Because of temptations: children, sex and HIV/AIDS in Tanzania
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III CHILDHOOD SEXUALITY IN TANZANIA

The aim of this study is to understand children’s sexual behavior in the Mwanza and Magu districts of northwest Tanzania. Therefore, it is important to consider the daily contexts of children’s social lives and position and the children’s sexual behavior within the local understandings and norms of childhood, gender and sexuality. Sexual behavior is influenced by the meanings and values children learn to attach to sex and sexuality. These are influenced by a complex array of social influences that affect the development of a system of sexual meanings, gender roles and gender identities. This chapter will examine the local Tanzanian understanding of childhood, gender and sexuality based on descriptions of the children themselves of their daily lives, hopes, dreams and concerns\[37\]. The description will also include perceptions of the parents and caretakers in respect to the norms for a child’s upbringing and explanations of childhood sexuality. These descriptions form a framework for the children’s sexual behavior. The main question to be addressed in this chapter is whether childhood sexuality can be seen as a violation or a confirmation of norms and values in social contexts of Mwanza and Magu.

Childhood in Tanzania

Why are those children playing? They should dig!
[Woman’s remark when passing the compound of a street children’s organization where the boys were playing soccer]

Daily lives: Ability and responsibility

Childhood in Tanzania differs from childhood in the West. Unlike most Western children, Tanzanian children often contribute significantly to their household’s economy. School-going children of the families we interviewed in the Mwanza region in 2001 and 2002 spent on average about three hours on weekdays and eight hours on weekend days helping with the household and/or on income generating activities. In both urban and rural areas, all children helped to fetch water and firewood, clean dishes, sweep the house, clean the home

\[37\] In addition to data from the fieldwork in 2006 and 2007 information was used from previous research in the Mwanza region from a study called “Children as Agents in Development” (Van Reeuwijk, 2003). For more detailed information on household economy and related roles, tasks and responsibilities as well as perceptions and prioritization of problems I refer to this report.
surroundings, wash clothes, take care of siblings and/or sick family members, and cooking. In addition to household tasks both boys and girls helped their parents, caretakers and families with income generating activities generally farm work, herding cattle, fishing and helped selling products and other small businesses. Children who did not go to school spent most of their day helping with these tasks. Boys and girls spent an equal amount of time and energy in performing tasks. However, girls were more involved in household tasks while boys were more often in the fields or fishing. Parents and caretakers believed that it was essential for their children to perform these tasks as preparation for their future. However, many also acknowledged that they needed their children to help them provide adequate income to sustain the family. Most families in Tanzania are poor subsistence farmers or have ‘small businesses’ (e.g. selling food or firewood or doing handy work). Sometimes grandparents or childless relatives ask parents if they would allow one of their children to go live with the relative in order to help them with the household and generate income. Indeed, half of the participants of this research said they lived with relatives and not their biological parents. Sometimes this was due to divorce or death or by the request of a relative. In the majority of cases, children said their parent(s) could no longer provide for them and so they were sent to a relative with more resources. While many NGO’s target so called OVC (Orphans and Vulnerable Children), for the children themselves it did not seem to matter whether one is living with parents or caretakers. For children important indicators to differentiate between unhappy and happy children were household poverty, fair treatment, care and attention. These impressions are based on information from discussions and role plays on parents’ and caretakers’ roles in children’s sexual decision-making (see Chapter 4).

The majority of the children did not complain or describe suffering from their responsibilities in the household or work tasks, when we interviewed them. Many children considered it a normal way of life and some were even proud to contribute to the family income or to provide for their own needs if their parents or caretakers were struggling financially. Normally the children did not keep the money they earned by helping their parents, caretakers or relatives. But sometimes children worked for other people, for example in the field or carrying bricks and in these cases they earned money that they could keep. The most frequently mentioned motivation for children to take the initiative to earn money was lack of food (see also Van

38 This corresponds to earlier findings that both parents headed only 58% of the households in certain areas in rural Mwanza and that grandparents headed 12% of the households (Van Reeuwijk 2003a).
Earning money was easier for boys than for girls and, as will be discussed in the next part, some boys used this money to seduce girls.

