

Can They Afford to be Safe?
School and HIV Risk among Young Kenyan Women¹

Preliminary Findings

Sanyu A Mojola, MA

Doctoral Candidate

Department of Sociology and Population Research Center

University of Chicago

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Abstract:

Young women in sub-Saharan Africa are now at the greatest risk of HIV. This has coincided with unprecedented numbers of girls going to school. This paper qualitatively examines the link between both outcomes in examining how the pursuit of education can also contribute to increased HIV risk. The considerable expense of school both from fees and other perceived needs - which parents and guardians may not afford - might lead girls to turn to multiple high-risk sexual partnerships in exchange for money to cater for these needs. This paper explores in greater depth, some of the motives underlying these relationships. Data for the paper is based on a selection of interviews conducted in February and March 2006 among young secondary school girls in Nyanza Province, Kenya. The paper is part of a larger project on HIV risk, education and employment among young women.

Can They Afford to be Safe? School and HIV Risk among Young Women

The latest statistics released from UNAIDS suggest that the HIV/AIDS epidemic continues unabated. 40.3 million people are estimated to be infected with HIV worldwide, with 25.8 million (64%) of those living in sub-Saharan Africa.(UNAIDS 2005). Similarly, fully 65% (3.2 million) of estimated new infections are in this region. These figures are staggering especially because sub-Saharan Africa contains only 10% of the world's population. Hardest hit are countries in southern Africa such as Botswana, Swaziland and South Africa; there median HIV prevalence levels among pregnant women attending antenatal clinics were between 30 and 40% (ibid). There are, however, glimmers of hope in Uganda, Kenya and now Zimbabwe where the epidemics seem to be slowing down. However because almost every sub-Saharan African country has between 40 and 50% of its population below age 15 (PRB 2005), there are concerns about whether these gains might be reversed if youth specific interventions are not continually emphasized. Half of all new HIV infections worldwide are among young people aged 15-24 (Kiragu 2001).

The latest UNAIDS report also notes that sub-Saharan young women aged 15-24 are three times more likely than young men to have HIV. This average masks widely varying levels of risk in its constituent countries. A series of studies carried out throughout sub-Saharan Africa illustrate the extent of this disparity. The table below shows just a sample:

Table 1: HIV among young men and women in sub-Saharan Africa

Country	Age	% HIV Positive		Ratio
		Boys	Girls	
South Africa (national)	18	2.0%	9.4%	1:4.7
	21	5.6%	31%	1:5.5
Zimbabwe (rural province)	18	1.25%	7.5%	1:6
	21-22	4 – 6 %	25 – 30%	1:6.25/5
Kenya (national)	15-19	0.4%	3%	1:7.5
	20-24	2.4%	9%	1:3.75
Kenya (Kisumu, Nyanza)	15-19	4.6%	27.1%	1:5.89
	20-24	12.9%	39.8%	1:3.08

Sources: Pettifor et al (2005); Gregson et al (2002); Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) (2003); Glynn et al (2001);

As we can see, the disparity between boys and girls HIV prevalence rates is high. The final column shows the ratio between boys and girls HIV rates. For example, among 15-19 year olds in Kenya, girls have 7.5 times the HIV rates of boys of the same age.

Several studies have looked at young women's high HIV risk and a variety of explanations have been put forward. These range from bio-physiological factors (e.g. high risk at time of first sex because of presence of blood, more vulnerable bodies of young women) (Glynn et al 2001, Zabin and Kiragu 2001) to early marriage (Clark 2004), sexual networks involving multiple and concurrent partnerships (Kretschmar and Morris 1995, Morris et al 1996), transactional sex – that is sex in exchange for money and gifts within the context of ongoing relationships (Cole 2004, Hunter 2002, Luke 2003) and labor migration systems where partners and spouses are separated for long periods of time (Lurie et al 2003). In this paper, I focus on an additional and strategically important factor for policy makers – the role of school and the pursuit of education in young women's high HIV rates.

