Reviewer’s report

**Title:** Sexual Practices among Adolescents in Tanzania

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**Reviewer:** Kåre Moen

**Reviewer’s report:**

Review of a submitted paper titled “Sexual Practices among Adolescents in Tanzania”

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Level of interest 3
Quality of written English 3
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Confidential comments to editors
( None)

Reviewer’s report

In compliance with the instruction given to the reviewer, each comment has been categorized as indicative of the need for either a “Major Compulsory Revision, a
“Minor Essential Revision” or a “Discretionary Revision”.

The category of each comment is specified with a code inserted in parentheses at the end of it, as follows:

- (MCP) = Major Compulsory Revision
- (MER) = Minor Essential Revision
- (DR) = Discretionary Revision

Overarching comments

1. There are some overlaps between the paper under review and a paper previously coauthored by the investigators [ ], but the findings reported in the previous paper have not been referred to in the text under review, nor is the previous article cited in the reference section of the present paper. This needs to be corrected, and it ought to be laid out explicitly how the two articles relate to each other, how they differ, and what new angles and insights the second article adds. See also item 2 and 5 below, and table 1. (MCP)

2. The two papers appear to deal with the same data material, but in the present paper (the one under review here), one group of respondents have been excluded from analysis, namely married out-of-school adolescents (yielding a sample size in the article under review which is somewhat smaller than the one discussed in the first article; 2,749 participants vs. 2,928). The rationale for this exclusion of respondents is not explained. Such an explanation would seem warranted. (MCP)

3. Furthermore, it appears that not all married respondents were excluded from the analysis in the new article, but only married individuals among out-of-school adolescents. Married in-school youth, on the other hand, appear to have been included. (“For the purpose of this paper, we used data for all in-school and for only unmarried out-of-school adolescents”). The rationale for this imbalance between study groups would seem to warrant explanation. (MCP)

4. If there are in fact married respondents in one of the study groups, it appears incorrect to state (later in the article) that the results pertain only to “unmarried adolescents” or “premarital sex”. Furthermore, the potential to make comparisons between married and unmarried adolescents would appear to be lost. Such comparison would have added to the quality and interest of the paper under review (see also the next item). (MCP)

5. Table 1 attempts to list areas in which the two papers do and do not overlap. Some of the findings reported in the paper under review have not been discussed in the previous article, namely (a) the proportion reporting experience with four different sexual practices (vaginal intercourse, masturbation, oral sex and anal intercourse), (b) the age of the partner at first sexual experience, and (c) the proportion reporting various degrees of forced sex. All of this appears to be previously unreported information. The other topics reported on in the paper under review have been addressed in some way or another in the previously published article (albeit in a sample where unmarried out-of-school adolescents
were included; ref item 2 and 3 above). This would need to be pointed out, especially since there are considerable differences between the two papers with regard to reported results. One example pertains to the number of multiple concurrent sex partners the adolescents report. Whereas the paper under review states that 14.8 per cent of unmarried adolescents have “multiple sexual partners”, 24.5 per cent of the respondents in the previously published article appear to have reported the same (computed by this reviewer from the data presented in table 2 in that article). This considerable difference needs discussion. The gap appears to be due to differences between married and unmarried individuals (with married adolescents appearing to being considerably more likely to have multiple concurrent partnerships). However, in order to make comparisons between married and unmarried subjects, it is important that the married and unmarried respondents be identified and analyzed separately in both study groups (and not only among out-of-school respondents, ref item 3 above).