The responsibilities and the number of tasks for children increase and differentiate with the increasing physical and mental development of the child (Van Reeuwijk 2003a, Varkevisser 1973). Generally, in Tanzania children are not defined by age but by their capacity to assume responsibility. This is particularly noticeable in primary school enrolment. Parents or caretakers will send a child to the first class of primary school when they deem the child ‘ready’ or when they have collected sufficient resources. If the child is physically small for their age or if the child is thought to be too playful or childish their entrance to school might be delayed. Therefore some children enroll at the age of seven while others are not sent until they are 11. It is for this reason that the pupils in school classes often range significantly in age. During this research, we encountered 13 year-old Standard 7 pupils sitting next to 18 year-old classmates. At school, classes consisted of many pupils (between 40 – 100 children per teacher) and materials were scarce and had to be shared. Imprinting through repetition was the teaching style. Teachers were strict and kept children disciplined in order to maintain control. Education is free, but parents or caretakers have to pay for school uniforms, shoes, pens and exercise books, which are considerable costs for many families. If a child lacks one of those materials or looks too shabby, they might be expelled (Rajani et al. 1999).

Children who handle their responsibilities well earn more respect and freedom from their parents or caretakers in regard to decision-making. Responsible behavior and the ability to earn income are seen as signs of maturity. However, most parents are strict about the upbringing of their children and children are not supposed to ‘talk back’ to adults (see previous chapter on adult-child power disparity). Cultural understanding of acceptable authority to exercise with children varies widely (Hart 1997). In Tanzania, respectful behavior from a young person towards an older person is demanded and children have to follow orders from an adult without questioning. If they do not obey these rules for respect, they will be punished. And in most families and schools corporal punishment is the norm (“whipping is a school rule”). Children themselves think corporal punishment is a valid method of discipline. When questioned, however, the children complained about excessive whipping and that adults would not allow them to explain their behavior and punished them when they were blameless.
Children are the only hope of escaping poverty
[Frequent remark of parents in rural areas]

Families in Mwanza and Magu are large and many take care of the children of relatives. An average household has 4-5 children. Many parents hope they will obtain financial help from their children in the future and will depend on this support in old age. Because of the risk of losing children to diseases, parents say they do not want to take the risk of having only one or two children and then losing them. At the same time family planning and contraceptive use is low in Tanzania and a quarter of the mothers in rural Mwanza say they have more children than they can take care of (Van Reeuwijk 2003a). On the other hand, children are regarded as bringing joy to the family and for many parents children are “the only hope of escaping poverty”. Parents and caretakers hope that their children will find a job or a husband or wife who is well-off and provide them with financial security. To increase the chance for their children to succeed, most parents and caretakers are motivated to send their children to school. Both adults and children see education as “the key to a better future” and finishing education as a sign of maturity. Some parents and caretakers see school as a way to prevent their children from loitering on the streets and getting involved in crime and transactional sex. For some, school is thought of as a method to postpone pregnancy and marriage (Van Reeuwijk 2003a).

Tanzanian children feel the expectations and hopes of parents, caretakers, and even communities. Children who are not going to school (the children from Jabali) mention their dream is to one day get the chance to go to school, even when they are too old to enroll. Children who are already in school dream of passing exams and being selected for secondary school. Many children say: “I want to become someone” or “I want to be important” and express their wishes to assist their families. Most children hope that with a secondary education they might ‘escape’ the village and move to the city (in this case Mwanza). Mwanza is perceived as a place with opportunities, money and modernity. But with these hopes and dreams comes a significant concern, the fear of not having the opportunity to attend secondary school.

