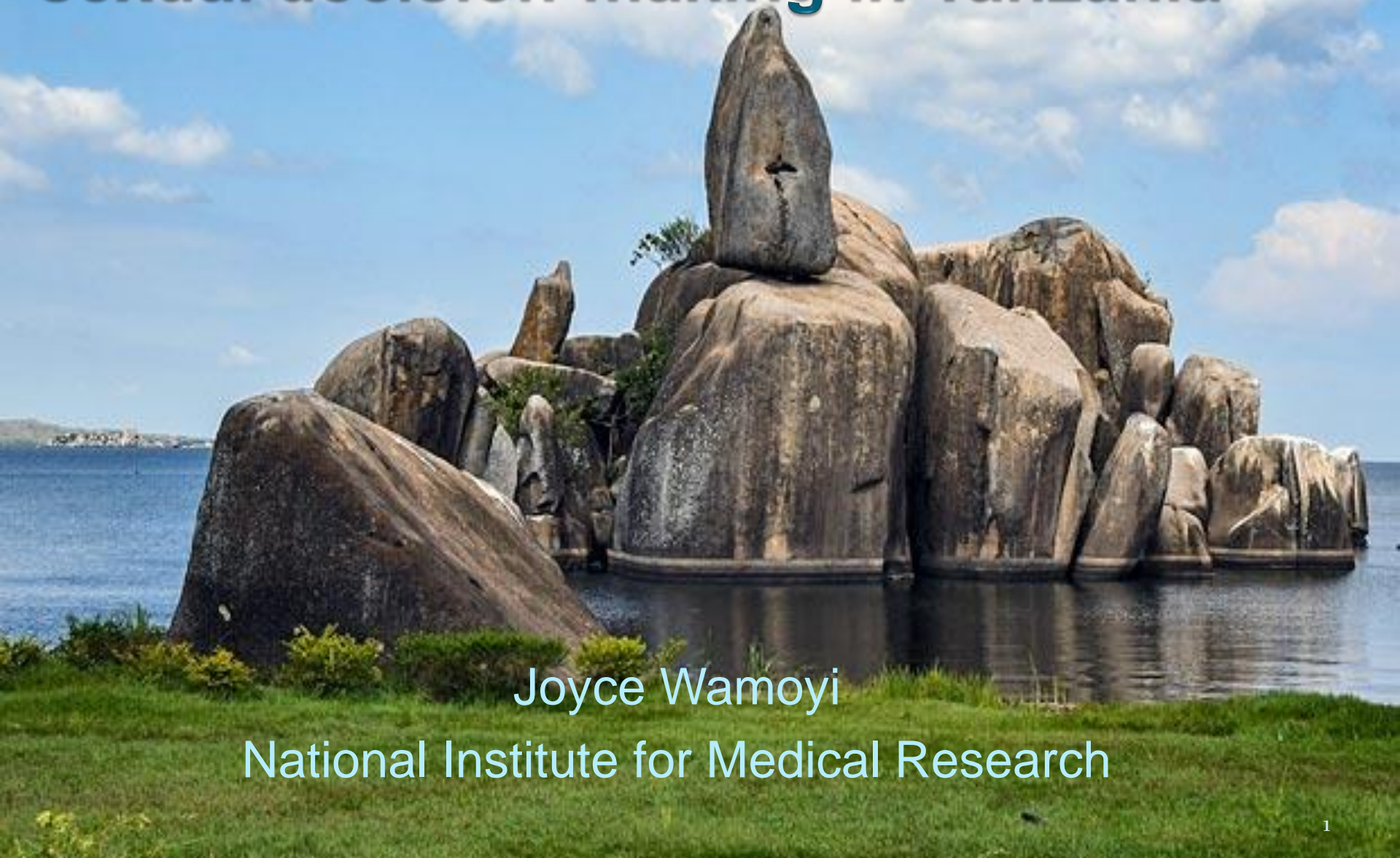


Adolescent girls' aspirations and sexual decision-making in Tanzania



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Introduction

- As adolescents transition from childhood to adulthood
 - Aspirations & hopes evolve & shape their life choices e.g. those related to sexual behaviour
 - Adolescents are exposed to various structural factors & their behaviour influenced through social interactions with peers
- Transactional sex (TS) though linked to increased SRH risk
 - BUT presents opportunities for AGYW to meet their aspirations
- SRH programming often fail to connect with social identities & aspirations of local adolescent girls & young women (AGYW)

Objective

- To describe the aspirations of AGYW aged 14-24 years, and to explore the extent to which aspirations are related to their sexual decision making in Tanzania

Methods

- Qualitative research
 - 6 Participatory FGDs including the use of vignettes
 - 17 In depth interviews (IDIs) with AGYW
- Fieldwork was undertaken in two sites (1 rural, 1 urban)
- The IDIs and FGDs explored:
 - What it means to be a popular girl
 - AGYW's desires and hopes
 - AGYW's sexual decision making and behaviour
- Thematic analysis

