Author’s response to reviews

Title: Community perspectives on the extent to which transactional sex is viewed as sexual exploitation in Central Uganda

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Author’s response to reviews:

Dear Editor

We would like to thank you and the reviewers for your careful and considered review of our manuscript. We appreciate your comments which believe have strengthened it. Below we provide a point-by-point response to each of the comments. We have also made changes to our manuscript in tracked changes mode.

Technical Comments:

1. Background - Please rename Introduction to Background.

We have renamed this section background

2. Conclusion - Please include a Conclusions section (with subtitle) as the last section of the text. This should state clearly the main conclusions of the research and give a clear explanation of their importance and relevance. Summary illustrations may be included.
Thank you for noting this. We have renamed our implications section as ‘conclusion’ to make clear that this contains our concluding remarks. As part of this we have also included an explanation of the importance and relevance of our study (page 34).

Editor Comments:

I have received the reviewer reports and assessed your article as well. Both reviewers make substantial suggestions to strengthen your paper before it is suitable for publication. This paper stands to make a valuable contribution to understanding socially constructed conceptions about sexual exploitation in relation to adolescent girls’ and young women’s engagement in age-disparate relationships and transactional sex in Uganda. I have a few comments in addition to those of the reviewers, which I would like you to consider.

Thank you, we welcome your comments

First, a note on your naming of quotes, unsure why they involve the prefix (KaF3-FGD-females-aged 18-24, Kampala). Could drop the KaF3- or explain it if it is relevant, otherwise (FGD, Young women, Aged 18-24 Kampala) is suffice.

Thank you for the opportunity to clarify this. We included the ‘KaF3’ in the quotes in order to reflect the breadth of data that were included in the paper. This is to illustrate that data were included from a range of participant groups and not, for example, all drawn from a single interview or participant group.

As per the Editor’s suggestion, we have removed the prefixes.

Next, I agree with reviewer 1’s comment on ensuring you are clear about when you are using ‘sex’ to refer to females biologically versus ‘women’ or ‘young women’ to refer to gender. As sex is biological and gender is a social construction, it may be important to be consistent in your use of gender terminology, as much of this analysis focuses on social norms and understandings/constructions of what constitutes ‘exploitation’.

Thank you, we have standardised all references to participants’ gender, not sex.

In terms of methods, I’m wondering what theoretical framework or theory was used, or if not used, could the use of one better situate your qualitative analysis? Why not situate your analysis in a theoretical framework, or have it guided by a feminist epistemology? A theoretical position would greatly strengthen and give depth to this qualitative analysis, as it appears your data is quite rich.

Thank you for raising this point. Our analysis was guided by a social constructivist theory through which we focused on how individuals created their reality and viewed their world. Our approach was grounded in the work of Berger and Luckman (1966) who explored reality creation and the influence of individual meaning based on life experiences, societal and cultural expectations, and rules and norms. We found this theoretical position to be especially useful for
exploring emic perspectives of unfair or wrong sex with a variety of participants, particularly when considering the influence of how life experiences, societal and cultural expectations, and rules and norms shape the individual meaning that participants ascribed to various permutations of sex between girls aged below 18 years of age and men aged 10 or more years older. This helped us to access the views and meanings that participants placed on exploitative aspects of transactional sex as well as to explore variations in these meanings and views across participant groups. We have added this detail to our methods section (page 15).

With respect to the richness and depth of your data, as you interviewed both men and women, and individuals across age strata, I’m wondering how age and gender have played more into your analysis and interpretation of these results from a social and cultural contextual perspective in Uganda. Age and gender norms play a large role in eastern Africa with respect to ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ behaviours and with generational differences, there may have been vastly different perspectives given the changing cultural context over time. I think your analysis and discussion begins to untangle this as ‘many AGYW themselves did not necessarily consider transactional sex relationships to be unfair’ and their position and agency was contrasted with older adults, but it could go deeper into a gender-based analysis and with consideration of age and cultural norms and perspectives over generations in urban Uganda. The discussion situates your findings in relation to the literature with respect to transactional sex and adolescent girls and young women, but could really go much deeper.

Thank you for making this important point. In our manuscript we note where perspectives varied by age and/or gender and that otherwise, perspectives were consistent across different participant groups. We have clarified this on page 15 of the manuscript. Where relevant, we have also more clearly drawn out the varying perspectives in the discussion section.

Finally, from a human rights perspective, how do your findings relate to young women’s rights within Uganda and how to ensure their rights are upheld in relation to sexual exploitation, or young women's sexual and reproductive health rights?

