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Joyce Wamoyi
*National Institute for Medical Research*

Angela Fenwick
*University of Southampton*

Mark Urassa
*National Institute for Medical Research*

Basia Zaba
*National Institute for Medical Research*

William Stones
*Aga Khan University*

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Joyce Wamoyi a b, Angela Fenwick b, Mark Urassa a, Basia Zaba a c & William Stones b d

a Programme for Sexual and Reproductive Health, National Institute for Medical Research, Mwanza, Tanzania
b School of Medicine, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK
c Department of Epidemiology and Population Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK
d Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Aga Khan University, Nairobi, Kenya

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Socio-economic change and parent-child relationships: implications for parental control and HIV prevention among young people in rural North Western Tanzania

Joyce Wamoyia, Angela Fenwick, Mark Urassa, Basia Zaba and William Stones

Programme for Sexual and Reproductive Health, National Institute for Medical Research, Mwanza, Tanzania; School of Medicine, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK; Department of Epidemiology and Population Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK; Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Aga Khan University, Nairobi, Kenya

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This paper examines how socio-economic changes in Tanzania have impacted on parent-child relationships, in particular parental behavioural control over their children and parental influence on young people’s sexual behaviour. Data came from participant observation, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with young people (14–24 years) and their parents. Socio-economic changes (education, changes in values, material needs provision) affected parent-young person relationships. Young people contributed to the economic needs of their families and parents receiving or expecting more support from their children exercised less behavioural control (in sexual and non-sexual matters of their children). Parents and young people spent less time together than in earlier generations. Parents reported that they thought their children were more knowledgeable about sexual and reproductive health than they were. As young people received more education and contributed more to their families’ economic well being, they emerged as decision-makers in their own right and parental influence waned. Policy interventions addressing sexual and reproductive health among young people should consider family influence on young people as well as the influence of young people on their families and parental authority. Families, and particularly parents, should be supported to respond to the emerging challenges and changes in their families and the wider society.

Keywords: SRH; parental authority, young people, socio-economic change, Tanzania

Introduction

Sexual activity begins early in Tanzania: 11% of young people aged 15–24 years report having had sex by age 15 (TACAIDS et al. 2008). Early sexual debut and multiple sexual partners increase the risks for contracting sexually transmitted infections including HIV (Boerma et al. 2003; Hudson 1993; Mishra and Assche 2009). In Tanzania 7% of women and 5% of men aged 15–49 are infected with HIV compared with 4 and 1%, respectively, in the age group 15–24 (Boerma et al. 2003).

There is an urgent need for better understanding of social processes influencing sexual behaviour so as to improve sexual health, including HIV prevention. Socio-economic contextual factors that influence young people’s susceptibility include gender dynamics, poverty and cultural norms (Wamoyi et al. 2010a; Wight et al. 2006). To satisfy material...
economic needs, young women may engage in casual or risky sexual activity (Lees et al. 2009; Wamoyi et al. 2010b) – relationships involving young women and older men are especially risky (Boerma et al. 2002; Kaufman and Stavrouv 2004; Longfield 2004).

Aspects of parental socialization that are critical to healthy development of young people have been identified (Baumrind 1968, 2005; WHO 2007) and conceptualised as typologies of parenting styles (Baumrind 1968) or as independent dimensions of parenting (WHO 2007). The WHO review summarised dimensions of: connectedness, control and monitoring, provision and protection, respect for individuality and role modelling. Broadly classified, these attributes relate to the dimensions of support and behavioural control (Roche, Ahmed, and Blum 2008) and link to early sexual debut and other risky behaviours (Miller et al. 1997).

Studies of parental influence on young people’s sexual behaviour in Africa (Ngom, Magadi, and Owuor 2003; Omoteso 2006; Oyefara 2005) have mainly collected information from young people and not from their parents or other family members, resulting in an unbalanced view of what actually happens in families. The present study captures the different perspectives of young people and parents on how socio-economic changes affect parent-young person relationships and young people’s sexual behaviour.

Examining family changes using theories of social change it can be argued that the family in Tanzania has been changing under internal (economic, social) and external (globalisation) pressures (Goody 1989; Ntukula and Liljestrom 2004). As extended kinship weakens, obvious changes are observed in terms of interpersonal relations among kin group members (Haram 2005) and its power over individuals’ conduct becomes less effective. Extended family structures are the norm in Tanzania, although the nuclear family is becoming common in urban areas (Goody 1989; Ntukula and Liljestrom 2004). Growing children are influenced strongly by parents as well as close relatives, friends and neighbours (Goody 1989; Ntukula and Liljestrom 2004).

In Tanzania (Ntukula and Liljestrom 2004) as in other African settings (Ngom, Magadi, and Owuor 2003; Oyefara 2005), the family still plays a significant role in the lives of young people. It plays a major role in their socialisation through physical and emotional nurturing as well as looking after health and education (Zeitlin et al. 1995).

There is, however, a lack of research examining links between sexual behaviour and parenting (i.e. behavioural control and parental support through provision) in the modern context of changing family socio-economic circumstances. Behavioural control here includes parental control and monitoring as manifested in the limits parents set for their children and parental actions aimed at shaping or restricting young peoples’ behaviours to accord with prevailing norms (Barber, Maughan, and Olsen 2005; WHO 2007). Parental support refers to the presence of a close, caring and nurturing relationship between a young person and the parent or family. As noted by Foucault (1978), power can be conceptualized in many ways and is perceived more as a strategy than a possession. Here, power is conceptualised as productive in the sense that it brings about forms of behaviour and events. We examine how social and economic changes have impacted on parent-child relationships, particularly parental behavioural control over their children and subsequently parental influence on young people’s sexual behaviour.

**Methods**

In ethnographic research the importance of interpretation as well as observation in understanding behaviour is emphasised (Denzin and Lincoln 2008; Lambert and McKevitt 2002). Parents’ expectations influence young people’s sexual behaviour and were studied.
by combining observations with data from interviews with parents and young people. Participant observation (PO) of parents’ and young people’s daily interactions was useful in complementing findings from in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). Although the researchers’ own interpretations were important, we adhered as closely as possible to participants’ accounts as the basis for interpretation.

Data generation procedure

Data were collected in 2007 in two of six villages in Kisesa ward, in Mwanza region, within the Health and Demographic Surveillance System (HDSS) by a female graduate researcher (first author) and a male research assistant, a sixth form secondary school graduate. The selection of participants was based on household size and type, village location (road-side, remote) and HIV prevalence. Participant observation was conducted in a village with both rural and peri-urban characteristics, selected because it had the lowest HIV prevalence (4.7%). Additional IDIs and FGDs were conducted in the smallest roadside village, with an HIV prevalence (7.3%) similar to that for Kisesa ward overall (7.9%) (Boerma et al. 2003; National Institute for Medical Research [NIMR] 2005).

During PO, eight weeks were spent in the village forming friendships with young people and their families, observing interactions and participating in farming and social activities. Participant observation was overt and prior to starting the observations, the researchers introduced themselves and the research at a public meeting held in the study community. Jottings were taken during the day and detailed notes each evening describing important observations.

Following PO, 17 FGDs and 46 IDIs were conducted. Four FGDs (two with parents and two with young people) and eight IDIs were conducted with participants from the PO village, the remaining involved participants from the other village which had both roadside and rural characteristics. Focus group discussions focused on issues related to parenting, provision of material needs and young people’s sexual behaviour. In order to capitalise on people’s shared experiences we selected participants aiming for homogeneity within the groups with respect to: schooling status, gender, village, residence and having had a child out of wedlock for the girls. The Table 1 provides a summary of the characteristics of the 17 FGDs.

Three days were spent getting to know and recruiting pre-existing friendship groups to participate in the FGDs. A snowballing approach was adopted: 34 ‘seeds’ for this were selected from the HDSS site survey list, based on information on family types present in the study setting and schooling status (Hosegood et al. 2007; NIMR 2005). The 34 seeds were advised to recruit friends with the same characteristics to ensure that participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group characteristics</th>
<th>Groups (n)</th>
<th>Participants (n)</th>
<th>Age range</th>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>School girls</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Out-of-school young women</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7–10</td>
<td>15–24</td>
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<td>Parents/carers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7–10</td>
<td>34–54</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>School boys</td>
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<td>Out-of-school young men</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7–12</td>
<td>15–24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents/carers</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>42–60</td>
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knew each other well and felt free to discuss sensitive issues with each other. Focus group discussions with parents were organised according to gender, while those with young people were by sex and schooling status (in and out of school).