(MCP)

Re: Abstract

6. The expression “adverse sexual behaviors” is used. It could be interpreted in a variety of ways, and could potentially also be taken as a rather judgmental comment. It should therefore be avoided. I assume that the concern here is sexual practices that involve risk to the persons engaging in it. (MER)

7. It is stated that “Some of the reported sexual practices include vaginal sex, masturbation, oral and anal sex” (emphasis added). My impression is that those four sexual practices were the only ones the informants were asked about. If so, that should be stated, and the expression “some of” avoided. (MER)

8. I think it is not possible based on the study to “conclude” that “Specific campaigns through youth’s clubs and work-groups may be used as mode of health instructions to advocate for safer sex” (mentioned under the heading “conclusion”). As far as I can see, this was not among the topics addressed by the study, and no such conclusion is therefore warranted. (MER)

9. The term “health instructions” is not clear (can one instruct health?) and should be avoided. (DR)

Re: Background

10. It is stated that “From the available literature in Sub-Saharan Africa,[... sexual practices other than penetrative vaginal sex] are reported to be uncommon and considered deviant in the continent” [7]. Although I have not been able to access more than the abstract of article [7], I get the impression that it discusses a specific material from Matabeleland, and cannot without further qualification be used to portray the entire African continent regarding these issues. Furthermore, although “uncommon” is a relative term, it is not correct that all the available literature from Africa gives the impression that sex other than penetrative vaginal sex is “uncommon and considered deviant” here. If the paper under review is to make comments about sexual practices other than penetrative vaginal sex, it is necessary that a proper literature review be carried out (and there are several relevant articles and books to review). As an example of a study that gives a
different impression, let me mention one that was carried out in Tanzania and published in 2006. It found that 7.1 per cent of STI patients in Dar es Salaam had a “homosexual or bisexual preference” (8 per cent among males) [ ]. (MCP)

11. Instead of “homosexuality and heterosexuality anal intercourses” use “homosexual and heterosexual anal intercourse”. (MER)

12. It is stated that the study was conducted in “areas served by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania”. It would have been useful to know how the area is served by the church and the link between that service and the study which is reported. (DR)

13. The expression “improving [...] reproductive and sexual health needs” is used. I think it is not the needs that need improvement, but potentially rather the reproductive and sexual health. (MER)

14. It is stated that one “random sample consisted of 100 secondary school adolescents”, but the text goes on to say that “These were mainly from form 3 and 4”. It is not clear how a random sample of secondary school students could yield a sample that mainly consisted of students in form 3 and 4. Normally, a random sample of secondary school students would be expected to yield students from form 1 and 2, as well as from form 3 and 4. The sample consequently appears to be skewed and this is a situation that would need explanation. (MCP)

15. Out of school students were interviewed at home after permission had been given by their parents/guardians. Although involvement of parents/guardians was probably warranted, this raises the question whether something at the same time was done to secure confidentiality for respondents in the home setting. If so, what? (MER)

Re: Results

16. It is stated that “A total of 2928 adolescents responded to the questionnaire”, but it is not mentioned how many who were invited to take part and how many declined participation? That would be an interesting piece of information in a study about adolescent sexual practice. (MER)

17. It is referred to the mean age of study participants (and the SD of the mean age). It does, however, appear to be necessary to know more about the age distribution of the study population, particularly since it is stated that most of the secondary school students were in form 3 and 4. If data are lacking for students in form 1 and 2, that lack needs to be mentioned, quantified and explained, and the consequences of it discussed. (MCP)

18. It may be expected that there could be marked differences between 10-year-olds and 19-year-olds regarding sexual experience and practice, but no breakdown on age has been made for any of the sexual practice variables described in this study. It is recommended that such a breakdown be included. (MER)
19. It is stated that “A total of 441 (16.3%) of all study participants who responded to the question, reported to have ever masturbated”. It would have been useful here to know what proportion did not respond to this question. The same applies to the questions about vaginal, oral and anal sex. (MER)

20. It is reported that 3.6% had ever had anal sex, but not whether it was receptive or insertive anal sex, and also not whether the partner was of the same or the opposite sex. It should be clarified whether such questions were asked or not. Although it is commendable that a question about anal sex was included in the questionnaire, a lack of follow-up questions of this type should be acknowledged as a weakness of the present study. Doing so may help future researchers seek more detailed information. (MCP)

21. The percentages cited in parentheses in the following sentence appear high and it is not clear what denominators have been used to calculate them,”More females, 76 (81.7%), than males 32 (66.7%), reported to have been raped”. This should be reviewed and clarified. (MCP)