Thank you for raising this critical question. Our paper shows areas of contrast and overlap between emic and etic conceptualisations of exploitation, highlighting views that offer promising opportunities for avenues on which to build based on community-based perspectives. It is rights-promoting to elevate the voices and perspectives of members of communities where transactional sex occurs, rather than blindly applying etic perspectives to their lives. We also believe our findings can inform interventions that seek to support AGYW to realise their human, and reproductive and sexual health rights. As these interventions will be based on an understanding of the perspectives of this target population and their communities, we can expect that they will ultimately be more effective in addressing exploitative aspects of transactional sex than would interventions that do not take emic perspectives into account and thus do not align rights discourses and existing local norms in order to close the gap between them. We have included this contribution to our conclusion section (page 34).

Overall, I think this paper stands to make an important contribution to the literature on AGYW and transactional sex and I invite you to revise and resubmit your manuscript responding to the reviewer comments.
Thank you

BMC International Health and Human Rights operates a policy of open peer review, which means that you will be able to see the names of the reviewers who provided the reports via the online peer review system. We encourage you to also view the reports there, via the action links on the left-hand side of the page, to see the names of the reviewers.

Reviewer reports:

Kalysha Closson (Reviewer 1): Overall there are some really great data here and I think the paper has great potential to tell an important story about the complicated nature of transactional sex. Moreover, the authors have included a very important population of men who are engaged in transactional sex with young women, however there was no specific reporting of findings from this group. The framing of emic and etic definitions is confusing and takes away from the overall story. I think it would be beneficial to have the paper framed in a way that the aim is to capture multiple perspectives on transactional sex.

Thank you for this valuable point. This paper is one of a series of papers that will emerge from the study. One of these papers specifically addresses the views of ‘sugar daddies’ (men who have transactional sex with adolescent girls) and we have therefore not included these themes in this paper. We have also added the following text on pages 6-7 to better explain our use of emic vs etic conceptualisations of sexual exploitation:

“Typically, these definitions of sexual exploitation have been defined by multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental organisations and are used to guide their work in many and varied populations and contexts around the world. They represent etic definitions of sexual exploitation which may not therefore necessarily reflect emic views and conceptualisations of any particular community”.

We feel that this framing is important to locate the findings of our study and examine the extent to which a behaviour (transactional sex), which is clearly considered exploitative in etic definitions of sexual exploitation, may also be considered exploitative in emic conceptualisations emerging out of the data from our study communities. We also summarise the similarities and differences between etic and emic conceptualisations of transactional sex in table 3.

Introduction:

The introduction could be restructured to be more clear. Specifically the framing around emic vs. etic definitions is unclear. Where are you getting your etic definitions?

Please see the comment above

Also, the link between child exploitation and what your research actually is looking at is a bit unrelated. A number of the conversations that you studied in your FGDs and interviews also
included adult women. I wonder if the introduction could be re-framed around definitions of sexual exploitation and/or transactional sex more broadly?

Thank you for the opportunity to clarify this point. The background includes definitions of sexual exploitation and transactional sex which is considered exploitative based on these etic definitions of sexual exploitation ie definitions from multilateral, bilateral and NGO agencies. Transactional sex is variously framed in the literature but the framing of transactional sex would fall squarely into the category of ‘child sexual exploitation’ when appraised against etic definitions of sexual exploitation. This raises concerns about how effectively interventions that take on etic perspectives, engage with young people and communities in which these perspectives don’t necessarily resonate. In this paper we explore the extent to which transactional sex is considered exploitative based on the emic perspectives of transactional sex that emerged from our data and examine how these relate to etic definitions of transactional sex.

We have added text to our background section to make our framing clearer (page7). We have also made it clearer in the methods section that we explored emic perspectives of sexual exploitation that involved sex with girls under the age of 18 and men 10 years or older (page 12).

You could also bring in a broader conversation around gender equality and health and mention international targets around gender equality.

This is a useful and interesting suggestion which we will consider for future publications arising from this study. We however feel that it is beyond the scope of this particular paper which seeks to explore emic conceptualisations on the extent to which transactional sex is viewed as exploitative.

I think the data from your paper can allow for a unique framing around the need for AGYW's perspective when conducting research and implementing interventions and programming around engaging in transactional sex. This can also be discussed in the implications section of the discussion where when aiming to reduce HIV incidence through improved gender equity we need to move beyond a risk-centric lens, understanding that not all forms of transactional sex may be considered exploitative for those involved.

