Reviewer's report

Title: Sexual Practices among Adolescents in Tanzania

Version: 3 Date: 9 June 2009

Reviewer: Kåre Moen

Reviewer's report:

COMMENT 1

Manuscript statement:
"Of concern, are the reported types of sexual practices in the region."

Reviewer's comment:
Are there in fact concerns regarding the types of sexual practices in the region? Or are the concerns rather linked to the fact that some sexual practices are performed in ways that carry risk for adverse health outcomes (e.g. because of lacking condom use)?

COMMENT 2

Manuscript statement:
"Nevertheless, the practice of homosexual as well as heterosexual anal intercourse has been recently reported from different parts of Africa than traditionally contemplated"

Reviewer's comment:
The way this sentence is constructed, it could be interpreted as the authors are of the impression that the occurrence of homosexual and heterosexual anal intercourse is a recent phenomenon in Africa. There is ample reason to conclude that such an impression would be incorrect. Regarding same sex sexualities, for example, there is now a considerable body of documentation of such practices throughout African history (a useful overview of relevant historical accounts may for example be found in Marc Epprecht’s book “Heterosexual Africa?”).

COMMENT 3

Manuscript statement:
“Classes 5 to 7 and forms 3 and 4 were believed to maximally capture the desired age of 10 to 19 years of students in schools.”

Reviewer's comment:
It is not so easy to see that a sample that excluded form 1 and 2 students was the best way to “capture” the age range from 10 to 19 year-olds. This should probably be discussed as a weakness of the study rather than a strength.
COMMENT 4

Manuscript statement:
“Table 2 shows types of sexual practices among study participants by gender. Although among all adolescents analyzed, 885 (32%) reported to be sexually active”

Reviewer’s comment:
Table 2 in fact reports a significantly different number and proportion of sexually active adolescents: 1109 (40.3%).

COMMENT 5

Manuscript statement:
“All (885) sexually active adolescents reported vaginal sex. A total of 441 (16.0 %) of all study participants, reported to have ever masturbated, 107 (3.9%) to have ever had oral sex and 97 (3.5 %) anal sex.”

Reviewer’s comment:
Here the denominator changes from the discussion of “vaginal sex” (where “sexually active adolescents” is used as denominator; n = 885) to the discussion of masturbation, oral sex and anal sex (where “all participants” is used as denominator; n = 2749). This denominator change may render the reader with the (false) impression that masturbation, oral sex and anal sex is relatively less common than the data material suggests. If one assumes that the number of sexually active participants is in fact 885 (ref comment 4) a recalculation of the proportions of adolescents having experiences with those four categories of sexual practices (using the same denominator for all) would yield the following picture:

Vaginal sex: 100.0 %
Masturbation: 49.8 %
Oral sex: 12.1 %
Anal sex: 11.0 %

Alternatively, if the denominator is “all study participants”, the comparison between those four categories would be:

Vaginal sex: 32.2 %
Masturbation: 16.0 %
Oral sex: 3.9 %
Anal sex: 3.5 %
Manuscript statement:
“… reproductive health education among adolescents should emphasize on dangers of anal sex; especially when unprotected as one of the high risk practices.”

Reviewer’s comment:
This statement leaves the reader with the impression that there are dangers related to protected anal sex. Is there documentation to support such a claim?

COMMENT 7

It is an improvement that the manuscript now refers to the previously published article based on the same data material and acknowledges that there are differences between the current manuscript and the previously published article regarding (a) the number of reported sexual partners and (b) the proportion of participants that reported multiple partners. The main explanation offered for these differences is that the current manuscript is based on data after improved data cleaning (i.e. more errors have been corrected in the data base). (An additional factor which is mentioned is that the current manuscript excludes married out-of-school adolescents; it is stated that this “may partly” explain the differences).

Errors are part of reality, and it is always an achievement when they can be detected and corrected. In order for the reader to have confidence in the results reported in the current manuscript, however, I believe it would be helpful to show explicitly (e.g. in a footnote) how the improved data cleaning affected the results regarding the proportion of adolescents that have multiple partners, especially since the differences appears to be considerable. As mentioned in my previous review, the reader of the already published article is left with the impression that 25 per cent of adolescents in the study area have multiple sexual partners. The reader of the current manuscript is told that this proportion is in fact 14.8 per cent. What proportion of this difference is due to errors in the previous article? What proportion can be explained otherwise? How should the reader conclude; what is in fact the proportion of adolescents that have multiple partners

COMMENT 8

Regarding the proportion of adolescents that are sexually active, there are still considerable inconsistencies. As I mentioned in my previous review, the previous article leaves the reader with the impression that this proportion is 30.57 %. In the body text of the current manuscript, the proportion is reported as 32 per cent, whereas table 2 in the same manuscript reports it as 40.3 per cent. What is the explanation for these differences? How should the reader conclude; what is in fact the proportion of adolescents that are sexually active?

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field
Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests