Because of temptations: children, sex and HIV/AIDS in Tanzania
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V PEERS AND PRESSURES

The case of Charlie

Charlie is 15 years old and in Standard 7 of Kijiji rural school. He lives with his grandmother; his mama mdogo (aunt) and his older sister a half an hour walk from his school in a rural village approximately 30 kilometres from Magu town. Charlie’s parents passed away, first his father in 1998 and then his mother in 1999. He tells us that he doesn’t know what caused their deaths. His grandmother and aunt are farmers and they use the products from the farm for their own needs. Charlie helps them with farming and fetching water. If the family needs money, they sell firewood. Charlie has no money of his own. If he needs something he goes to his grandmother and asks. Although he says his grandmother and aunt are not very strict, he has to come home straight after school, to help them. He is not allowed to ‘hang around’.

Charlie: “I eat at 8pm and then I revise my homework, then I go to bed. The only time I can leave home is when they send me to buy or do something. I don’t hang out with friends, I don’t hang out with girls, but some of my male friends come over sometimes to study with me.”

Charlie’s friends sometimes ask him to come with them to look for girls. If he does not want to, he cannot tell them no, because they will argue with him and he’s afraid he will lose the argument. So normally he just keeps quiet, not answering them. But some time last year, one of Charlie’s friends (17) who had a girlfriend himself, wanted Charlie to have a girlfriend also. After telling Charlie he should ‘try it’ too, this friend approached a girl from another school and talked to her, telling her about his friend and offering her some money, which she accepted. The friend went back to fetch Charlie and brought him back to his house, where they met up with the girl. The parents of his friend were not at home and Charlie had sex with the girl. According to Charlie “The one who hooks you up normally tells you what to do”. He didn’t know much about the girl; only that she was a schoolgirl at a nearby school. He sometimes sees her walking by, but they did not have sex again. Charlie now decided he really wants to wait until he has finished studying and tells this to his friend, who continues to try to push him into getting a girlfriend again.

Charlie’s story is not unique. Most boys and girls mention their peers as one of the main sources of information about sex. Sometimes talking with peers about sex is enough to encourage boys and girls to look for a sexual relationship. This was the case for Charlie’s classmate, 13-year-old Daniel. Daniel told us that three years ago, when he was 10 years old, he had a “temporary chick” that he took to his house where he was “chatting her up” in an attempt to seduce her to sleep with him. His dad came home however, caught them and whipped Daniel who then “had to give up”. Although Daniel did not succeed having sex with the girl, he clearly stated to us that he wanted to have sex with her. When we asked him why he wanted to sleep with the girl, he said: “Because of talking in a group with friends about the taste of a girl and the joy you can get”.
Peer pressure can also be experienced more directly, as in the case of Charlie, when peers actively try to involve their friends in sexual encounters. Boys frequently described how male peers or older brothers attempt to involve them into ‘approaching’ girls by looking for a girl for them, offering their skills as negotiators, and sometimes even providing the money needed for sexual negotiations. The dominant norm among male peers is to ‘try out’ sex and corresponds to the more general cultural notion that expects Tanzanian men to be knowledgeable and experienced about sex. Although the dominant norm for Tanzanian women is to be sexually restrained girls too experience pressure from each other to get involved.

They say like “that guy has a lot of money! I slept with him”. [...] They've tried to get me involved. They say "shall we find a boyfriend for you or is it because your boyfriend finished school that you are not interested anymore?" Sometimes they send boys to me.
[Seba, 14 years, personal interview, Magu town]

When her boyfriend left, my friend would tell me what they were doing and then she would tell me to give it a try as well. I always said no, but one day I thought 'okay, let’s give it a try'. [...] This girl found a boy of the same age for me. I had sex with the boy, that is how it started. I didn't really like the boy. I just did it to impress the girl, but I wasn't ready for it yet.
[Shani, 15 years, personal interview, Nyahali]

Both the boys and girls we interviewed bragged about being popular with the opposite sex. Boys try to impress each other by being knowledgeable about courtship and sex. According to Imani who was 15 years old, in rural Magu: “They will say don't be old school, you're growing up, you need to know about those things”. And in a small group discussion with four boys who were friends in Nyahali, one of the boys showed off his experience and ‘maturity’ by claiming that the boys in his class who do not have girlfriends: “[…] are not grown up, they are not matured”. Again this remark shows that children see sexual interest and activity as a sign of maturity. Girls also compete with each other in the domain of maturity and sexuality. Girls consider it positive to be approached by boys and regard it as attention or as confirmation that they are attractive. This is despite that fact that sometimes girls reported that the approach was a nuisance or irritant and upset them because they feared punishment by their parent or caretaker.

Me: How does attention of a boy make you feel? (Girls giggle)
Girl 1: I like it if a boy impresses me and brings me things
Girl 2: I will not take anything from the start; it is harder to turn him down at a later stage
Girl 3: It makes you feel good!
Girl 4: I feel excited if a boy approaches me
During the research we noticed a competition between the boys and girls because the girls made a distinct effort in group discussions to tell us their stories about being approached by a boy, how often it happened, and what they were told and offered. Children in this research valued being regarded attractive as a man or a woman and this was cause for jealousy, competition and pressure among peers. Much of the pressure for younger children came from older children and siblings. Because enrollment in primary schools occurs at various ages, primary school classes have pupils with a range of ages. In Standards 7, for example, we found 17 year old pupils sharing books and benches with pupils who were 13 years old. The older classmates and siblings were said to influence the younger ones: “If older sisters have a boyfriend, younger sisters say like, oh, if my sister is getting all this, then I want to do the same thing” (FGD with girls in Magu town).

**Keeping it secret**

Although it is clear that peer pressure significantly contributes to the boys’ and girls’ motivations to become involved in sexual relationships, at the same time this pressure is not clear-cut. Many boys and girls who are involved in sexual relationships want to keep it a secret out of fear of parental, caretaker, family or teacher repercussions. The information they give to others is therefore often limited and kept general, unless they are speaking with close friends or within a kinship group. Charlie told us for example, “I won’t be able to know when these guys get involved, because they will keep it a secret, to prevent parents from finding out”. And Tumaini stated,

I didn’t tell anyone [about the girlfriends and the sex], because it is my own secret. If I tell one, they all know. If they find out I will refuse to admit that I have a girlfriend or have had sex, I will deny it.

And Deusi (17) who has a boyfriend told us,

Nobody in school knows. Only my best friend, who is my neighbor, she is the only one who knows. If I would tell my friends, the teachers will also know and I’ll be kicked out of school
For girls it is particularly critical to keep their sexual relationships hidden, out of fear for their reputation. When we interviewed Salim, 15 years old boy and in Standard 7 in Nyahali he mentioned that his friends have girlfriends; “But I don't know if they have achieved sex with these girls, I can only guess, I don't know for sure”. He added, “Girls are embarrassed about it and don't want others to hear about it, so they ask the boys not to tell anyone. And the boys don't.”

Girls do not always have a relationship with a boyfriend that is sexual because girls sometimes receive money from a boy before or even without having sex (this is sometimes called “skinning” see next paragraph). So girls can pressure other girls without having to reveal their sexual involvement with boys, although this involvement will be suspected. Out of fear for punishment or for getting a ‘bad reputation’ that might decrease a girl’s chances of getting married or undermines her negotiation position in courtship, few girls will admit to others, including me, that they are involved with boys. The children believed that their relationships had to be kept secret. However, knowing a friends’ secrets gave children power over the friend since they could disclose the secret. Therefore, the children did not share their secrets easily. If they did, they did it in the context of trust, with close friends or siblings. Furthermore, if a boy directly pressured another boy to have sex with a girl, he would have to offer his help in respect to negotiations and sometimes with money. Abdalla, an out of school boy of 15 who lived with his grandmother because his parents could no longer take care of him told us his friends would not talk about their girlfriends with him. “Because they think that you don't have money. They don't see the point of including you if you don't have any money.” When I asked him if his friends didn’t try to show off about having girlfriends, Abdalla explained, “No, their aim is to use their own money on a girl. If they include you, they are afraid that otherwise they'd have to share their money, or spend it also on a girlfriend for you.” Abdalla’s remark shows why it is important for boys to have access to money. Without money it is difficult to get a girlfriend and you will be excluded from the group; you don’t belong.

‘Positive’ peer pressure

Peer pressure can also include discouraging others to engage in sex. This kind of pressure was most noticeable during the group discussions because of the normative character of group
discussions. Boys and girls valued a peer’s statement, example or answer as good or bad, or asked the other student to justify why he or she had behaved in a certain way or had made a particular decision. This feedback often reflected the dominant norm in Tanzanian society; that sexual behavior among children is bad behavior and that sex should not be allowed before a certain age. Most children indicated that someone should not have sex until they reached 18–20 years. Children would point out that they had a responsibility to warn other children not to do something ‘bad’. We often found in peer interviews that if the interviewee described “bad” behavior in others the interviewer would ask why he or she did not attempt to stop the other person. An example is an interview between Shilling and his friend Zazi, both 13 years old:

| Shilling | You, maybe you have your friends; you have your friends involving themselves with these things? [Referring to sexual involvement] |
| Zazi     | They’re there. |
| Shilling | Now you, have you ever advised them, that like, “you homie, leave that!” What have you ever advised them? |
| Zazi     | No. Meaning if you advise them they can say that, “you, don’t interfere with my things! What, you are jealous of me? You want to seduce, come after this girl [yourself], you seduce her …what…?” That's it and you, you only leave [them alone]. |
| Shilling | There is where you see where they are coming from or… |
| Zazi     | Yes, there is where you see where they are coming from. Tanzania, that's why it's failing to develop fast because of words [I guess disputes or ignorance] |
| Shilling | Right, […] if you stay with that boy, maybe he has chicks, and you, you will learn. |
| Zazi     | They’re like, if it’s your friend, if he is following chicks and you, you will copy that behavior. But if you are smart you can be dodging him, you be like, if he wants to talk to you [persuade/encourage you], it will be hard. If you don't want, even him, he will notice that you don't want. You will be dodging him; you join with the group that doesn't involve with those things of getting involved. |

**Strategies to deal with peer pressure**

Zazi tells us that to withstand pressure from friends who are getting involved in sexual activity, basically means you will have to make a choice not to hang out with them anymore, but to ‘join with the group that does not get involved’. Two sisters from an Evangelist family, who had told us that they were strongly against sex before marriage, said:

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45 The quotes are a literal transcription because they come from a videotaped child-to-child interview.
There are four groups: boys who say no, girls who say no, boys who get involved, girls who get involved. They [those who want to postpone sex] have refused the other groups and chosen for the group that chooses education.

Tumaini, belonged to a group of friends who had or wanted to have girlfriends. He appeared to confirm this division of peer groups as those who choose education or those who chose sex:

The group [his friends] may be talking about love/sex while others like to talk about studying.

Although we wondered if the peer groups were really that clear cut, we did find many informants who spoke about the choice of education versus sex. Those informants who said they were not (or no longer) involved in sexual relationships justified their decision by saying “because I want to focus on studies”, “education first”, “I do not want to be distracted from my examinations” or similar reasoning. The majority of our interviewees actually said they chose to postpone having sex until after finishing Standard 7. However, it was difficult for us as researchers to determine the reliability of such remarks. Yet some boys and girls strongly argued finishing primary school and trying to get to secondary school, convincing us that finishing school was so important to them that it outweighed any encouraging influences to have sex. Juma, a boy and Neema, a girl are examples of children with strong personal motivations not to get involved in sexual relationships despite an encouraging context:

The case of Juma:

Juma played the father and headmaster in the Nyahali play and was prominently present in the debate46, arguing strongly for the boys’ refusal to take responsibility for pregnancy. Juma has the habit of taking his time before answering a question, creating the impression he thinks his answers through carefully before speaking. Juma is 16 years old. He lives with his mother, older brother and sisters, seven in total. He has not seen his father since 1996: “He was accused of murder, together with his brother and had to flee the area. I have not seen him or heard of him since.” The family survives by buying products from town and selling them in Nyahali. They do not have a lot of money, so he never asks his mother for anything and does not turn to her when he has problems: “She won’t be able to help me”. He prefers to go to his friends or older brother. When I asked him if his mother has told him anything about sex or girlfriends Juma hesitates: “… Not really.” He says: “You learn automatically, like from an older brother.” Juma’s older brother is not married, but has many girlfriends. He tries to convince his younger brother to join him in chasing girls and tells him about his experiences with girls. His brother would tell Juma: “I met a girl, you probably know her... like so and so... we went there and there... to have sex.” Or he would say: “Can I call that one for you?” Juma’s friends have girlfriends too and they try to persuade Juma to get a girl as well or to come and watch an X-movie (porn) with them. But Juma refuses. He is sometimes jealous of his friends: “It has happened that I