Yes, we agree that this is an important contribution of our paper which we have added text on page 33 to better reflect this in our conclusion (previously labelled implications) section.

Methods:

There are a number of places within the paper that switch back and forth between female and women. I would stick with one. And given that this paper is focused on gender norms I would use the later.

Thank you, we have standardised all references to participants’ gender, not sex.
For the description of your study context are there any references for statements made around self-employment in agriculture and informal sector self-employment.

Thank you for raising this point, yes, there are references that we can include however in doing so, we would identify the specific communities in which the study was undertaken. We have sought to avoid doing this in order not to stigmatise the communities and also to reduce as much as possible the likelihood that any individual may be inadvertently identified.

You sampled adolescents under 18 however it was unclear how the informed consent processed worked within your study.

Detailed on page 13 in the section on ‘ethical considerations’, we note that all adult participants aged 18 years and older provided written informed consent to participate. All young people aged between 14-17 provided written informed assent to participate. For those young people under the care of the Uganda Youth Development Link (UYDEL), UYDEL provided ‘in loco parentis’ consent for them to participate to complement their own written assent. Parents or guardians provided informed consent for the participation of all other young people (those who were not under UYDEL care) aged 14-17 who participated in the study.

How were the topic guides used developed? Who was involved in this process and how did the final themes decided?

Thank you for raising this point. We have added the following text on page 12 to clarify this:

Topic guides were developed based on a review of the literature, and on the study objectives and research questions. They were developed through a collaborative process between the study investigators, staff of UYDEL and the research assistants. The final themes that were decided reflected the key themes that were considered necessary to explore the research objectives and questions.

Did more than one person do the coding of the data?

The coding was conducted by the first author. This has been clarified on page 12. We also had an interpretation meeting with the broader team in order to analyse the initial findings and discuss the emerging themes.

How many men who identified

This question is incomplete

Results:

There are some places in the results (e.g. pg 21 line 55) where you mention results from the discussion and don't provide any quotes. I would ensure that quotes are provided where you discuss results.
Thank you for raising this, we have added more data (pages 21, 25, 27) to better illustrate the points in our results.

In discussion

You start the discussion saying that based on etic definitions of child exploitation that transactional sex would be considered child exploitation. This, however, is not entirely true as there are many different forms of transactional sex, some of which would be considered sexual exploitation.

With apologies, we do not quite follow the above point. Based on the etic definitions of sexual exploitation that we outline in our background, sex with a minor (under the age of 18) in which they receive ‘something’ in return for sexual activity is considered exploitation. With this paper we seek to evaluate the extent to which emic conceptualisations of exploitative aspects of transactional sex match and do not match with etic definitions of sexual exploitation.

I think the discussion and introduction need some reframing and I would remove the framing of etic vs. emic as it is confusing and I think the paper would draw upon how the data collected during this study highlight important differences in the conceptualization of transactional sex that has been previously discussed in the literature of sexual health and HIV among young people in sub-Saharan Africa.

Thank you for raising this point. We have added the following text on pages 6-7 to better explain our use of etic vs etic conceptualisations of sexual exploitation:

“Typically, these definitions of sexual exploitation have been defined by multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental organisations and are used to guide their work in many and varied populations and contexts around the world. They represent etic definitions of sexual exploitation which may not therefore necessarily reflect emic views and conceptualisations of any particular community”.

We feel that this framing is important to locate the findings of our study and to examine the extent to which a behaviour (transactional sex), which is clearly considered exploitative in etic definitions of sexual exploitation, may also be considered exploitative in emic conceptualisations emerging out of the data from our study communities. We also summarise the similarities and differences between etic and emic conceptualisations of transactional sex in table 3.

Comparing perspectives between the different groups interviewed would be interesting to know about in the discussion.

Thank you for this suggestion. We have made this clearer in the discussion by highlighting how perspectives varied by participant groups.
You have a section on the implications of your study but you do not specifically include a concluding statement which would be helpful for readers to understand the main conclusions of this study.

Thank you for noting this. We have renamed our implications section as ‘conclusion’ to make clear that this contains our concluding remarks. As part of this we have also provided an explanation of the importance and relevance of our study (pages 32-33)

Minor:

There are a few places where the reference bracket comes before the period (5). And others where it comes before. (5) Please check the Journal guidelines and go through the manuscript and check for consistency.

Thank you for highlighting this, we have made this consistent throughout

Monica Adhiambo Onyango, Ph.D (Reviewer 2): Please include all comments for the authors in this box rather than uploading your report as an attachment. Please only upload as attachments annotated versions of manuscripts, graphs, supporting materials or other aspects of your report which cannot be included in a text format.