Participants for 46 IDIs were selected from 17 FGD participants purposively based on schooling status, gender and responses given during group discussion. These interviews built on the rapport established during the group discussion and explored issues that emerged in the FGDs and PO. Initially, 39 IDIs were conducted, but after preliminary analysis of data, there was a need for further clarification of the emerging theory so 7 more were conducted.

The selection of participants for the second, follow-up phase of FGDs and IDIs was based on a theoretical sampling approach (Mason 2006). Two more FGDs (of young women and men) and seven additional IDIs were conducted to explore issues emerging from preliminary analysis.

Data were collected on family socio-economic status, family material and social support and young people’s sexual behaviour. This paper is based on data generated from questions asked about: family types, interactions within the family (parent-child time spend together, gender power and decision making dynamics), material needs provision and young people’s sexual decision making.

Ethical approval for the study was provided by the Tanzanian Medical Research Coordination Committee. Additional permission to conduct the study was granted at district, ward and village levels (community and individual). For participants aged under 18 (the age of majority in Tanzania), consent was also sought from parents. The purpose and methods of the study were explained to the potential participants, who provided verbal consent prior to participating.

Analysis

Data were transcribed, translated into English, entered into QSR NVivo 7 software and coded. A combined approach to analysis was adopted using anticipated and grounded codes. Grounded codes, developed by a thorough reading of the data, reflected the participants’ ways of expressing ideas. Anticipated codes were developed from research objectives, prior knowledge and early analysis and were refined in the light of further data. Thereafter, codes were developed into conceptual categories and, finally, themes. The key themes were: material needs provision, parental control and monitoring, ‘we change/go with the times’ (social and economic changes) and ‘Do what I say and not what I do’ (parents as role models).

Findings

Participant characteristics and socio-economic context

In the study community the predominant ethnic group was Sukuma (95%); Christianity was the most common religion (74%); 13% of men and 29% of women were illiterate; and only 5% of men and 2% of women had secondary school education or higher. Farming was the main source of income (Boerma et al. 2002; NIMR 2005).

Participants were young people aged 14–24 years and their parents. Most young people in the sample were either attending or had completed primary school. In Tanzania children enrol in primary school between eight and nine years of age (Bommier and Lambert 2000), primary school lasts seven years and secondary education six. Most young people complete primary school aged 15 to 17, but some aged 17 and over are still in
primary school. Those who proceed to secondary school usually complete by age 24. Repeating a class is common for those who do not perform well.

Most young people had received several SRH educational and behavioural interventions at primary school and sometimes through community programmes. Examples of behavioural sexual and reproductive health (SRH) interventions were those delivered through schools and health facilities (NIMR 2005). These programmes generally focused on young people, parents rarely benefitted. Many parents said that even though they had some primary level education, they had not received any SRH education.

As much as some parents tried, they were not able to sufficiently provide for all the young people’s material needs. They expected children who had completed primary school to fend for their own material needs such as clothing, school supplies, cosmetic and hygiene items and sometimes food. For example one father said:

We parents maintain them but they maintain themselves too. Starting from the age of 7 years . . . we are having problems getting their school needs or maintenance generally . . . for those starting from 10 years onwards, let’s say their employment is in the hills [at the stone quarry] . . . they have to break stones to get money. (FGD, male parents)

**Material needs provision, parental control and monitoring of young people**

Evidence clearly shows that consumption patterns have changed since current parents were young. Meeting higher expectations is a challenge for most parents who felt young people were materialistic because they desired modern commodities (e.g. mobile phones) and clothing. A 42-year-old father said:

