

## Underlying factors in female sexual partner instability in Kampala \*



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### Abstract

**Divorced or separated persons are more likely to be infected with HIV than those in marital unions: sexual partner instability appears to have significant implications in STD/HIV transmission. While this appears empirically true, most current STD/HIV preventive strategies do not seem to address partner instability as an important underlying factor in STD/HIV transmission and control.**

**This paper describes reasons why young females may be motivated to change sexual partners or have more than one sexual partner. The problems appear to be dissatisfaction due to infidelity of the male partner, fear of getting STD from current partner, drunken or unattractive male partner, economic problems, lack of leisure time together, male partner's children with other women, and male partner's relatives' influence. STD/AIDS Control Programs should note that dissatisfaction with partner may be an underlying factor in HIV transmission.**

The elusive nature of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and its associated clinical sequelae, AIDS, has generated widespread consensus about the need for worldwide basic and applied research especially in the area of human sexual behaviour. Most available studies show that transmission of HIV is mainly the result of multiple sexual partners, in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships (Sewankambo et al. 1987; Piot et al. 1988; WHO 1990; Serwadda et al. 1992). Multiple sex partnership has a significant role in the evolution of the HIV epidemic and it occurs in several forms: a person may have several sexual partners concurrently or one after another through divorce, separation, widowhood or inheritance.

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Although the major goal of the AIDS Control Programme is to reduce incidence and prevalence of risky sexual behaviour, Uganda has little idea of the underlying causes of risky sexual behaviour and their prevalence levels. For instance, little is known about why people choose to change their sexual partners or to acquire them in sequence. What are the

motivating factors and the root cause of decision change? Underlying factors in the persistent risky sexual undertakings have not yet been adequately addressed. Because of this gap, risk perception is still very low and risky sexual behaviour still rampant, thus posing continuous challenges to AIDS control programs.

Multiple sexual partnership including that arising from widowhood may be due to unstable sexual relationships which are not well documented in Uganda. Uganda is a multi-ethnic nation consisting of Bantu and Nilotic ethnic groups. Because of this and the forces of modernization, sexual practices are likely to vary amongst the various groups. For instance, among the Ganda and Soga Bantu tribes elongation of the labia as well as musical cries of the female partner '*okusikina*', and among the Nyankore the rhythmic digital manipulation of the penis around the vulva are reported as preconditions for marital sexual satisfaction and its stability. Other tribal entities as well as urban groups have various ways of ensuring sexual satisfaction and stability of relationships but little is written down. These have in the past been passed on to the new generations through the paternal aunts (*senga*) and uncles (*kojja*) (Nabaitu 1995; Adekun et al. 1995).

There is a need to bridge this gap to help STD/AIDS control programs to redesign their approach to the prevention and control of HIV/AIDS.

Ethnographic studies that address sexual practices and in particular factors in sexual partner instability among young single persons are scarce, and those that are available focus mainly on marital instability (Kisekka 1973; Mutunzi 1977; Laker 1989; Nabaitu 1995). According to these studies, the major factors in marital instability include sexual dissatisfaction, alcohol-related problems, mobility, infertility and sexually transmitted diseases. A partner who is not sexually satisfied loses interest in the partner and looks for a new lover who will satisfy him or her.

This paper describes personal and non-personal factors which influence and motivate females to change their sexual partners concurrently or consecutively, or rebound to previous sexual partners. The study puts into perspective the high rates of multiple sexual partner networks as background factors in HIV propagation.

## Methods

The data used are from a pilot study of a planned main study entitled 'A Time Series Study of Sexual Behaviour among Young People, and Underlying Factors in Partner Instability', to be conducted later in Uganda by the authors. The methodology was tested using 42 randomly selected female students in tertiary educational institutions in Kampala. Information was collected using two main instruments: true story writing and incomplete sentences.

Participants were randomly selected using pieces of paper bearing numbers. Those who got the pieces of paper bearing the 42 predetermined numbers were asked to participate in the study after an initial education and dialogue with the group. Each respondent received a set of questions on sexual issues sealed in an envelope. The sealed envelope also contained a stamped envelope with the address of the researcher; respondents were asked to use this to send their responses back to the researcher. Respondents were advised to answer each of the questions confidentially as individuals and give their true sexual life histories. Even those who declined to answer were encouraged to post the questions back giving reasons why they were unwilling to answer the questions. The responses received were edited, coded and analysed by the authors.

## Results

Table 1 shows that out of the 42 respondents, two persons declined to give answers, 22.5 per cent had two or more sexual partners, 20 per cent had acquired new sexual partners in the

previous three months of whom five had resumed active sexual relationships with former sexual partners. Two respondents aged 18-20 years stated they were still virgins, while ten had one sexual partner in their lifetime, 18 had 5 to 9, and eight had had 10 or more sexual partners in their lifetime. The sexual partners of two respondents had died in the previous three months but the cause of death was not named.

**Table 1**  
**Numbers of current and lifetime partners by age of respondent**

Number of partners	Age of respondent			Total
	15-19	20-29	30-39	
<b>Current partners</b>				
None	3	0	0	3
1	0	10	18	28
2+	0	5	4	9
No response	0	1	1	2
Total	3	16	23	42
<b>Lifetime partners</b>				
None	2	0	0	2
1	1	5	4	10
2-9	0	9	12	21
10+	0	2	5	7
No response	0	1	1	2
Total	3	17	22	42

Case histories of nine respondents are given below to highlight the underlying issues contributing to female partner instability.