Please see the comments attached. Get somebody to edit the paper for grammar and flow of text

(I have pasted in reviewer 2’s comments below)

Emic perspectives on the extent to which transactional sex is viewed as sexual exploitation in Central Uganda Background information”

- The background is general but should also include the situation of transactional sex in general and specific to AGYW in Uganda.

Thank you for raising this point. We have included specific text and references on transactional sex in Uganda to the background section (page 7)

- Emic and Etic perspectives should be mentioned somewhere in the background and their relevance for this study. The authors begin to mention them in the discussion section which is very late in the document although the title of the paper begins with “Emic Perspective…”

Thank you for raising this important point. We have added the following text to the background to clarify our use of etic vs emic definitions of sexual exploitation (page 6-7).

“Typically, these definitions of sexual exploitation have been defined by multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental organisations and are used to guide their work in many and varied populations and contexts around the world. They represent etic definitions of sexual exploitation
which may not therefore necessarily reflect emic views and conceptualisations of any particular community”.

- Study Objectives: The authors have stated the overall aim of the study. What were the specific objectives or the study questions?

We did not include the specific study objectives or study questions as these guided the overall study, not the specific theme that is discussed in this paper. This paper is one of several that have/will emerge from the study.

- Study context: Line 52: The authors should explain the criteria they used to choose the two study sites. They have explained some characteristics for both sites, but does not explain how these characteristics are related to the study topic.

Thank you for raising this issue. We have added the following on page 9 to clarify this:

The two study sites were chosen to reflect differing contexts to explore whether, the social and structural drivers of transactional sex differed in an urban versus rural setting. They were also settings in which we were confident in the availability and effectiveness of referral services to ensure that we could appropriately respond to any referral that may have been needed.

- Sampling and data collection: Line 21—how did you know that the participants had previously been involved in sex work?

Thank you for the opportunity to clarify this. For one of the FGD’s with young women aged 18-24 years old in Kampala, we sampled from one of UYDEL’s community-based centres which provides services to women who were previously sex workers.

- What sampling methodology did the authors use?

We have added the following to the section on sampling and data collection (page 9): Sampling for all interviews was purposive

- How many participants were in each focus group?

We note on page 10 that FGDs included an average of 9 participants

- Line 54: “Interviews were sex-matched”, please explain what this means in the context of this study

By this we mean that the sex of the interviewers matched the sex of the interviewees. In order to be consistent throughout the manuscript, we have changed this to ‘gender-matched’.

- The authors should describe:
1. how individual participants were identified and selected to the study (the process),

We have added the following detail to page 9:

“All beneficiaries were made of aware of the study and invited to participate. The individuals who were included in this study were selected based on their willingness to take part, their being in the appropriate age category and their ability to provide independent informed consent”.

“Students in the desired age bracket were invited to an information session about the study. Those who expressed an interest in participating were given informed consent forms to take to their parents to confirm their consent to participate. From those who returned the form, individuals were selected to reflect a gender-balanced sample of in-school young people aged 14 years and older”

2. the interview process—where (location) did the interviews take place? How did the authors choose these locations?

Thank you, we have added the following detail on page 11-12 “Interviews were conducted in a private location chosen by the study participant(s) in collaboration with the field researchers. Interview locations were selected to ensure that the discussions could not be overheard by others whilst also being safe and conveniently located. FGDs were conducted in a vacant classroom of a school that was not in session”

3. Was there adequate privacy during the interviews? How was privacy ensured

Please see comment above

- Explain who the field researchers (data collectors) were, how they were recruited. Did they undergo any training for this research? For how long? Outline the pertinent content of training.

Thank you for the opportunity to add more specificity on these issues in the paper. We have added the following detail on page 10: Field researchers “were recruited from members of the social science research staff of MRC/UVRI Uganda. All field researchers” had experience researching sensitive topics including HIV and violence, and of interviewing vulnerable groups including children. “In addition to their on-going training on interview techniques, probing and qualitative research procedures, field researches also underwent an intensive one-week training programme on the aims and objectives of this study, the study tools and procedures, the ethical considerations of this study, the informed consenting procedures and the study’s referral protocol to ensure that any participants who may have required referral support would be appropriately identified and referred.
- How did the authors reach the desired sample sizes? For example how did you decide on the numbers of FGDs and individual interviews to conduct?