Most children are aware of the fact that only 50% of the children who enroll in primary school actually finish primary school and only 8% are given the opportunity to go to secondary
school (NBS 2005). Many schoolchildren who are not top of their class know they will probably stay at home after finishing Standard 7, continuing to help their parents or caretakers with their small scale businesses or farming until they are ready to marry and live on their own. Most children said they pray for their parents or caretakers to find money and that they themselves were trying really hard to get high marks and pass the final examinations. Because of this motivation to get into secondary school and because of fun and social activities, the majority of the children valued school as very important. The majority of problems and concerns the children identified were school related. A very pressing problem, according to children, was a lack of food and the sensation of hunger that led to concentration problems, bad school performance, corporal punishment, truancy and school dropout. The children also felt pressure from peers who had dropped out of school and who tried to convince their former classmates and friends to drop out as well. These dropouts told their friends that school was useless and that it did not improve the chance for employment. In addition the dropouts recommended to girls that it was better to try to earn some money or find a boyfriend to get you food or nice things. For boys the recommendation was to use their money earned after dropping out of school to get girlfriends. According to school children, children who drop out of school may join street gangs and harass the children who are going to school, especially the girls. Adults generally blame dropping out of school on the children’s laziness, the bad quality of education, overcrowded classrooms and the failure of teachers to appropriately discipline their students. Teachers on the other hand, believe that the problem of dropouts is related to the parents’ or caretakers’ inability to pay for school related expenses and their perception that education is not important. The children say dropping out is related to hunger, bad school performance, corporal punishment and peer pressure.

Most children who are not, or no longer, going to school support their families until they can marry and live independently. Traditionally, a boy receives a small piece of land from his parents when he is growing up and earns some money farming this land. With this money he can buy materials to build his own hut. After he has accomplished this, he can marry. A girl is selected on basis of good reputation and manners39 and after negotiation between the families. Girls are often perceived as marriageable the moment they finish Standard 7 and do not continue secondary education. If a girl is not attending school she is marriageable when her parents perceive her as ‘grown up’. This is generally defined as having the ability to take care

39 For a description of what is regarded as good manners and good reputation, see Part II.
of the household tasks on her own and to run a household. A bride price is paid in the form of cattle or money to the family of the bride. When asked about the future, many children included a wish to start a family of their own, but only after finishing education and having found a job. Boys and girls mentioned that a life is not complete without children and parenthood was highly valued. Girls, who were out of school and helping their parents or caretakers because of the lack of employment opportunities, hoped to marry a loving man with a job who would provide her family with a high bride price. To increase the chances of marriage and the amount of the bride price that her family can ask, a girl has to guard her reputation and manners. However, virginity does not seem to be expected at the time of marriage by most people (also not traditionally, Varkevisser 1973) and the amount of the bride price is said to mainly depend on how much the man loves the girl and the wealth of his family.

Many young men cannot continue secondary education and do not find official employment. For them it is hard to find adequate financial resources to build a place of their own and support a wife and family. Many of their families have difficulties collecting enough money or cattle to pay a bride price. Therefore many young men have to delay marriage and most men do not marry until their late 20’s. According to Mzinga, this has implications for male identity, because marriage is considered an essential rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood (2002). According to Silberschmidt socioeconomic change affects men’s social value, identity and self-esteem, leading to multi-partnered sexual relationships and sexually aggressive behavior to strengthen male identity and sense of masculinity (2001). When men marry, they marry women who on average are 6-7 years younger than they are (Van Reeuwijk 2003a). If a man has not yet built a place of his own a married couple will move in with the husband’s family. If a couple is not married, but the girl becomes pregnant, she is generally not allowed to move in with the family of the boy until the bride price has been paid. In many cases (pregnant or not) an arrangement is made between the families that the bride price can be paid in installments over time. It is possible that a young man ‘kidnaps’ a girl and they flee the village to live elsewhere, with the plan to return when enough money is collected to pay the girl’s family. These young couples flee to the city in the hope of finding jobs and money. But if something goes wrong and the couple split up or if the man is abusive, the girl or
woman cannot return home because she will be regarded ‘a prostitute’ and bring shame upon her family⁴⁰.

