Adolescents' Perceptions of Healthy Relationships

Policy Brief

A Generative Approach to Addressing Child Sexual Violence

In this policy brief we propose an alternative approach to addressing sexual violence drawing on research conducted on adolescent perceptions of healthy relationships in Tanzania. We propose a generative strength-based approach anchored on working with existing community structures that have the potential to positively shape the prevention of sexual violence among young people in Tanzania.

Young people and sexual violence in Tanzania

Most adolescents in Tanzania have a sense of positive discovery and growth but many are exposed to risks and vulnerabilities because of the loss of parents, unwanted pregnancy, early marriage, HIV related vulnerabilities, inability to complete education, or exposure to violence, abuse, and exploitation (UNICEF, 2011). Indeed our survey results revealed that sexual abuse is a prevalent threat among young people with 26% of study adolescent participants indicating that they have been propositioned to have sex by relatives. This was higher for especially girls (34%) and boys (18%) mainly in urban (Dar es Salaam, 33%) than rural (Mwanza, 16%).

Two-thirds (68%) of the adolescents in the study held the perspective that it is okay for a boy or girl to be asked to have sex by a relative in exchange for or without money/gift. More girls (77%) than boys (60%) reported this.

Why does it matter?

Research, policy and practice has tended to focus on abusive or violent experiences including for young people hence reinforcing a deficit or pathology view. We propose that responding to violence against adolescents requires starting from the positive attributes of supportive structures in adolescents ecology of relationships including around to healthy ideas, values, and practices. This is consistent with a review of existing research that recommends a need for research that focuses on adolescent perceptions of healthy relationships and one that frames relationships from an aspirational perspective (Gevers 2016: 8). In addition to linking these perceptions with the actual practices in adolescent relationships and obtaining nuanced perspectives. Such perceptions are important in making decisions on which relationships to support as antecedents to prevention of violence.

Study design and methodology

The multi method 2-year adolescent guided peer inquiry had the goal of understanding adolescents' perceptions and experiences of healthy relationships. A total of 8 primary and 4 secondary schools were purposively selected in Kinondoni and Magu districts in Mwanza and Dar-es-salaam respectively. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from a total of 927 adolescents aged 10-18 years, 79.5% in-school and 20.5% out-of-school adolescents using questionnaires administered through a mobile handset. Qualitative information was collected through a range of methods including semi-structured interviews, life history interviews with young mothers and fathers, photo narrative interviews, auto-biographical essays, creative drawing activities, focus group discussions (FGD).

Young people were seen as co-creators of knowledge – especially about their own lives and their voice and perspectives were important. Adolescents were thus at the center of the research process both as researchers and as informants with trained adolescent peer researchers generating knowledge from peers relationships.

Key findings

Realities of sexual violence and violence

- Sexual abuse emerged as an issue in the research sites. Our survey results indicated that twenty six percent of adolescents have been propositioned by relatives. More than one third (37%) of adolescents know of another boy or girl who has been propositioned by a relative. Discussion with peer researchers revealed that young people were pained by the rampant sexual exploitation.

- The evidence also indicates that in most cases the adolescents know their abusers, who are mainly relatives or their friends.

- Fear of reporting was attributed to power relations between adolescents and the adults in their lives. Study participants reported their fear of causing family break-up, of not being believed, and fear of loss of financial support from the perpetrator (if he was the provider). For example, there were cases where children had reported their experience of sexual abuse from one parent and the other parent refused to believe them. From the FGD with female parents, mothers were aware that their brothers or brothers of their husbands force their daughters into sex but also noted that it is difficult to address because it can cause marital discord and breakage.

- Besides sexual abuse from family members, adolescents also face sexual abuse from schools. The existence of sexual relationships, sexual harassment of students by teachers creates unhealthy relationships between adolescents and teachers with serious negative consequences for the adolescents. A student in a secondary school in Mwanza argued that, teachers sometimes ask for sex from students, especially the female students.

  …there was a teacher who hated a student because the student refused his sexual advances. So the teacher failed the girl each time and later she was expelled from school. When this was discovered, the girl was brought back to school and the teacher was suspended though the girl had lost a year.

