Reviewer's report

Title: Sexual Practices among Adolescents in Tanzania

Version: 4 Date: 2 August 2009

Reviewer: Kåre Moen

Reviewer's report:

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS:

COMMENT 1

Manuscript statement (manuscript page 2; "Abstract"):

"This study aims to assess sexual practices among adolescents in Tanzania. [...] A cross-sectional survey was conducted among adolescents, in- and out-of school, aged 10 to 19 in five locations in Tanzania."

Reviewer's comment:

From this sentence the reader would get the impression that this paper deals with all adolescents in the mentioned age bracket. It is, however, reported later in the manuscript that married out-of-school adolescents were in fact excluded from the data analysis on which this paper is based. This exclusion is not trivial and ought to be made explicit whenever the sample is discussed. It represents a denominator difference between this paper and a previously published article based on the same data material (reference 1), and it partly explains marked differences in some key statistics that have been discussed in both papers (see also Comment 5 and 6 below). (A relevant question, however, may be whether it is a good decision to omit the married out-of-school adolescents from discussion in this paper; see Comment 6 below).

COMMENT 2

Manuscript statement (manuscript page 2; "Abstract"):

"Female reported more both penetrative and non-penetrative sexual acts than males."

Reviewer's comment:

This statement seems to disagree with information provided later in the manuscript.

COMMENT 3

Manuscript statement (manuscript p. 4):

"The target population for the study was adolescents (10 to 19 years) who were
attending primary and secondary schools as well as those who were out-of-school."

Reviewer's comment:
Same as comment 1.

COMMENT 4
Manuscript statement (manuscript p. 5):
“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:
As mentioned in previous review rounds, it may not be so easy to see that a sample which excluded form 1 and 2 students from the study was the optimal way to cover (“maximally capture”) the age range from 10 to 19 year-olds.

COMMENT 5
Manuscript statement (manuscript page 6):
"Using the same data set collected for baseline information mentioned above, similar work has been published on risk sexual behaviour and associated factors (5). For the purpose of this paper that aims at examining sexual practices..."

Reviewer's comment:
This statement seems to under-communicate some of the similarities between the previously published article and the current manuscript. Although it is acknowledged that the two papers pertain to the same study in the same population, it is not immediately clear that several of the statistics dealt with in the current manuscript were also reported on in the previous article (e.g. age at first sex, number of current sex partners, and the proportion of adolescents reporting condom use at their last sexual encounter). Regarding these parameters (there are others that were not reported on in the previous article), the main differences between the two papers appear to be that 160 married out-of-school adolescents have been excluded from analysis in the current paper (see also Comments 6 and 8 below) and that some database errors have been corrected since the first article was published (ref. Comment 8 below).

COMMENT 6
Manuscript statement (manuscript p. 6):
"For the purpose of this paper that aims at examining sexual practices, we used same data set but limiting ourselves to all in-school and only unmarried out-of-school adolescents".
Reviewer's comment:

A rationale is not offered for the decision to omit married adolescents from the analysis (a total of 160 adolescents appear to have been excluded) and it may not be immediately clear to the reader that there are good reasons to leave them out of the discussion. On the contrary, a presentation of overall data on sexual practices would seem to be a natural first step in a paper like this, followed by a discussion of differences between population sub-groups, for example the differences between married and unmarried adolescents.

COMMENT 7

Manuscript statement (manuscript page 7):

"Of all sexually active adolescents, 260 (29.4 %) reported masturbation, 72 (8.1%) reported oral sex and 66 (7.5%) anal sex."

Reviewer's comment:

In previous drafts of this manuscript, these data (both absolute and relative figures) have been cited differently for the mentioned sexual practices. The number of participants having experience with masturbation has consistently been cited as 441, but is now reported as 260, the number having experience with oral sex used to be reported as 107 (now 72), and the ones with anal sexual experience were previously reported as 97 (now 66). I assume that the changes in the latest draft of the manuscript are the result of corrections/improvements, but it would seem important to double check this since the departures from earlier versions of the manuscript are considerable.

COMMENT 8

Manuscript statement (manuscript p. 8):

"Of 785 (100 sexually active adolescents did not respond to this question) reporting number of current sexual partners, 116 (14.8%) reported having multiple sexual partners."

Reviewer's comment:

As mentioned previously in the review process, there is a considerable difference between the finding reported here (14.8 per cent of sexually active adolescents reporting multiple sex partners) and the corresponding proportion cited in the previously published paper (24.5 per cent of sexually active adolescents reporting multiple partners; reference in footnote 1).

In correspondence related to the review process (see footnote 2), the authors have indicated that the difference has two main explanations:

(i) It is partly a result of the exclusion of married out of school adolescents from analysis in the paper under review. Reportedly, this accounts for 60 per cent of
the difference between the two papers.

(ii) The remaining 40 per cent of the difference is reportedly a result of database-related errors when preparing the previous article (at the time, figure "9" was interpreted as a valid number in stead of as a code for "missing value").

The explanatory footnote the authors have referred to (see footnote 2) seems not to have been included in the latest version of the manuscript. It is recommended that it be included so that the reader will be in a position to comprehend the differences in reported results between the two papers.

The database error that has been detected may strengthen the proposal made in 'Comment 6' above; that the overall prevalences for the sexual practices under discussion be presented and discussed before prevalences for certain sub-groups of the population are dealt with (at the moment the manuscript discusses these statistics only among unmarried adolescents).

Previously in the review process, the authors have indicated that they consider to submit an erratum to the previously published article. This would seem to be a helpful and appropriate step to take.

COMMENT 9

Manuscript statement (p. 8):

"Less than half, 371 (42.0%) of the 885 adolescents who had penetrative sex, also reported current use of a condom during the most recent sexual activity."

Reviewer's comment:

Although all of these 885 adolescents had had penetrative sex at some time in the past, it is not clear whether they in fact had penetrative sex as part of their "most recent sexual activity" (or whether condom use was indeed relevant in that sexual activity).

COMMENT 10

Manuscript statement (p. 9; "Discussion"):

"... self-reported anal sex in this study was less than 4%".

Reviewer's comment:

Earlier in the manuscript, self-reported anal sex is reported as 7.5 per cent (among adolescents who are sexually active). It is not immediately clear what 4 per cent refers to here, but a guess could be that it refers to the proportion of all adolescents that have experience with anal sex (i.e. the denominator includes adolescents who do not yet have any sexual experience). If so, that would come across as a less interesting statistic than the proportion of sexually active youth that have experience with this type of sexual activity.
Manuscript statement (p. 10):

"While the previous article dealt with a sample of in- and out-of-school adolescents, the present article excluded married out-of-school adolescents. This may partly explain differences between the two articles with respect to number of sexual partners; especially among out-of-school adolescents. Nevertheless, differences between the two articles in the proportion of adolescents reporting multiple sexual partners among in-school adolescents was due to improved data cleaning."

Reviewer's comment:
Comments 1, 5 and 6 above would pertain also to the text segment cited here.

FOOTNOTES:


(2) Authors' remark to the reviewer (13 July 2009): "As we mentioned to you earlier, the error was on considering a ‘9’ as a valid number of sexual partners instead of ‘missing’ number of sexual partners. We have accepted to add a footnote in which about 60% of the decline in the proportion of adolescents reporting number of sexual partners is due to excluding married out-of-school adolescents and the remaining 40% due to this correction of valid number of sexual partners.")

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.