Over the past two decades in sub-Saharan Africa, mass education has become widespread. Indeed in a handful of countries including Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, over 75% of girls have reached or passed elementary school level (Lloyd et al 2000). However, many of these countries have also been the hardest hit by the HIV epidemic. While the statistical relationship between schooling and HIV is unclear (Glynn et al 2004), preliminary analysis (not shown here) from the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (2003) suggests that HIV rates might vary by education level. Given that school is an increasingly key institution for girls aged 15-24 who are at the highest risk of HIV, the key question this paper investigates is: What role if any does secondary school and the pursuit of education play in the epidemic?

DATA AND METHODS

Fieldwork for the study was carried out among the Luo ethnic group in Nyanza province, Kenya where high HIV rates persist in the context of a nationwide declining epidemic. The tables below illustrate the extent of the disparities between the Luo/Nyanza and other Kenyans based on nationally representative Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2003 data.

Figure 1: Provincial HIV prevalence:

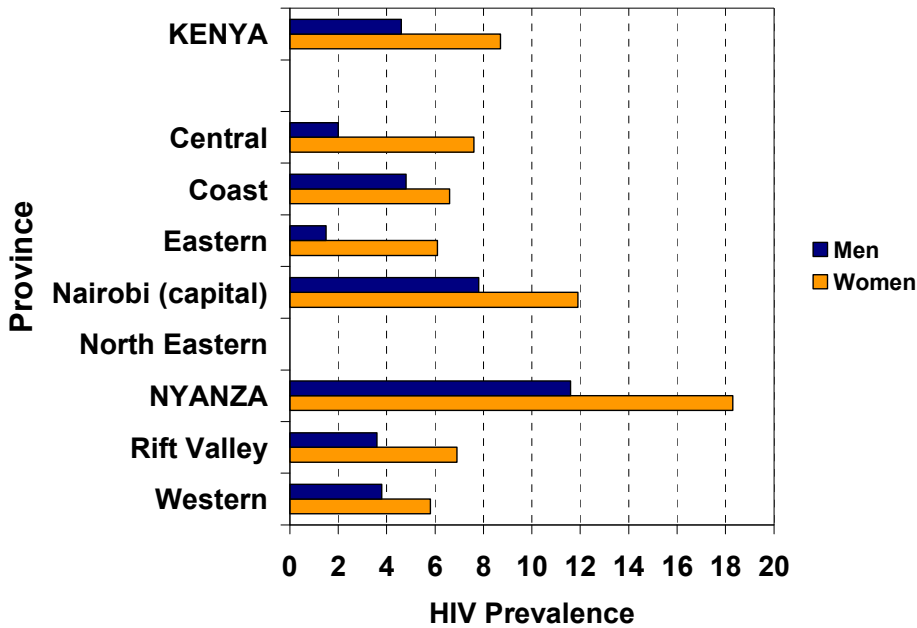
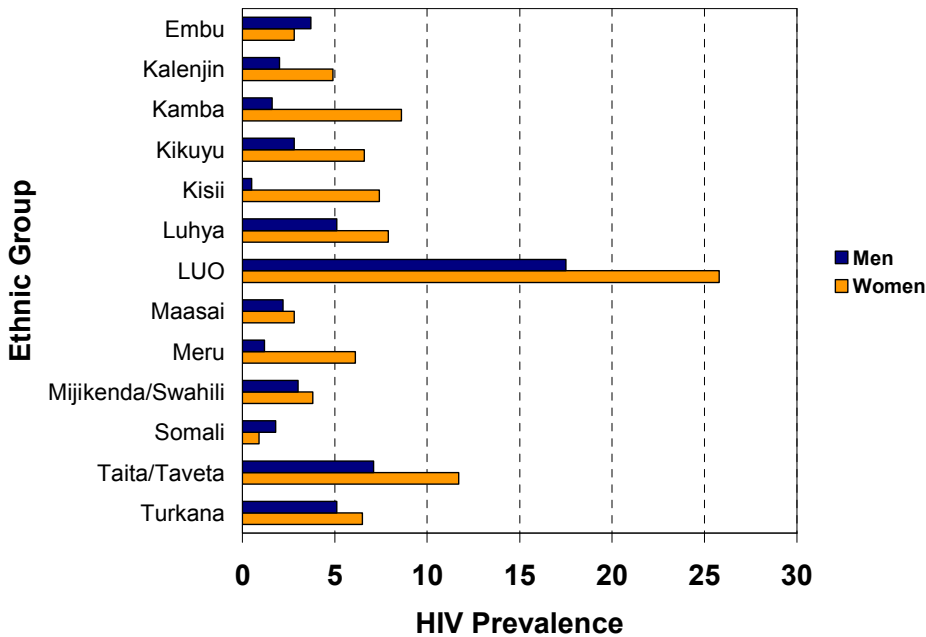