Findings

- AGYW's aspirations were categorized as: short- and long-term
- ***The short-term*** aspirations reflected the immediate hopes & desires of AGYW
 - often driven by social norms, peer pressure, technology (e.g. mobile phones) & the globalization of fashion trends
- ***Long-term aspirations*** were completion of education, marriage & children
 - Influenced by social structures that shaped what AGYW considered salient goals to pursue

Short-term aspirations & sexual decision making

- AGYW were aware of what it meant to live in poverty & aspired to have “a good life” free of poverty
 - Equated a “good life” to affording material items
- AGYW were under peer pressure to conform to a ‘modern’ lifestyle, commonly referred to as “*kwenda na wakati*” (going with the times)
 - Expressed strong aspirations for possessing what their peers had & talked about “*wanting to be like other girls*”
 - Popular items aspired: *smart phone, food/snack during break time at school, and latest fashion clothing*
- To keep up with fashion and peer pressure
 - Engaged in transactional sex (e.g. older partners)
 - Due to power imbalance, could not negotiate for protection use

Illustrations

Peer pressure to possess material items

- *For example, someone might tell her boyfriend “I have seen so and so with a phone, I need a phone like that” ...Also clothes. She has seen her peer with certain clothes that she has never owned... she asks herself, “why should she manage and not me?”...He [boyfriend] tells her, let us meet somewhere private...when the two meet they must have sex and he provides that thing. (FGD, adolescents 14-17 years in-school)*

Inability to negotiate condom use:

- *But as he gives you that money and other things that you want...it is him who decides on whether to use a condom or not because you can't force him to use protection yet he is the one who buys it, “what if he refuses and says he doesn't have money to buy it, what will you do?...Besides, he is older than you and you can't stop him” (IDI, 17 year old school girl)*

Long-term aspirations & sexual decision making

- Aspirations for good education & career
 - AGYW discussed completing school & a career that could lead to a “good life”
- Aspirations for good social standing (e.g. respect & marriage & children)
- Aspirations were interlinked e.g.
 - Education & having a career
 - Marriage and having children & community social standing
- Aspirational careers were shaped by what AGYW observed in their immediate social settings
- Some long-term aspirations seemed more important than others
 - Marriage versus education

Illustrations

Reflecting on education as a gateway towards their aspirations:

Sometimes, I find myself wishing to be like an educated person, like a member of parliament or a minister. I say to myself, "If I would have gone to school, I would be like this woman" [IDI, 18 years, out-of-school]

A group of girls reported:

"There are others who have not gone to school but have been lucky to be married... they are also successful". (FGD, young women 18-24-year out-of-school)

Transactional sex & meeting aspirations

- Poverty was a limiting factor to achieving one's aspirations
- AGYW sought sexual partners who could meet their aspirations
- Different partners were meant to meet different aspirations
 - *Younger partners/peers* – were meant to meet the long-term aspirations on marriage & children
 - *Older partners* – for short term material aspirations e.g. providing fashionable items, for AGYW to keep up with peers
- AGYW meeting salient aspirations resulted to sexual manipulation by men

Illustrations

Limited capabilities to achieve aspirations

"I too would have liked to continue with school because I can see my friend doing well [employed]. Considering that life is changing, I regret that I did not complete school. I wish I stayed in school to be like her and to know what she knows (FGD adolescents, 14-17 years)"

Different partners to meet different goals

When I start a relationship with my peer, I have good intention... the intention is that he would be my husband in future...but I can't get into relationship with an older married man and have similar expectations for marriage...He [older partner] is mainly for fun (IDI, 18-year-old out-of-school)

Discussion

- Aspirations are relational, dynamic and are often connected to others held by the individual & significant others within their context
 - Having good education was key but dressing well & being attractive to potential sexual partners & valued by peers were immediate & easily achievable
- Aspirations largely shaped by peers, role models & social circles
 - Short-term aspirations for nice clothing was valued among peers & was easily achieved through TS compared to long-term ones (e.g. education) that required resources from parents
- Aspirations were sometimes in conflict with each other e.g. being attractive to gain peer approval versus respect

Conclusion

- Aspirations of AGYW determine their sexual decision-making
- It is important for projects to develop innovative ways of engaging with AGYW based on their circumstances & aspirations
- Interventions need to have a strong local focus appropriately tailored to AGYW & in-line with their views of the future
- Failure to recognise AGYW aspirations, may lead to failure in the opportunities offered by SRH interventions
 - due to lack of resonance with their social identities and structural realities
- There is need to find a common ground in the short and long-term aspirations & to capitalise on them when addressing AGYW's SRH risks & achievement of future goals

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