

Original Research Article

Pattern of Sexual Behavior of Hawassa University Students, Ethiopia: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: The body of quantitative literature that described risky sexual behavior as a predisposing factor for HIV and other sexually transmitted infection are plenty. However, little is known how risky the sexual practices of university students are in this era, particularly in Ethiopia.

METHODS: A qualitative research method was employed to explore the sexual behavior of undergraduate university students. Ten students' focus group discussions and twenty three in-depth interviews were conducted. The study participants were purposively selected students, night time taxi drivers, nightclub owners, abortion service providers, members of campus police and addictive substance sellers.

RESULTS: Both the focus group discussants and key informants emphasized that the sexual practices of some of Hawassa University female students were more risky than their counterpart male students. Some of the evidence the discussants pointed out were: the high number of female students competing with commercial sex workers in the night clubs; being the majority among women coming for abortion service; several local businessmen coming to the university campus to pick female students at night; and some female students being observed working in hotels as bar lady. Being away from family, academically poor, watching a sex film, peer pressure, attending night clubs, lack of

control by the university and substance use were some of the predisposing factors for unsafe sex in both sex. These observations were further strengthened by the low utilization of condoms among students who practiced unsafe sex.

CONCLUSION: This study has shown that some of the students were engaged in risky sexual practice both as unprotected and with multiple partners. Involvement of parents, university officials and other significant community members in a forum discussing this issue with students may bring a change in the students' sexual behavior.

KEY WORDS: Ethiopia, risky sexual behavior, qualitative study, university students.

INTRODUCTION

Several literature have shown that risky sexual behavior is the primary route of HIV transmission and propagation [1-5]. Risky sexual behavior is more commonly observed among adolescents globally [6]. As a result, about two-thirds of all sexually transmitted infections (STIs) worldwide occur in adolescents and those in their early twenties [7]. In the United States, adolescents bear a disproportionate burden of the HIV/AIDS epidemic [6]. Similarly, about two-thirds of the people living with HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa are young people, where still the high prevalence of risky sexual practice is attributed to [8].

In the interest of this article, previous study revealed that more than half of university students had inadequate **knowledge** about what constitute high risk sexual behavior and only about a quarter of sexually active respondents reported using a condom always [9]. Early initiation of sexual intercourse was also associated with increased risk of having an unwanted pregnancy and acquiring STIs including HIV among university students in China [10]. Another study among Makerere university students (Uganda) showed that despite high knowledge of the clinical features, the predisposing factors for STIs and methods of prevention, their sexual **behavior was risky** [11]. A study done in Tanzania among students in secondary schools and colleges demonstrated the low utilization of condoms while having sexual intercourse with multiple partners [12]. Low parental supervision and low socio-economic status, especially among females have also been associated with increased likelihood of sexual activity and risky sexual behavior such as lack of condom use [13 – 15].

According to a nationwide behavioral surveillance survey in Ethiopia, nearly a quarter of study participants had sex with more than one partner in a 12 month period, and nearly two-fifths didn't use condom when they had sex with commercial sex workers [16]. Ethiopia is one of the HIV highly affected countries in Sub Saharan Africa, primarily due to unprotected heterosexual practice with non-regular partners [17]. **Specific to Hawassa university students, different mass media reported that students' were practicing sex injudiciously with people outside the university campus. High "prevalence" of HIV infection and unplanned pregnancies among these students were also included in their report.** However, there was no a systematic assessment of the students' sexual behavior at

the university level. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the pattern of sexual behavior of Hawassa university students by applying a qualitative method.

METHODS

Study area:

A basic interpretive qualitative research method was employed in order to explore the sexual behavior of generic undergraduate university students in all the four campuses of Hawassa University/Ethiopia (Wondo Genet College, College of Agriculture, the Main Campus, College of Medicine and Health Sciences). The detail description of the methods is found elsewhere [18, 19].

Study participants:

Specific to this manuscript, a total of 10 students' focus group discussions (five FGDs for male and female students each) were conducted; and 23 key informants were involved in the in-depth interview. Two FGDs were selected from each of the three campuses. Taking into consideration the high student population, the remaining four FGDs were conducted in the Main Campus. The number of students per FGD ranged from 8-12. FGD participants were selected with the help of members of Student Council in each campus. Students who were thought to be more informative were given priority.

The key informants constituted: ten Bajaj (a three tired small public transport or taxi) drivers (who were transporting students at night), three members of a university campus police (one from each campus), three members of students' council (one from each campus), three *khat* (the leaves of the plant *Catha edulis forsk*, known by its active ingredient-cathinone) shops, three night clubs, and one health institution providing reproductive health services including abortion. Key informants who had relevance to the study topic were selected purposively through familiarization and recommendation.

Data collection:

Experienced FGD facilitators and in-depth interviewers were recruited to conduct FGDs and in-depth interviews. Male and female facilitators handled FGD for male and female discussants, respectively. Silent and comfortable rooms were selected for FGD and in-depth interview. Tape recorders were used to record FGDs and in-depth interviews after getting the consent of the participants.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Hawassa University. Written consent was obtained from each study participant. To ensure confidentiality, guiding questionnaires were anonymous.

Operational definitions:

In this study, risky sexual behavior is to mean any sexual activity that increases the chance of having unwanted pregnancy and acquiring sexually transmitted infection including HIV. A student with multiple sexual partners is defined as having had two or more sex partners prior to the time of data collection. STI symptoms considered for males include urethral discharge, dysuria, genital ulcer and swelling in the groin and scrotum; for females foul smelling vaginal discharge, genital ulcer and swelling in the groin. Commercial sex worker and bar lady are used interchangeably.

Data analysis:

Data analysis was done following systematic approach. Initially, both handwritten notes and taped recorded data were transcribed. After the transcription, coding was done. First, open coding was carried out in order to deconstruct into the simplest form possible, examined for commonalities, and sorted into categories. Following this, axially coded to reassemble based on logical connections between categories. Lastly, the “core” category was determined and the relationships between it and secondary categories were posited. Core and secondary category relationships were later validated and interpreted across the study objectives [20].

Furthermore, during data analysis, tape recorded FGDs and in-depth interviews were thoroughly listened and coded. Clusters of coded responses were then established to represent the major findings which were narrated and summarized based on the thematic area. The repeatability of the findings among different in-depth interviewees and FGD discussants were given more emphasis with the intention of understanding the integration from different perspectives.

RESULTS

The findings from FGDs and key informant interviews focusing on sexual behavior of Hawassa University students are presented in a consolidate form. The key informants described mainly what they witnessed while they were engaged in their daily activities.

Patterns of risky sexual behavior:

The majority of the study participants, who were involved in either the FGDs groups or in-depth interview, perceived that risky sexual practices were commonly observed phenomena; a large proportion of them being initiated and practiced in all the campuses. Being young, peer pressure, dressing styles of some female students, were mentioned as major factors that arouse males to sexual intention.

Specifically, female students' way of dressing to the level that exposed their private body parts is provocative for unplanned and forceful sexual acts. Drunk and intoxicated female students usually initiate sex by calling male students by cell phone. One of the discussants explained the peer pressure and environmental influence as a main reason to end up in the act of risky sexual behavior.

He said, *"When one sees others' engagement in sexual activities in the campus, he/she gets initiated/aroused and engage in unplanned sex"*.

Another discussant from College of Agriculture mentioned that female students are at more risk to practice risky sex as some of them go to night club and enjoy with 'sugar daddies'. He added that substance addicted male students are also equally at risk as they are likely to lose their conscious decision to practice unplanned sex including with bar ladies. He further qualified his view with the following:

"I feel females are the causes. Males do not go out with females for economic benefits, but females make money with their beauty (female nature). They go out with 'Sugar Daddies' for the sake of making money, but make love with students in the campus. By doing so, females are the primary means to attract the virus from outside and propagate within the campus to their male friends".

One female student from main campus mentioned that the sex practice in the campus is often unplanned and unsafe. It first happens accidentally which is called "Kiseta" (the moment), where the pairs begin by kissing. Then become unknowingly hot and end up in unplanned and unprotected sex. The group mentioned the following students to be at

greater risk of infection (HIV) due to unsafe sex: those who were under strict control of the family while they were in high school; those with very good or very poor monthly income; substance addicted; academically weak students; those from poor family background; and those who are far from religious beliefs. Similarly, academically weak female students engage in sexual relations with their instructors to get marks and ensure their survival in the campus.

The group reflected on the condition that some female students are also engaged in sex with senior students who academically support them. One student from the group at the main campus mentioned, *“Some instructors force female student to have sex with them, otherwise harm them by giving failure grades”*. Another female discussant from college of Medical and Health Sciences stated that, *“when the instructors start to negotiate for sex with students, every female says okay, even me if such forceful invitation comes, no way out except accepting it. Thus, by saying ‘no’, no one wants to be out of the competition”*.

Participants of the key informants shared the same perceptions with the FGDs with respect to the types and magnitude of the problems students practicing unsafe sex may face. University students are generally perceived by the respondents to engage themselves in risky sexual practices. One of the Bajaj drivers explained the condition like this:

“I think a significant number of university students certainly practice unsafe sex. Look, how female students dress, they do it with the absolute intention of attracting males. They seem to forget why they came to the university. At night, we are busy in transporting them to night clubs and hotels”.

Another participant from the owners of the night club, who shares the same thoughts added, *“The behavior of university students is highly disgusting; they seem to totally forget that they joined the university to accomplish a big task. The female students come here and compete with bar ladies working for us. The young and elderly men either from the town or coming from other places would easily pick female university students to satisfy their sexual desires. In this way, I would say the students are wasting their time and endangering their lives.”*

In response to a question about safety of sexual practices, the majority of the key informants and students involved in in-depth interview agreed that female students, compared to male counterparts, are more engaged in unsafe sexual practices as they seek businessmen, NGO staff and tourists to satisfy their financial needs. One of the respondents said, *“Female students do not limit the number of their sexual partners and do not use condom as many of them do sex after they got drunk”*.

A participant from the health institutions further described the safety of sexual practices as follows, *“Large number of students come to this health care facility to seek abortion services. Most of such problems occur among students because of unsafe sexual practice. Based on this notion, I would say the sexual relations among the students are unsafe”*.

A participant from night clubs added, *“I believe most of sexually active university students practice unsafe sex, particularly females who go out to look for the sexual mate”*.

Most sexual practices in the campuses don’t as well look healthy. The relation doesn’t last long. Some leave one and engage in a new relation. There is very low and inappropriate condom use as they are in a hurry and the place is inconvenient to buy it. Some of them do not have adequate skills, how to use condom properly.

Furthermore, the study participants reported that some students practice safe sex; others do not and still the rest abstaining from sex. A participant from health institution who provided his views on this matter said,

“Most of sexually active students do not practice safe sex because; had they been taking care, they couldn’t have come to health institutions with a problem of many unwanted pregnancies”.

Consequences of unsafe sex:

The group further added that unsafe sex exposes several students to other problems too, including prostitution, addiction to substances, school dropout, physical problems, mismanagement of time, psychological problems such as fears and guilty feeling, loss of virginity, social problems, economic problems (money is required for abortion, the condition that also leads to economic dependence).

The response of the key informants to a question about the kind of problems the students practicing sex may face was unanimous; they agreed that the current sexual behavior of

the students certainly leads them to health problems. STI, including HIV, unwanted pregnancy and related problems like induced abortion were frequently mentioned. Participants also told that the student engaged in sexual activities has poor academic records which subject them to academic dismissal or withdrawals because of unwanted pregnancy or other health problems. Consequently, significant numbers of students interrupt their studies and end up in commercial sex work as many female students do not go back to their family. One of the Bajaj drivers mentioned his experiences with one of Hawassa University female student. He said,

“A female student from my home place was studying at this university two years ago. This year, when I went to one of the hotels in Dilla town, oh my God, I could not believe my eyes when I saw her as a bar lady in the hotel. When she saw me, immediately she run away and hid. She was dismissed from her study and became a bar lady because I knew that she was untimely engaged on sexual activities”.

Practice of safe sex:

According to the students interviewed in-depth, *“the reasons for those students who restrain themselves from risky sexual behavior could be: those who feel responsibility; are visionary; best performing students; those with strong faith in God; students who are always busy with academic activities; those coming from rural areas. These categories of students, even when happened to do sexual intercourse, they take care of themselves”.*

In general, predisposing factors identified as reasons for practicing unsafe sex were watching a sex film, being away from family, peer pressure, attending night clubs, lack of control by the university, and the intention of getting money in exchange for sex.

DISCUSSION

This study indicated that Hawassa university students have been exhibiting risky sexual behavior as several of the study participants pointed out in one or another way. Both the focus group discussants and key informants emphasized that the sexual practices of some of the female students were more risky than their counterpart male students. Some of the evidences the discussants pointed out were: the high number of female students competing with commercial sex workers in the night clubs; being the majority among women coming for abortion service; several local businessmen coming to the university campus to pick female students at night; and some female students being observed working in hotels as bar lady.

However, the pattern of female students' risky sexual behavior varied by their former or current place of residence, academic profile, monthly income, peer pressure, exposure to substances such as alcohol and *khat*, religious affiliation and level of responsiveness. This finding is in agreement with other studies conducted in Africa and outside Africa [10, 11, 21-23]. For instance, a study conducted among the United States college students established that exposure to drugs and alcohol directly increased the amount of risky sexual activities; and the college environment provided them an opportunity to have sexual encounters with multiple partners, often without condom and without contraception [24]. Similarly, since the Ethiopian government provides residence for undergraduate students within the university campus, it has probably created an opportunity for peer pressure by easily observing what others doing and discussing in their dormitory about sexual fantasy, which was also noted in other studies as predisposing factor [1, 2, 22].