Figure 2: Ethnic HIV prevalence

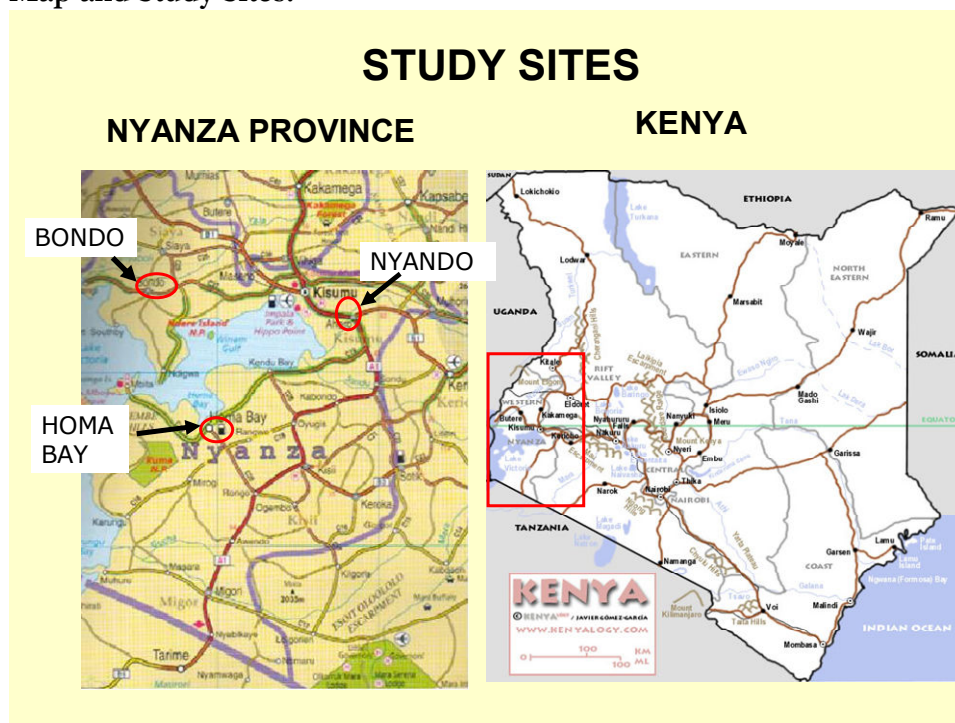


Source: Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2003

As we can see from Figure 1, almost 20% of women in Nyanza tested positive for HIV – the highest rates in Kenya. Even more troubling is when we focus on ethnic group prevalence levels in Figure 2. Here we see that over 25% of Luo women, the predominant ethnic group

in Nyanza tested HIV positive. Further, as illustrated in Table 1, young women aged 15-24 in this area had prevalence levels as high as 40% by the end of this age range. Nyanza also provides a useful case study not only because of the high HIV rates among young women, but also because it shares many macro-economic elements common to other parts of Africa which are affected by HIV. It is a major labor migrating province, situated along major trading routes – including the Trans-African highway, as well as being a port city with routes to Uganda and Tanzania by water, and has been hit hard by economic downturns.

Map and Study Sites.