Summarised in Table 1 one FGD was conducted with each gender and participant age group in Kampala and Masaka. We also conducted at least 2 IDI’s with each gender and participant age group (please see Table 1). This was determined based on the time and resources availability of the study. Our analysis showed that we reached saturation with this sample

- The sub-title “Ethical considerations” can be moved up, to come before data analysis. In this section (Ethical considerations), please describe data management and how this was done to ensure confidentiality of data and confidentiality.

We have moved the section on ethical considerations and added the following to describe our data management procedures (page 13)

“All FGD and IDI interviews were given a unique identifier number which did not contain any personal data. During the course of the study any handwritten notes were stored in a locked cabinet when not being reviewed by a research team member or before they had been transcribed onto a password-protected computer with any personal identifiers removed. All transcribed interviews were saved onto a password-protected computer without any personal identifiers included. Any data with identifiers, for example the informed consent and assent forms were stored separately from the all other data. Furthermore, all raw data including audio data that had not yet been transcribed or entered into a password-protected computer were located in a secured office and kept in a locked filing cabinet when not on the person of a research team member in the field or while being transcribed.”

- How was the consent administered? Were participants taken to a private space for consent administration?

We have added the following on page 13:

“Informal consent/assent was obtained in the same private location as the interview was conducted and it was emphasised to all participants that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose not to answer any question or to withdraw from the study without giving a reason. They were also assured that their decision not to participate in the study would not affect any services that they might have been receiving in any way.”

Results

- The findings section is very confusing and difficult to follow. Before the heading “Exploitative’ aspects of transactional sex”, have a transactional sentence that summarizes the main themes from the study, then move on to discuss each theme.

Thank you for the opportunity to clarify this this. We did include this summary in the last paragraph on page 16 but to make this clearer, we have moved this to the first paragraph under
the findings section. We have also reorganised some of the text in this section to help the findings flow better.

- Line 41: the sentence that begins with “In general, and across participant groups …”, which groups are the authors referring to? Do these groups also include some of AGYW?

Yes, this is a general summary of the views on the exploitative aspects of transactional sex, we include the views of adolescent girls and young women, adult women, boys, young men and adult men. In each section we then go on to discuss variations in the data amongst participant groups.

- Parts of the results section are one liners followed by quotes. The authors should try and offer more descriptions of the findings. Quotes are good, but the authors seem to be relying on them a lot in the findings section.

Thank you, we have added more descriptions throughout where appropriate although given our focus on emic perspectives, we have sought to give voice to the narratives and views of the study participants.

- Line 47: the subheadings: “Pre-existing status of the girl and a man’s intention for the relationship”, the authors should consider changing the word “pre-existing” to for example “current”

Thank you for this suggestion. We however use pre-existing to reflect the AGYW’s status before the relationship, through which we seek to capture a longer-term perspective of her circumstances, enduring from before the relationship through to the start of the relationship, not just her current status. This could reflect the type of family that she is from, her living situation, her access to resources etc. ‘Current’ status of the AGYW could distort this if, for example, her current circumstances had recently improved but were still precarious.

- Line 53: Can the authors explain, what “a good life” means in this context?

This referred to AGYW who were being provided for by parents or relatives, were in school, had their needs met and were otherwise not struggling in life. This additional detail has been added on page 19

- Line 20, Sub heading: “AGYW’s perceived choice and responsibility for ‘their situation’” does their situation mean involvement in transactional sex or another situation? Consider changing this phrase

This refers to any negative situations that an AGYW may find themselves as part of their perceived choice to participate in a transactional sex relationship. This has been clarified on page 23.
Discussion:

- The authors need to clearly mention from whom (among study participants) were the etic and emic perspectives in this study. It is not clear in the paper which were etic perspectives and which were emic perspectives.

Please see earlier points where we clarify that etic definitions of transactional sex are from multilateral, bilateral and NGO communities.

- Also, what are the main themes from this study? There is one bolded heading: “exploitative” aspects of transactional sex, with several subheadings following.

Thank you for the opportunity to clarify this. We did include a summary of the main themes in the last paragraph on page 16 but to make this clearer, we have moved this to the first paragraph under the findings section. We have also reorganised some of the text in this section to help the findings flow better.

- The findings are also mixed up and not organized in a logical manner. The authors need to discuss the tension of vulnerability and the girls being considered exploitative themselves. Also, include some supportive literature in the discussion section.

Thank you for this suggestion. We have added some text on page 30 to more clearly discuss the tension of AGYW’s vulnerability and their perceived views on whether they consider themselves to be exploited or not. We have also included more supportive literature in the discussion section.