With regard to the former residence as a factor for unhealthy sexual practice, students from rural area were observed to behave favorably compared to their urban counterparts, which was in line with the quantitative study finding [17, 18]. We surmise that this can be explained by their strong acquaintance to the tradition and respect to their parents' concern; however, this need to be substantiated with further study. Similarly, students who had a strong religious affiliation behaved favorably and took less risk than their counterparts on issues related to sexual aspects. This is also in agreement with studies conducted elsewhere in some university students [23, 25]. Those academically low

289 profiled female students were easily victimized either by teachers who want to misuse
290 their academic power for transactional sexual pleasure or senior class male students who
291 approach them as if they would help them to cope up with academic challenges and
292 finally request them to pay sexually.

293 As many of the qualitative study participants stressed on the practice of unsafe sex by
294 female students, primarily taking into consideration of their sexual engagement with local
295 businessmen as witnessed by nightclub owners and night transport service providers, the
296 quantitative data (reported by the students themselves) has as well shown that high
297 proportion of sexually active female students had sexual intercourse with non-regular
298 partners and more than one-third of them were not using condoms [17, 18].

299 This study further uncovered that economically poor female students with subsequently
300 low monthly income were more liable to risky sexual practices as they try to find
301 additional income for their daily expenses from people like '*sugar daddy*'. This finding is
302 substantiated by similar studies conducted in Tanzania and Uganda [12-15]. However, it
303 should be noted that in the quantitative study, female students with high income were
304 also at higher risk of unsafe sex including having multiple sexual partners and low
305 utilization of condoms [17]. It was theorized that students with relatively higher monthly
306 income as well show risky behaviors as they have excess income to get relaxed date with
307 their respective partners.

308 Use of multiple substances has been another driving factor to risky sexual practice, which
309 is consistent with the quantitative study finding [18, 20]. Both male and female students
310 reported as engaged in risky sexual practice after getting drunk. Students first start with
311 simple kissing that eventually advance into sexual arousal and end up in unplanned and
312 unprotected penetrative sex commonly called the "moment" or in local vernacular
313 "kiseta", which was also a case in other studies [16, 26].

314 Our study finding also expounded the untoward outcomes related to students' risky
315 sexual practices. Students who were engaged in unplanned and unprotected sexual
316 practice were more likely to get pregnant, which ended up in unsafe abortions as the
317 discussants pointed out and the quantitative study findings triangulated [17]. As a result,
318 some of the students were forced to withdraw or get academic dismissal. Consequently,
319 some students even engaged in disgusting work such as commercial sex. Most of the

female students who discontinue their university education in such a manner did not want to reconnect with their parents again for the fact that they feel ashamed of their failure. These findings conform to reports from South Africa, which have shown that young persons who have engaged in unprotected sex were associated with having unplanned pregnancies and contracting STIs including HIV [27-29].

Although this research has several strengths (among others, the data were gathered from multiple sources), it has also several limitations. Some of the data constituted a very sensitive part of personal issues like behaviors related to HIV and sexual matters, which may be kept secret from social and cultural perspectives. The finding of this study may not reflect the sexual behavior of the majority of the students. Furthermore, it should be noted that since the students were assigned by the Federal Ministry of Education from different parts of the country, the features of sexual behaviour observed in this study were not exclusively the reflection of Hawassa town students.

In conclusion, this study has shown that some of the students were engaged in risky sexual practice both as unprotected and with multiple partners. Among others, the good number of female students' sexual engagement in the night clubs and several pregnancies being terminated in one of the health institutions has revealed the extent of risky sexual practice among this university's students. Furthermore, female students were more prone to engage in risky sexual practice as they were observed being picked at night from their dormitory by different businessmen.

Therefore, to make a difference in university students' sexual behavior, the linkage of risky sexual behavior with income needs to be investigated. Involvement of parents and other significant community members in a forum discussing this issue may bring a change in the students' sexual behavior. The university has to put remedies in terms of providing remedial academic support for the vulnerable group and sustainable student friendly sexual and reproductive health services for all. Otherwise, if this risky behavior continues among successors, the chance of HIV propagation and unwanted pregnancy may continue being a challenge.

Competing interest

Authors would like to declare that there was no competing interest associated with this manuscript.

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