**Sexuality and socialization**

*Gender roles and sexual culture*

As in most of Tanzania, gender roles in the *Mwanza* region reflect the dominance of men over women. Despite efforts by the government and NGO’s to fight gender inequality, local customs tend to discriminate against women. Men are the main decision makers and therefore, control production and distribution of resources (Setel 2001). This power inequity in gender relations translates into an unequal power balance in heterosexual interactions where male dominance also prevails. It is the male partner who makes basic decisions in regard to sexual actions, including whether or not to use a condom (Plummer et al. 2006, Mzinga 2002, Gupta 2000). Because many men give their girlfriends money or gifts in return for sexual favors, male control over sexual decisions is an assumed right. The transactional component to sexual relations is widespread (Dilger 2003, Nnko & Pool 1997, Wamoyi et al. N.d. a and b, Luke & Kurz 2002). This is also true for younger boys and girls (see Chapter 6). Receiving money, gifts or favors in return for sex is the norm for non-marital relationships. Not receiving something in return for sex is viewed as being used and humiliating to the girl, or a sign that the girl is cheap which is damaging for the girls’ reputation. In this respect, receiving money has a symbolic meaning for the girls’ self-worth and as an expression of the man’s love for her. On the practical side, this monetary exchange is an important motivator for girls to engage in sexual relationships. This is due to many reasons ranging from poverty and survival, to the need for capital to start a small business, the desire for status and possessions or for non-essential consumables like nice clothes and beauty-products (Wamoyi et al. N.d. (b), Nnko & Pool 1997, Luke & Kurz 2002). In general, sex is regarded as a female resource that can be exploited (Wamoyi et al. N.d. (b), Wight et al. 2006) and sometimes is explained as a consequence of adapting to modernization and as a motivation of women to strive for individual profit (Dilger 2003). According to Wight et al. (2006) and Wayomi et al. (N.d.(b)) there are ideas of romantic love, but in many sexual encounters the meaning of sex is more

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⁴⁰ The option of kidnapping was mentioned during some FGD’s with young men and women in the villages. The information about abuse and not being able to return home comes from personal stories of some young women in the slums of *Mwanza City.*
instrumental; to satisfy feelings of desire, to boost masculine esteem and as a resource to be exploited. Yet at the same time the children disapprove of this instrumentality and sexual relationships are thus rendered morally ambiguous. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 will provide an in-depth discussion of the role and meaning of transaction, peer pressure, love and expectations in the Tanzanian children’s sexual experiences.

Transactional sex increases vulnerability to HIV infection, because affluent men are more desirable to girls and women. These men are often a bit older and able to ‘afford’ multiple partners and therefore more prone to HIV infection. Transactional sexual relationships are usually short lived and characterized by multiple partners and form a further barrier for condom negotiation (Wamoyi et al. N.d.(b)). In Tanzania HIV prevalence increases as educational level and wealth increase (TACAIDS 2005). The use of condoms in the northwestern part of Tanzania appears to be low, due to associations of condoms with promiscuity, reduced male sexual pleasure, low risk perception, dynamics of gender and power and cultural values concerning meaningful, decent or natural sex and reproduction (Plummer et al 2006), and including the strong association of the sexual act with unhindered male ejaculation (Dilger 2003).

Sexual socialization: Parental views and concerns

You know when a daughter is getting involved; she becomes proud

[Father mid 40’s, raising 6 children]

Sexual activity of men, women, adolescent boys and girls is generally seen as ‘natural’ and perceived as inevitable unless prevented, by adults (Wight et al. 2006) and children (Part 2 introduction). Yet sexual activity for children is deemed undesirable. Parents and other adults try to control and restrain children’s sexuality by avoiding discussions about sex with children and therefore, this topic is taboo. Furthermore, parents and caretakers limit interactions between boys and girls in an attempt to regulate children’s sexuality. Even if a boy and girl are seen talking together in the street they might get punished or beaten by their parents. There are clear norms for school pupil abstinence, female sexual respectability and religious norms for monogamy and abstinence until marriage (Wight et al. 2006). Ideally boys and girls abstain from sex until marriage, but this seems to be an expectation for Tanzanian girls more than for Tanzanian boys. The norm (and thus parent and caretaker expectation) for boys is to move out of the house when they become financially independent: “Only when he is stable he
can start looking for a spouse”. Girls stay with their family until they get married. A boy is supposed to be the one who looks for a suitable girl and to approach the family of the girl ‘to introduce himself’. As a father commented: “He should tell about his family background. Then we send someone to his village to investigate behind his back, to check if what he says is true.” Girls are not allowed to go out to look for a potential husband, the “culture forbids it”. Because of these social rules and the norms about school pupil abstinence and female sexual respectability many parents and caretakers are strict with their children and in particular with their daughters:

I do not allow my sons and daughters to have friendships with the opposite gender. Pregnancy spoils the education and the reputation of the family, so you have to monitor the behavior of your daughter; for instance with regard to when she comes home. I’m strict on my sons too, but with boys it’s a bit difficult. If you tell them this, they will do the opposite. My son likes to play football outside and gets influenced by his friends and then he doesn’t want to come home in time and comes home late. Girls do not do games outside, they are kept inside – that’s the culture. So for girls it’s harder to escape.