Data for this paper is drawn from focus group interviews which are part of an ongoing study on HIV among young women in Kenya. Interviews were conducted among 18 girls aged 15-19 in three randomly selected secondary (high) schools from Bondo, Nyando and Homabay districts in Nyanza province. The districts were selected on the basis of variation by geography (north, central, south) and HIV prevalence level (low, medium and high). The schools selected were mixed in type with one all girls boarding school, one mixed day school, and one mixed boarding and day school. Two were district schools – drawing mainly girls from the surrounding district, while one was a provincial school, drawing 85% of students

from the entire province, and 15% from out of the province. Proportions of orphans (mainly because of HIV) in schools ranged from 1/3 to 3/4 of the student population; these were either partial (lost one mother or father) or total (lost both parents) orphans. In each school, one focus group composed of six girls and one or two individual interviews with teachers were conducted. In addition, several formal and informal interviews were conducted with district and government officials as well as key informants. Data was collected between February and March 2006.

RESULTS

○ *School creates costly needs*

The first obvious, but nonetheless significant, finding of the study is that going to school involves significant costs. Students told me of many cases they knew of girls called to some of the best secondary schools in the province by merit, but staying home for lack of school fees. School fees at the schools visited ranged from Kshs 14,000 (\$200 a year) in the day school to 24,000 (\$340 a year) in the boarding schools.² Thus those who made it to secondary represented not just those smart enough to get in (only half of primary school students last year – 2005 - got secondary school places – Nation Newspaper), but also those fortunate enough to have parents/guardians/donors who could afford to pay the fees. Unfortunately, the costs are only just beginning. In the course of interview discussions, several other annual expenses common to all the schools emerged:

Table 2: Secondary School Expenses per child

Item	Kenya Shillings	US Dollars
School Fees	14,000 – 24,000	\$200-340
Shopping	3,000 – 6,000	\$43-86
Lunch for day school	2700 (10/day)	\$40
Textbooks	3000	\$43
TOTAL	22700 33,000	\$326 - \$469

In terms of what this would mean for the average Luo/Nyanza parent: Kenya's GDP per capita is about \$1000/year (UNDP 2005) and Nyanza women have an average of 5.6 children. Table 2 suggests a minimum of \$200 to pay school fees per child per year – a

² At the time of interview (Feb – Mar 2006) , the exchange rate was about US \$ 1 to 70 Kenyan shillings

significant parental investment. It is easy to see why students have to do without other needs over and above school fees. Additionally, other costs involved in going to school, the interviews suggest, might differ by gender.

- *Girls perceive their needs to be greater than those of boys*

It became clear when conversing with the girls that they felt their needs were different and more expensive than those of boys. For example, when I asked about why boys didn't have the same money concerns as girls, in one school, a girl wryly observed,

“ Boys don't have so much needs like girls... You find that... when schools open, you see girls carrying very big boxes and the boys, just one bag...”

In another school, I asked,

Why do you think girls are affected by money so much?

I think their needs are high, they need many things. Compared to boys.

Like what?

Things like, for example, sanitary towels, they are things which maybe are a must. They are things that a girl cannot do without.

I investigated the cost of sanitary towels in all the schools, as they were independently brought up, a key touchstone issue, and seemed to be symbolically representative of girls' perceived needs. The price ranged from Kshs 45 to 80 shillings per packet (of 8). Depending on the parent, this was not always included in “shopping.” While day scholars said they used rags if they could not find the money to buy them, in boarding schools living among other girls, sanitary towels were considered a necessity. For a school girl wholly dependent on her parents, they would add not inconsiderable costs if they were not included in the shopping. They would have to rely on pocket money or find some other means.

- *Poverty among parents exacerbates the issue*

It quickly became clear that parents/guardians were *the* source of financial support – fees, shopping and pocket money – for the girls. Thus the extent to which girls' perceived needs

were catered for depended entirely on the socioeconomic status of their parents. One girl said for example,

if the family is poor, you know as girls we need several things, but if the family can't provide all this, the girl will be forced to search for them somewhere else...