- Adolescents are often direct or indirect victims of violence owing to domestic violence in the home. This made the home to be a place where children were scared of interacting. Young people therefore gave recommendation that their parents should ensure that they live harmoniously and avoid domestic violence.

Adolescents' Significant Relationships

- A majority of the adolescents (84.3. and 93.7% Dar and Mwanza respectively) said that they have strong relationships with their mothers because their mothers support them emotionally and listen to them. Noted that their primary caregiver was their mother (92.3 and 67.9 % for in-school and out-of school adolescents respectively)

- Mothers also 'responsibilise' adolescents, provide for their needs, nurture them and sacrifice for their children as various adolescent study participants noted.

  "Mothers lay down their lives for their children" (male adolescent in Dar)

- Relationships with the fathers are important aspect in the ecology of adolescents' relationships. Some fathers were perceived as having healthy relationships with their children because they were present, engaged, provided for the needs of children, respected, and defended the adolescents against relatives who despise them as well as meeting their emotional and material needs.

- However, we noted that compared to mothers, many adolescents have weak relationships with their fathers. The main reasons include: fathers absence in their lives, disengagement and failure to provide for the needs of their children

- Sibling relationships: This relationship was seen as important in supporting each other and giving the children a sense of togetherness and family. Some of the qualities that young people said they like in the siblings were *thoughtfulness*, politeness, getting along well and being good listeners. Siblings also tend to support the younger ones emotionally as well as provide other support with school-work, guidance and defending them. Siblings in some cases assume the role of caregiver especially when parents die thus assuming a double position of sibling and parent at the same time.

- Peer to peer relationships: Our survey indicated that peers were reported to positively shape each other to be more responsible, and supportive, they even often help each other when in trouble like when their friends need to accomplish a punishment.

- A common occurrence in the research sites is adolescents living with (non-biological) parents. We noted that in cases of death of parents or separation or after their mothers/fathers remarried, children live with stepparents.

Significant spaces for adolescent relationships

Home

- Many adolescents suggested that home provides a sense of peace, emotional satisfaction and relief from stress. Some youth however noted that home was not a safe space, made them uncomfortable and especially due to domestic violence or the perception that one of the parents was not nurturing to the children or was mistreating the spouse.

  "I treasure my home, it is my everything, I spend most of my time there and it is at home that all my needs are met" (Male in-school Mwanza.)

School

- We established that school space is important to in-school adolescents as the place where they spend a considerable part of their normal daytime, form lifelong childhood and adolescent friendships; and shape careers through interacting with teachers. School was reported as 'a place of refuge'. Adolescents liked school because it's where they meet friends; share ideas and views concerning different things, give each other advice on how to avoid early pregnancies, how to avoid sexual advances that may result in undesirable consequences and shape/protect their life and career dreams: I am happier at school than at home because at school we have many sports and leisure activities, which we do not have at home.

Virtue space

- Adolescents made use of technology, especially mobile telephone, was a major communication and learning channel. Technology can provide spaces for healthy relationships and especially for out of school youth who lack networks- they can connect, can be used to dispel myths about youth, and are useful for passing information. The in-school youth however do not always access mobile phones because of school regulations

Policy recommendations

Involving young people in research about them

- The research undertaken by young people emerged as empowering to the young people involved but also to others that participated in the research.

- Youth were given a voice to share their experiences. We recommend that modalities to ensuring that this dialogue on healthy relationships continues should be put in place in these schools and communities.

Prevention efforts towards sexual violence: enhancing positive adolescent relationships.

- We recommend that in building self-efficacy of young people towards healthy relationships, the positive aspects of being a youth should be enhanced while norms that misrepresent the identity of youth especially out of school youth should be entangled. Fundamentally, issues like lack of education, early parenthood and motherhood that make these young people present with negative traits need to be tackled.

- The research has revealed that peers play an important role in enhancing positive relationship. This is especially so for in-school youth who see school as a site where they can enhance a sense of camaraderie with peers

- Building on these positive relationships for in school youth would enhance them. However, for out- of-school, youth who lack networks, connecting and enhancing positive networks in the community like self-help groups as well as other positive spaces would provide a space for healthy peer relationships.

- Use of mobile apps that enhance their networks would be a possible route.

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