22. The following sentence should be rewritten for clarity: “When these unmarried adolescents were stratified by school status, only females significantly reported older partners than themselves.” (DR)

23. The expression “significantly reported” does not seem to make sense. (DR)

24. It is not clear what constitutes the denominator in the following sentence: “Only about half, 371 (47.9%) of unmarried adolescents, reported current use of a condom during the most recent sexual act”. (MCP)

25. It is also not immediately clear how the proportions in the subsequent sentence were calculated: “More of the out-of-school adolescents, 371 (47.9%) significantly reported current condom use than their in-school counterparts, 181 (42.2%) (p < 0.01)”. The first statistic seems to be the same as that mentioned in item 24, but with a different explanation. Regarding the second statistic: there were 2021 in-school students, but 181/2021 is not very close 42 per cent. (MCP)

26. Since this is the second of two papers about the same study in the same population, and where some of the same variables have been discussed in both papers, a discussion about differing results (and they are sometimes considerable, ref item 5 above) would seem a natural thing to include in the discussion.

27. It is referred to “dangers of anal sex” but that should presumably be “dangers of unprotected anal sex” (MCP).

28. The study is linked to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania and Dan Church Aid. It is not clarified whether these entities have a religious-political agenda regarding sexuality, and – if so – how and to what degree this agenda is promoted and communicated in the area under study. It would be of interest to
include a discussion about how any such agenda might possibly influence the study results.

Re: Conclusion

29. In the paragraph titled “conclusions”, several statements are made that do not appear to be reasonable conclusions based on the work that has been reported. For example:

- Motivation for HIV prevention does not appear to have been studied, yet it is stated as a conclusion that “unmarried youths would like to be safe out of HIV”;

- Knowledge about – and availability of – condoms does not appear to have been studied, yet it is stated as a conclusion that “program efforts among in- and out-of-school adolescents should target wider knowledge of use of condom and increasing condom availability”;

- Efficacy and efficiency of programming aimed at promoting good sexual and reproductive health does not appear to have been studied, yet it is stated as a conclusion that “Specific campaigns through youth’s clubs and work-groups may be used as mode of health instructions to advocate for safer sex”.

Table 1

This table gives an overview of the main findings reported in the article under review [i] and attempts to identify to what degree these variables were also addressed in the previously published article [ii]

- In the left column, the main variables reported on in the article under review have been briefly listed.

- In the right column, an attempt has been made to identify to what degree these variables were also addressed in the previously published article.

The two papers appear to deal with the same data material, but in the present paper (the one which is under review here), one group of respondents have been excluded from analysis, namely married out-of-school adolescents (yielding a sample size which is lower than the one discussed in the first, ref item 2 in the reviewer’s comments). Not all married respondents appear to have been excluded from analysis, however (ref item 3 in the reviewer’s comments).

Main findings reported in paper under review Comparison with previously published article

- Proportion reporting four different sexual practices (vaginal intercourse, masturbation, oral sex and anal intercourse) · Not reported on
- Age at first sexual experience, by sex · Age at first sexual experience, overall · Age at first sexual experience, by school status (in or out of school)
- Age of partner at first sexual experience · Not reported on
- Proportion reporting to have experienced various degrees of forced sex · Not reported on
- Number of current sexual partners, overall · Number of current sexual partners,
by sex · Number of current sexual partners, by school status (in or out of school) · The same variables are reported on, but the reported findings differ considerably from the ones reported in the paper under review (possibly a result of the different approach to exclusion of participants in the analysis) · Proportion reporting condom use at last sexual encounter, by school status · The same variables are reported on, but the reported findings differ considerably from the ones reported in the paper under review (possibly a result of the different approach to exclusion of participants in the analysis)

Conclusion

Based on your assessment of the manuscript, what do you advise should be the next step?

# Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest

# An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English

# Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Is it essential that this manuscript be seen by an expert statistician?

# Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests

# I declare that I have no competing interests

References