**Case histories**

*Case 1:* Female, 27, never married. Currently has six sexual partners; has had 30 partners in her life; has dropped four partners and acquired two new ones in last three months. She loves X because he is handsome; she feels sexual life with X would be improved if they had money.

*Case 2:* Female, 36, married in polygamous union. Currently has three sexual partners; has dropped one and acquired two new ones in last three months; the two new partners were former sexual partners (resumed relationships); has had 12 sexual partners in her lifetime. She prefers monogamous marriage because she would be having sexual intercourse with husband as many times as she wants. What she would like most of married life is complete sexual satisfaction. The worst experience she has had in sexual life is when the husband brought another woman into the house. What she does not like of sexual life is when the husband spends a night out of the home. The husband at times comes back drunk and incapable of erection. She feels sexual life would be improved by foreplay or romancing to put her in the mood.

*Case 3:* Female, 30, married in monogamous union. Currently has two sexual partners; has had 15 sexual partners in life. She wants to leave the current husband because he is not presentable and does not make her happy; she does not enjoy sex with the husband.

She has acquired a new sexual partner in the last three months; she prefers sex with the new sexual partner because he is young, active, handsome and knows how to romance; they first have a beer and romantic foreplay. She does not like sex without foreplay. She feels the best thing about sex life is intimacy but only gets this occasionally, especially after misunderstandings with husband. She feels that sex life with the husband would improve if he looked smart, if they had leisure time in bars and attended concerts together. The worst experience she has had in her sexual life is when she played sex with someone who had a big penis.

*Case 4:* Female, 21, single after separation. Currently has two sexual partners; has had four partners in life. One of her current partners is a former sexual partner (resumed relationship); she has acquired two new partners in the last three months.

*Case 5:* Female, 21, single after separation. Currently has three sexual partners; has had four partners in life; has acquired two new partners in last three months. One of her new partners is a former sexual partner (resumed relationship). She has sexual satisfaction within the resumed relationship because the man is quite capable and knows how to play it. She has no regrets about separating from her husband because she had sound reasons for doing so.

*Case 6:* Female, 30, widow. Has had three sexual partners in life. She has lost a sexual partner (husband who was studying abroad) in the last three months. She has not acquired a new sexual partner and has no interest in acquiring one.

*Case 7:* Female, 40, divorced because partner brought home a second wife; no regrets. Sex was unpleasant because the partner was becoming weak.

*Case 8:* Female, 20, never married, still virgin.

*Case 9:* Female, 18, never married, still virgin, not yet in need of a partner.

What they liked most about sexual life were sexual satisfaction during intercourse, romancing or foreplay, intimacy or closeness to each other, faithfulness, enjoyment and pleasure, and to have children. Two respondents said that they liked nothing about sexual life. From the responses, there is an indication that young females liked sexual intercourse.

Most of the respondents described sexual intercourse as the best moment in life especially at climax and if both partners reach orgasm at the same time. It cools off the tensions, refreshes and makes one happy. Through this experience, a woman is relieved of worries and boredom, and feels good. It is a moment of sweet memories.

On the other hand, the most influential factors in male partner selection include personal characteristics such as age, appearance, being handsome and well dressed, being trustworthy, determination, patience and first sight impression, followed by economic benefits; and social-cultural factors such as having some things in common, belonging to the same ethnic group and having the same educational level. Loneliness was also named as a factor which can motivate a woman into love affairs.

Several respondents (37%) were dissatisfied with their sexual life and wished to change their sexual partners. The following were the most frequently mentioned reasons for dissatisfaction: male partner being unfaithful, jumpy and having many sexual partners; male partner comes back drunk, sleeps and threatens you; male partner is not presentable; does not

make her happy; lack of romance or foreplay; too much sex; poverty or economic problems; no leisure time together; partner having children with other women; a rough partner.

However, despite the above sexual dissatisfaction, most of the women are not in favour of changing their current sexual partners because of fear of STD/HIV and age limitations. The majority of the respondents (63%) were sexually satisfied and in happy sexual relationships with their current male partners.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The findings of this study suggest that a reasonable proportion (37%) of sexually active young women aged 15-39 years in Uganda are dissatisfied with their sexual relationships, a fact which may partly account for multiple sexual partners and HIV spread. The reasons for dissatisfaction are many. These reasons agree with the findings of past studies conducted on marital instability in Uganda (for example, Kisekka 1973; Mutunzi 1977; Laker 1989; Nabaitu 1995). According to these studies, the major factors in marital instability include sexual dissatisfaction, alcohol-related problems, mobility, infertility and sexually transmitted diseases. Sexual dissatisfaction is caused by weak sexual drive, impotence, STDs, age, poor sexual styles and biological factors among others. A person who is sexually dissatisfied loses interest in the partner and soon looks for a new lover who satisfies her.

The paper has highlighted the things young women like most about sexual life: sexual satisfaction attained at intercourse, romance or foreplay, intimacy, faithfulness and enjoyment. Also outlined are influential factors in male sexual partner selection: personal characteristics such as age and appearance, economic benefits and socio-cultural factors. Loneliness can also motivate a woman into love affairs. Given the above information, it is necessary to recommend to STD/AIDS control programs that a fresh look at the current approach to the problem is essential. Young people should be educated on how to select sexual partners and be trained in techniques of satisfying their partners sexually. The latter recommendation is not a new African cultural practice, except that the tutors may no longer be the aunts and uncles but non-relatives who may need to use more innovative training strategies to be accepted.

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