[Father, mid 40’s, raising 6 children]

Parents and caretakers told us that culture forbids talking about sex directly with their children or allowing the children to initiate a conversation about sex. If children talk about sex or show ‘bad behavior’ such as showing in public that they have a boy- or girlfriend, this is regarded as one of the most disrespectful actions that a child can take against their parents or caretakers. This is one of the reasons that parents and caretakers fear talking ‘openly’ about sex to their children or allowing them to interact with the opposite sex:

You cannot allow as a parent, because then they will do it openly. It’s better if they do it behind your back. Otherwise they might even bring a boyfriend or girlfriend home and that means they disrespect me as their parent.

[Father, early 30’s, raising 2 children]

Many parents and caretakers are aware that this attitude leads to secrecy rather than to abstinence and that children hide their sexual relationships from them. Therefore many parents and caretakers find it essential that their children receive sexual education and are taught how to respond to being approached and peer pressure. However, due to traditional taboos, Christian values and ideas about respectful interaction between members of different age groups and gender, parents and caretakers say they feel unable to do the sexual education themselves. In the Mwanza region we found no evidence of traditional sources of sexual information like initiation rituals. This corresponded with published literature reports that among the Sukuma people (the main tribe in Mwanza region) sexual initiation rituals were not
common historically (Allen 2000). However, Varkevisser (1973) referring to Cory (1953) mentions that in the past boys and girls would leave the homestead upon attaining physical maturity. Boys would sleep in collective sleeping huts and girls would move in with a grandmother. Young men would visit the girls at night. The grandmother was seen as best placed to teach a girl how to prevent or abridge unwanted pregnancy and to prevent her for falling in love with any particular lover. But already in the early seventies the collective sleeping places were “a phenomenon of the past” (1973:268). A decrease or disappearance of traditional sexual training (called jando / unyago) to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood around the age of 13 has been noted in other parts of Tanzania (Dilger 2003, Fuglesang 1997). New socio-economic patterns, rural-to-urban migration and the disruption of families due to diseases and divorce are all believed to be reasons for this decline (Mzinga 2002). Hence, many parents and caretakers expect schools to take on the responsibility of providing children with sexual information41.

Only when parents notice that their children are ‘behaving badly’ does a father warn his son or a mother warn her daughter. These warnings are limited to “Don’t get involved”; “You’ll end up like those street kids”; “You should study first” and pointing out unwelcome consequences like pregnancy, being kicked out of school and embarrassment to the family. But some parents and caretakers indicated that there was not much they can do if their child decided to continue: “If they do not listen, you leave them; there is nothing you can do”.

Parents and caretakers mentioned that they noticed if their children were getting involved in sexual relationships. If a girl had money or new equipment for school or clothes, this was considered a sign. Their daughter would become ‘proud’. “She would answer back to her parents as if they were her peers. She would become disrespectful”, mentioned a mother of five children. Boys and girls are said to no longer “want to sit at home”, “hear about the word of God” and “make up excuses to go out”, according to parents and caretakers from the Nyahali village.

The degree to which parents and caretakers expected schools to give information about sex and sexuality differed. Some parents and caretakers were of the opinion that teachers should

41 This corresponds with the findings of Fuglesang (1997: 1249) and the Tanzanian 2005 Demographic and Health Survey, where 7 out of 10 adults reported support for teaching children, from ages 12-14, about condom use to prevent AIDS.
be very open about sexual issues. They argued that girls who were not well educated about sex ended up pregnant. Yet other parents, caretakers and many teachers were against giving too much information (for instance about condoms), because this was believed to encourage children to engage in sex. Sexual education was being taught in the primary schools where this research was conducted. However, the child informants complained that the information they received was “only in overview”, and limited to scientific information about reproduction and HIV/AIDS. One parent commented:

Teachers don’t bring the topic the right way, they leave question marks. It is because of these question marks that children become curious and want to find out.

