

P4.8. The Concept of Engaged or Married Status Among Youth (15-24 years) in Two Regions of Uganda (2007) - **EK. Namayanja**, Straight Talk Foundation, Uganda; **C. Watson**, Straight Talk Foundation, Uganda; **P. Walugembe**, Straight Talk Foundation, Uganda; **E.Namubiru**, Straight Talk Foundation, Uganda; **I. Kato**, Straight Talk Foundation, Uganda
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Background/Significance: Straight Talk Foundation (STF), a Ugandan multimedia communication organization targets youth with reproductive health messages to create behavior change in the mitigation of HIV/AIDS. In 2005, STF in collaboration with CORE initiative, implemented a radio campaign for youth(Y) 15-24 years in two Ugandan regions to promote abstinence(A) among engaged and faithfulness(B) among newly married couples in addition to promoting VCT

Main Question/Hypothesis: The main questions were to understand the context of being engaged or married among youth, find out whether youth were abstaining during courtship and married ones were faithful in relationship and whether youth were accessing VCT before engaging in sex

Methodology: A cross sectional descriptive study was conducted following implementation to understand the context of being engaged or married, find out whether youth were abstaining during courtship, married ones were faithful in relationship and whether youth were accessing VCT before engaging in sex. The survey employed qualitative means of data collection. In-depth interviews were held with 25 youth randomly selected from three sub-counties in each region. Data was collected through face to face interviews and master sheet analysis technique was employed in data analysis

Findings: Nearly half (12/25) respondents were engaged and rest were married. All were out-of-school with an average education level of 7 years. The majority of females were in non- gainful employment as housewives and the males' main occupation was performing odd jobs.

a) Concept of being engaged: Love and having sex (8/12) was the most important sign that showed commitment to the relationship and was considered a pre-requisite to marriage. Having good personal qualities, agreement to marriage, introduction to ones parents or having a child born out of the relationship indicated steps to marriage. In half (6/12) of these relationships, respondents had engaged in sex with a previous partner and children were born in two of such relationships. Only one respondent was engaged and abstaining with the current partner. The rest gave reasons such as; difficult to abstain, had to have sex to express love to partner, for sexual gratification and to show commitment to relationship. Having sex proved that a couple is destined to marry although this is usually not the case. Despite having unprotected sex with their partners, these youth were not aware of their partners HIV sero-status or their own.

b). Concept of being married: Marriage is assumed when partners start staying together as husband and wife and in all cases none was in religious or traditional marriage. Initiation of marriage starts when the girl who is usually in school gets pregnant, drop out of school and cohabiting with husband with or without the parents consent. In most cases (11/13) the parents encouraged or even force the girl to stay with their husband on getting pregnant.

Knowledge Contribution/Lessons Learned: The concept of being engaged is not clearly understood. Youth who implied they were engaged were those having sexual relationships to show commitment to the relationship. Despite engaging in sex, the youth do not know their HIV status. The female youth have the opportunity to test when pregnant during antenatal. Male youth are not keen on testing for HIV and normally assumed their partners status. Some youth have sex with more than one person during engagement in the hope of choosing the best partner. This is a sequel that may lead to the spread of HIV, as apart from having multiple partners, their HIV status is not known. Youth have unprotected sex as a sign of love and commitment to the relationship hoping this eventually leads to marriage. In some cases this is not the case and other partners are sought and the sequence repeated. Courtship lead to marriage if the partners who initially are in school, get pregnant, drop out of school, start cohabiting, introduce partner to parents with or without paying bride price. Nearly all married respondents had not completed paying bride-price. Female youth unlike their male counterparts are apprehensive of having multiple

partners in relationship for fear of HIV, misunderstandings with partner, having children fathered by other men. Males however thought they would possibly engage in extramarital affairs.

Recommendations

- Programs involved in HIV prevention strategies should continuously design abstinence and be faithful messages for youth. However delaying engagement would contribute to delaying sex and possibly contribute to reduction of HIV/AIDS transmission.
- Couples whether engaged or married should be encouraged to test for HIV and disclosure should be promoted. This would be through promoting couple dialogue and testing.
- Male participation would be important in contributing to behaviour change in the mitigation of HIV/AIDS.

Conclusion: HIV prevention strategies advocate for no sex until after marriage for youth and promote faithfulness among married but this is not the scenario. Youth are engaging in unprotected sex during courtship without testing for HIV. Marriage is a sequel of pregnancy and cohabitation between partners whose HIV status is not known. Lack of dialogue in relationships may limit strategies on HIV prevention. Messages should be tailored to delay engagement, encourage abstinence among engaged and unmarried youth and faithful during marriage. HIV testing should be encouraged in all relationships.