46 See later under Responsibility: Pregnancy and Condoms
went to the beach with my friends and they all had girlfriends with them, except for me. So I
would sit aside.” Juma admits that he finds it difficult not to get involved, especially
when his friends or brother bring him a girl or if a girl approaches him. He finds it
difficult to turn the girl down, “So what I do, I will not focus on her and in the end she will
give up, but then nobody got hurt”. Like his friends, Juma has feelings of desire but
deals with that in a different way: “I realize that desire gets away, if you don’t concentrate
on it. My friends can’t control themselves. And once you have tasted the honey, you want to
taste again. So it is better to not get involved, but to postpone.” Although Juma is
interested in girls, he tells his brother and friends that he wants to study. The reason
for his decision: “I learnt from my brother, because my brother was in Form 2 when he
started getting involved with girls and he became too much [out of hand], like going to
nightclubs and discos and stuff. Then he asked our mom for a private room to rent, near his
school, so that he could use that ‘to study’ and mom believed him. But instead he used this
room to be with girls. And in the end he failed his Standard 4 exams. I don’t want that to
happen to me.” Juma is number two in his class and badly wants to go to secondary
school. “It is one of my fears that my mom cannot afford to send me, but she has already been
asking all her friends and relatives to contribute to help us.”

The case of Neema:

Juma’s classmate Neema is 14 years old and one of the youngest girls in her class. In
the class or group interviews she likes to tell stories and she encourages the other
girls to share their stories as well. During the break you can see her move around the
school compound with a group of female friends. One of her best friends is Nuru47
and Neema is very protective of her. Neema is an attractive girl; she has beautiful
features and behaves in a feminine way. The boys look at her but somehow seem to
keep a respectful distance. In the debate she was one of the girls fiercely attacking the
boys, creating a sense of group identity for the girls, who were encouraged to stand
up against the boys. One time when we visited the school, she came out of the
classroom with a test that was just returned to her. She proudly showed it to us: she
had scored 95%. Neema does not live with her parents, but with her Mama Mdogo (the
younger sister of her mother) and her husband and their two daughters of 8 and 9.
She moved from Bukoba to Nyahali when she was five years old. Her parents could
not afford to raise her and had asked Neema’s aunt to look after her. Her older
brothers and sister continued to live with her parents in Bukoba. Neema would have
preferred to stay with her parents and she does not like living with her uncle and
aunt. However, she says, “the choice was not mine to make”. Her aunt and uncle are
strict with her; she has to come home straight after school to help with the cooking:
“They never allow me to play. I get a lot of tasks, more than my cousins. It’s unfair. And even
without making a mistake they shout at me.” If she has problems her aunt and uncle are
not interested in hearing about it. “They say I should write a letter to my mother.” Her
aunt never spoke to Neema about sexual issues, except to tell her that if she got
involved, that it would be her own problem: “They don’t care, they would be okay with it.
Even if boys walk with me to the house and come up to drink some water, my aunt says it’s
my own problem if I have boyfriends.” Neema is in a situation that does not discourage
her to have boyfriends. Her aunt and uncle refuse to give her money and do not treat
her well. She is not discouraged to have sex by friends who sometimes have
boyfriends themselves. She is regularly approached and boys offer her relatively

47 Nuru will be introduced in the paragraph on Courtship: expectations and force
large amounts of money. However, Neema said she never had a boyfriend and refuses to agree to one. Her behavior in class and remarks in discussions and interviews support her statement. The reason Neema gave for not wanting to engage in sexual relationships with boys was: “I know I’m from a poor family. So it will be very important to finish school first. If I would have a boyfriend now, my mind would go out to him and I would be thinking about him too much. Then I could not concentrate on my studies or what the teacher is saying. But it is important that I pass examinations with good marks, so that I can go to secondary school. Only if I finish secondary school I could get a job and help my family.”

Children who chose not to comply with the peer pressure or expectations had various strategies. For example, Zazi and the Evangelist girls would distance themselves from the friends who were pushing them to become sexually active and look for new friends who made the same choice, as they had to abstain. Assertive boys and girls such as Juma and Neema were able to postpone sexual activity without having to break friendship ties by convincing their friends of their firm decision. Other children lied about achievements or denied having a girlfriend or boyfriend, depending on the context and where the pressures or expectations were coming from:

*Do your friends push you?*

Yes, they are trying to convince me. They told me ‘find a girl!’ I can’t tell them I don’t want to. So I say ‘okay, I’ll try to find’. But then I delay, I don’t want to find right now. [Yussuf, 14, Nyahali]

More than once we heard stories from boys who told us that they wanted to have sex and managed to seduce a girl but did not succeed in having sex. They were thwarted because they were ‘caught in the act’ and punished by a parent. The parent then kept such a close eye on the boy that he didn’t get a chance to try again. Or the girl they had seduced had ‘moved’ somewhere else because one of her parents was transferred, just before they had a chance to ‘do it’ (have intercourse). It was difficult for us to assess how truthful these stories were and this must also be true for these boys’ peers. These strategies appeared to be successful if a child wanted to belong to a group that focused on having sex but if the child themselves did not want to be sexually active.