Like parents and caretakers, teachers are products of the same Tanzanian socialization that inhibits parents and caretakers from discussing sex with children, unless they can distance themselves and approach the topic as a purely academic subject. This reaction was similar to findings in Kenya (Mbugua 2007).

Parents and caretakers we spoke to perceived that children engage in sexual relationships at earlier ages compared to the past and they contributed this to poverty and social changes. “The most important thing nowadays is money”. Migration and modern influences like media were said to cause ‘mixing of tribal cultures and rules’:

The rules get confused. In the past you could only marry a girl from your own tribe and you had to obey the rules of the culture you grew up in. Now there are many influences that change ideas about proving manhood or womanhood.
[Father of five in Magu town]

This mixing of cultures and rules is also thought to contribute to a decrease of social control. A mother commented that in the past, the whole village was involved in raising the child and any villager could punish an errant child if they did something wrong. “Nowadays you are not supposed to interfere with other people’s children. You can be brought to court if you do”. The parents and caretakers mentioned poverty, lack of parental guidance and bad influence of friends as important contributors to the loss of social control. However, parents and caretakers also mentioned that love could play a role in boys’ and girls’ engagement in sexual relationships and that boyfriends give girls a sense of being grown up; “A sense of maturity is important for girls”.
Tanzanian parents and caretakers are generally concerned with their children’s sexual lives, especially their daughters. They are aware of the high occurrence of teenage pregnancies and all know stories about ‘bad teachers’ who become involved with schoolgirls.

It scares me as a parent, because as a parent you trust teachers with your children and they spend a lot of time with each other. If something happens, the child is scared to report it.

They said that that they knew that boys and men specifically approach schoolgirls because they are considered to be safe (HIV free) and inexpensive compared to girls who are not, or no longer going to school. Attempting to protect their children, parents and caretakers are strict. Girls’ freedom is especially restricted because they are considered most vulnerable to negative consequences.

**Childhood sexuality: Violation or confirmation of norms?**

Despite ideas about the naturalness of sexual activity, parents and caretakers attempt to regulate and restrain their children’s sexuality, at least until they have finished school and preferably until they get married. Sexual activity before ‘the right age’ (which refers to stage rather than chronological age) is a disgrace to families because it is a display of disrespect by children to their parents. Yet the interval between puberty and marriage is now growing longer due to lack of employment and income earning opportunities. Norms about masculinity expect maturing boys to have sexual experiences and results in parents and caretakers giving boys more slack than girls. Norms regarding female sexuality are more restrictive, especially because of the risk of pregnancy. Yet it was traditionally acceptable for *Sukuma* girls to enjoy their freedom at night so long as they considered not shaming their parents by explicit display of their sexual relationships (Varkevisser 1973). Economic hardship and ideas about sex as a resource for exploitation can make parents or caretakers turn a blind eye (see Chapter 4). The most important rule that needs to be obeyed is discretion (Haram 1995, Wamoyi et al. N.d.(b), Varkevisser 1973).

Sexual activity in children in Tanzania tends to be unacceptable for most parents and caretakers and seen as a violation of social norms and values. Unlike Western societies, this is not due to a perception that sexual activity in children is a violation of childhood as a time of
protected innocence. This reaction follows because social rules for engaging in a sexual relationship are not observed. The boy or man has not been introduced to his girlfriend’s family and therefore, the girl’s behavior is considered as inappropriate behavior for a woman. Sexual behavior in children is seen as highly disrespectful to the parents or caretakers. Yet if the rules of discretion are observed and the activity does not lead to pregnancy, a child’s parents or caretakers might be more permissive. Most parents and caretakers are concerned about the negative consequences of sexual activity for their children. It can ruin the child’s opportunity to finish their education or to find a good marital partner, both of which are key factors for the hope of a better future. This contradiction between norms and expectations results in an ambiguity that has an impact on Tanzanian children and young people’s sexual actions. This ambiguity will be described and analyzed in the next chapters.