Others gave a variety of reasons why the pursuit of money was important, not least because "life is difficult without money." One said, "you find most of the parents are not able", "some are not around", "some of the parents are not stable, they can't provide such things," "you have to save yourself", "some are even orphans, and the guardians cannot provide all these necessities so it causes the girls to just search for them somewhere else." These problems would be even more exacerbated where one girl might have 1000 shillings in pocket money, while another's parents could only afford to give her 100 shillings. This might result in either "stealing or...Maybe search for some other way...to find some money and be eating with your friends." In day schools, the need was more basic. One girl said,

"this is a day school so you know some people are coming far from here, ...so their parents will give them money for lunch, so now if they don't have, what can you do?"

o *No alternative sources of income other than parents for girls*

Given the limitations of poor parents struggling just to pay fees (the sight of students leaving school at odd times of day and year was a common sight – people in public vehicles often commented that they were girls sent home until their parents could come up with the fees), I tried to explore how girls "searched" for money." At first, focusing on whether alternative means in which girls could earn some money while going to school existed. In almost all cases, girls said that while they had almost no options, boys seemed to have plenty. The following conversation is worth quoting at length:

So are there alternative ways or safe ways in which girls can earn money?...if you want to... earn pocket money, to buy these things and your parents can't afford?

No.. its only you talk with your parents to provide you with those things

So you can't, girls don't do businesses as well as go to school, or do work for someone else to get money, its only parents?

Yes.

If there are no other ways for girls to earn money other than their parents give, then what about boys, do they have a chance to earn money?

Boys can make.. charcoal, they can go to the lake to fish, they can do the job of boda boda [transport people using bicycles] on Sundays to get money...during weekends, ...some boys will have some jobs in the farm, you know people are planting, so go there and they have some jobs and when they are finishing the job, they get money.

And girls can't do those things?

No...Its hard work for a girl to cut a tree, and make into smaller pieces for charcoal. That one is a very difficult job for a girl. [They went on to say that girls don't fish or do boda boda]

And they don't work on farms?

They work, like planting. They can go and plant, its when they are being paid.

How much would you be paid after a day?

50 shillings.

And it is a very big portion.

Laughter.

○ *School girl solutions to monetary problems increase their risk for HIV*

Given the monetary needs of girls in secondary school, the limited ability of parents to provide, as well as limited alternatives for girls to earn their own money, the main solution was transactional sex with multiple partners – a solution clearly increasing the risk of HIV. Indeed these issues were raised by girls and teachers to explain why they felt HIV was higher among young women. For example, in the day school, a teacher talked of girls' solution to lack of money for lunch.

“So the girls go as far as selling themselves even to these boda boda men, these people riding the bicycle, so long as they can get 10 bob [shillings] for lunch...”

She went on to note:

“ in this community they believe once a girl has reached the age of 12, you can now take care of yourself. So ... if they go asking for something like sanitary towels, they are told you're now a big girl, you can get this one on your own. So when they've been told like that, they go ahead looking for it where they can get it. And the only source is now selling themselves to men.

That's the only source of income?

Yeah, that's the only source of income. Apart from parents, now only boyfriends.

In another school, a girl noted,

“and if you find somebody who cannot provide all these necessities. . . ., the girl may switch to the next man, she thinks might provide it. So that’s the reason as to why the girls move from one man to another, and get infected to this disease easier”

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As the last comment hints, the irony of many of these conversations was that it is *not* for lack of knowledge of HIV and how it is spread that school girls engage in risky sexual behavior. They appear to be moved by what they perceive as necessities presented by the pursuit of education; necessities which are beyond the means of their parents. Multiple high risk sexual partnerships in exchange for money can be a strategy enabling them to buy these things. In other words, secondary school girls who are poor may not feel that they can afford to be safe. In summary, the five findings in combination point to three needs: a) the need for enabling secondary school girls to generate income to support themselves while in school and/or during the holidays. This would both alleviate the burden on poorer parents who may have many children to put through school, as well as teach girls economic independence early so that they do not need to search for money in risky ways; b) a need to explore ways to provide girls with necessities such as sanitary towels at school level; c) a need to tailor guidance and counseling curriculum to specific challenges young women face regarding attitudes towards perceived needs, consumption and spending habits and decision making.

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