**Observations: Competition and popularity**

In addition to collecting firsthand accounts from children about how they experienced peer pressure, we observed how the children influenced each other and what made a child popular
within a group. As described in the methodology chapter, our research exercises were sometimes used as a means to gain popularity or strengthen a child’s position in the group. After working with groups of children over months, we got a good idea what kind of behavior or traits children thought of as ‘cool’ and which classmates had the most influence on others. Girls, as well as boys, who displayed boldness, cheekiness and humor were appreciated by all groups. The dramas were an excellent opportunity to display one’s skills as a performer, which appeared to be highly valued by the class as well. Other personality aspects that appeared to influence a student’s popularity and status were doing well in class48 and “attitude”. Attitude included actions such as daring to trespass rules, especially towards teachers, but also daring to speak one’s mind in the group. The ability to speak slang, to rap, dance and how they walked (‘bouncing’) and dressed reflected their status as “cool”. This was explained by the children as an influence from the media, especially “bongo flava”49 music.

Having access to money was experienced as something to be jealous of, as well as being clean, having a neat uniform, good shoes and school equipment and money to spend on snacks and candy during break. Some children got cash from their family while others managed to gain access to money through other ways. Boys, for example, would make money through doing small jobs like farming for others, or making bricks. One of our key informants, “Shilling” was skilled in ‘cutting’ money by self-report and also according to his friends. ‘Cutting’ money involved running errands for his parents or neighbors, but going to a different shop than where he was told to go where he could negotiate a cheaper price. He would then bring the item back to his parents, not tell them he paid less than expected, and he would keep the change for himself. This way he managed to accumulate quite a sum of money thereby earning the nickname Shilling. I emphasize the significance of money for children because it has both a practical and a symbolic meaning. For girls, there are fewer options to get money of their own, since most parents and caretakers do not allow them to work for others. So girls only have access to money from parents, caretakers or boys. This is why money plays such a significant role in courtship, sexual relationships and peer competition.

48 Measured by rankings based on marks. Informants often mentioned their ‘number’ first in personal interviews. Children who did well in class, would indicate this, by saying for instance: “I’m number 3 in my class”.

49 Bongo flava is the name used for Swahili rap music, originating from the streets of Dar es Salaam. It is a mix of hip hop with native dance music. Bongo flava is very popular, especially among youth, because the lyrics are often about the lives of youth in Tanzania or other issues that are relevant to them. The music is often played in local bars, nightclubs, discos, television channels and radio. Bongo flava is associated with ‘urban youth culture’ and a certain ‘lifestyle’ that is expressed through language and clothing (see also The Foundation of African HipHop Culture Online: www.africanhiphop.com).
Concluding remarks

It appears that for children in Tanzania peers are not only the primary source of information about sex but they also have a central role in the onset or refusal of sexual activity. Peers influence each other by example, direct encouragement or discouragement, using peer norms and expectations or by competition in a variety of domains, like the domains of maturity and independence, school performance, sports, skills etc. Sexuality is a crucial domain in which to prove maturity and to win popularity and status among peers. Yet this is contradicted by many children emphasizing the importance of keeping sexual interest and activity secret. There is a tension between keeping it secret and showing off to friends. Yet children find ways to ‘show’ their sexual achievements. Their behavior is enough to create peer norms and exert pressure on others, yet at the same time these children keep their true sexual achievements unclear even from their friends. This allows the sexually active children to deny sexual activity whenever it might lead to trouble for them. It also provokes lying about achievements or sexual activity in order to cope with peer pressure. At the same time this lying reinforces the dominant norm in a particular social context and contributes to peer pressure.

If children have an intention to postpone sexual activity, or say they have, this is almost always linked to the argument of wanting to finish education first. These children reason that a sexual relationship before reaching graduation will jeopardize their educational goals.

Peers, parents, personality, physical development and socio-economic contexts are important influences on children’s decisions to engage in or abstain from sex. Yet whether a boy or girl intends to engage in a sexual relationship or to abstain, the real decisions are made only when the child is presented with a situation in which sex is a real possibility. In the following chapters I will give a description of children’s explanations of courtship and how decisions are made during an interaction with a potential partner.