Author's response to reviews

Title: Changes in Sexual Behaviour among Young People associated with HIV Prevalence Decline in Zambia

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RESPONSE TO REVIEWERS

Reviewer 2:

Minor Essential Revisions
The English may need some revision. For instance on page 10, first paragraph: it should be "admission to hospital" and not "hospital admittance". Also Chelstone has been spelled as Chelstone and Chelston. Please be consistent.

Response: This has now been corrected and the language has been copyedited.

Discretionary Revisions

1. Page 11, bottom: this seems to me to be a rather long-winded way of saying that child bearing is the result of sexual intercourse. It should really not be surprising that single women who have had a child have a much higher risk of HIV than single women who did not have a child and that the difference in HIV risk was much smaller in married women. Married women are sexually active, single women may or may not be sexually active.

Response: It may be obvious that single women who have had a child have a much higher risk of HIV than single women who did not have a child, but we would like to spell it out. We therefore prefer to keep these sentences.

2) Page 13, last sentence of first paragraph. I would be more cautious about interpreting the "decline" in HIV prevalence among "virgins". First of all numbers are small. Secondly HIV in virgins is evidence that there is a problem with the validity of reported sexual behaviour. However it can not be taken as a measure of the bias. The prevalence of HIV is not only determined by sexual activity (yes or no) but also by the risk taking. Young people may be very sexually active and deny it, yet be consistent condom users and have no HIV infection.

Response: Deleted the sentence “When pooling data from urban and rural men and women it was found that the risk of HIV infection for “virgins” was lower in 2003 than in 1999 (AOR 0.35 [0.16-0.76]).” on p 13

3) Page 15, last paragraph: the references 20-25 seem to be out of place here.
Response: Thank you for discovering this error. The articles referred to were not relevant and I cannot explain why these references were there. The references have been removed.

4) Page 17, last sentence of first paragraph. I do not understand this sentence. This sentence seems to imply that the authors feel young women with casual partners may be more conscious of the risk of HIV, because society condemns this behaviour. Is that correct?

Response: The sentence has been rephrased: “Young women with casual partners are probably more conscious of their own risk of becoming HIV infected as casual sex is considered especially inappropriate for them and is condemned by society.”

5) Page 18, fourth last sentence: see my comment n°2.

Response: We have deleted the sentence “The decline in HIV prevalence among self-reported virgins could indicate less reporting bias in 2003.” on p 18.

Reviewer 3:

Minor Essential Revisions

1) Discussion, page 15
“… This supports the interpretation that delaying the first pregnancy may be an effective preventive strategy [20-25] …”

The sentence could read: “… Delays in first pregnancy may be interpreted as strong evidence for the use of an effective preventive strategy [20-25], such as abstinence, or condom use, or avoidance of marriage to high risk partners …”

Response: Suggestion accepted

2) Discussion, page 15
“… The finding that the proportion of those postponing the first birth did not differ by HIV status …” The intention was probably to make a more general statement describing the direction of change, e.g. “… The finding that proportions with first birth before age 20 declined for both HIV positive and negative …” and figure 2 should have a second panel showing how the proportions ever given birth changed among HIV positive women to substantiate this claim. It is likely that the proportions ever giving birth are higher all round for the HIV positive (there are no virgins in this group), so any stronger statement about the fall in this proportion being independent of HIV status would need to clarify whether the fall was measured in absolute or relative terms.

Response: The sentence on p. 11 has now been rephrased: “The declining proportion of women who had given birth among urban and higher-education groups was also observed among both HIV positive and HIV-negative women (Figure 2 and Table S4).” and the sentence on p 15: “The finding that the proportion who had ever given birth among young women declined among both HIV positive and HIV negative urban women indicates that decreased fertility among young women was more likely due to behaviour change than to the physiological effect of HIV infection.” The numbers for HIV positive young women are small, so we have chosen not to compare the decline in proportions after all. Figure 2 now has a second panel showing proportion ever given birth for HIV positive women.
3) Discussion, page 16
insert the capitalised words to clarify the meaning of "frequency"
“… Condom use at the last sexual intercourse is often employed as a POPULATION LEVEL indicator of frequency, …”

Response: Done

4) Discussion page 17
“… In a society where people from different educational levels are part of the same social networks, distinct infection patterns reflect …” What is the basis for this implied claim about Zambian society? The implied claim can be avoided by simply re-phrasing: “… If people from different educational levels are part of the same social and sexual networks, distinct infection patterns reflect …”

Response: Suggestion accepted

5) Discussion page 19
Incorrect use of the concept of linearity is something I previously commented on.
“… such inconsistencies disturbing trend linearity may indicate …” This phrase should read something like: “… such inconsistencies in the direction of change may indicate …”

Response: Suggestion accepted

6) Furthermore, reversal of trend direction can only be identified if information is available from 3 data points, you cannot “blame” the middle point – if the first point had been much higher there would be a consistent downward trend, if the last point was much lower there would be a consistent upward trend. So the next sentence should not single out 1999, it should simply say: “… these inconsistencies are unlikely to be due to misunderstandings of the questions as they were formulated in the same way in all three surveys …”

Response: Suggestion accepted

7) And the last sentence should say “… for most indicators we observed consistent direction in trends or stability, which increases the likelihood that these reflect real behaviour patterns …”

Response: Suggestion accepted

Discretionary Revisions
Needs some attention to grammar - e.g. "data" is a plural word; check for missing prepositions and correct prepositions following certain verbs

Response: The language has again been copyedited and is hopefully acceptable now.

RESPONSE TO EDITORS

I am sorry that the language was not yet up to your standards as it was copyedited before the resubmission. We have now also received help from the 'Manuscript Presentation Service'
based at the University of Aberdeen and hope that the language is acceptable after two rounds of copyediting.

I have done my best to ensure that the manuscript conforms to the journal style and to correctly format the files. Please let me know if it is not yet according to your wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Ingvild Fossgard Sandøy