Modern young people like so many pleasures and to look smart. In the past people were not decorating themselves like they do at present. That is why their needs have increased so much. For example, in the past people were not using lotions. . . . Someone just bathes using soap and that is enough but at present you have to give her oil, lotion, creams to look smart. (IDI, Juma)

Most young people agreed with parents’ views on providing some of their own material needs, particularly for commodities seen as non-essential:

He wants to have things of a certain kind or have a phone, perhaps a watch, those are her/his personal needs that do not concern a parent. (FGD, out-of-school young men)

Most families were poor and parents were unable to provide for basic needs, let alone meet expectations of modern necessities. Young people increasingly met their own material needs (through farming and petty trade) and sometimes also contributed to those of their families. Expectations were higher for those out of school and from single parent families than for those still schooling and from families with both parents. This affected the extent to which parents could exert authority over young people’s decisions and actions (both sexual and non-sexual) and their ability to communicate about SRH:

There is a friend of mine with her twin sister their mother just allows them [have sexual partners]. When they bring money [from sexual exchange] she takes it. They also use it for their personal needs and she doesn’t ask them anything. (IDI, Sarah, a 19-year-old out-of-school young woman)

Similarly, Wight et al. (2006) have noted parents losing power over their sons’ decision making because they could no longer afford to pay for bride wealth for them to marry.

Some mothers directly encouraged their daughters to engage in sexual activity to get money and other goods and rarely seemed to monitor their daughters’ activities – for example by questioning them when they noticed them with something they had not
provided. Other less direct ways that mothers encouraged – or colluded with – their daughters engaging in sex for money or goods included: asking them to buy food and other family supplies, opening the door for them to meet sexual partners at night and helping them to keep sexual relationships secret from their fathers. Young women indicated that some mothers were explicit in their expectations to provide for the family:

The parent tells you that ‘you know I depend on you’. . . . once the parent tells you that, it is for everything. . . . You have to take care of yourself. (FGD, out-of-school young women)

As noted by Wamoyi et al. (2010a), mothers sometimes gave out contradictory messages about young people engaging in transactional sex. For example, they encouraged them to abstain but at the same time shared clothes daughters had bought with money from sexual partners or unquestioningly consumed food bought by the same daughters. While some young women earned an income through work, others relied on sexual partners for material support. Relying on sexual partners is likely to place these young women at risk as it lessens their bargaining powers to negotiate for safer sex (Wamoyi et al. 2010a, 2010b).

In certain situations, young people were encouraged to be independent and some parents were reluctant to provide for their daughters’ material needs: when asked for basic needs such as school requirements and clothing, they told them to look after themselves. Mothers reported that some mothers ‘ranted’ at their daughters when asked for basic provisions creating fear of repeating the request. For example:

It is the mothers who are teaching them about such things [engaging in transactional sex]. When she asks, ‘mother, give me clothes’ you say ‘why can’t you go and look for them’. (IDI, Jane, 54-year-old married woman)

Young women interpreted this as an expectation to bring home money obtained from sexual partners as it was clear they did not have other forms of income generating activity.

Overseeing young people’s activities seemed especially difficult for single mothers, who prioritised working hard to support their families and rarely had time to follow up on what their children did or spend time establishing closeness and trust. Many engaged in labour that involved a whole day of heavy physical work and were referred to as walala hoi (a person who sleeps exhausted from doing heavy manual work). Walala hoi mothers left home early and returned late:

X said that their mother usually comes back home from the rice mill [where she works] at 7.00pm. This depends on the season of the year and availability of work and therefore, she may come back even later. Yesterday their mother came back home at 8.30pm and by the time she arrived the family had already had dinner and the children were already asleep. (PO notes, Annette, 16-year-old out-of-school girl)

Monitoring young people’s (sexual) behaviour was particularly problematic in situations where parents could not provide much needed resources, for example transport to school. Parents were often left with no choice but to believe their children’s explanations when they returned home late. A 35-year-old mother talked about her daughter’s experience in the following:

Because we don’t have a bicycle for her to use while going to school . . . she can return in the evening and say ‘mother transport was a problem’ . . . those are the children’s explanations. She is alone there and if she decides to do something [have sex] she can do it . . . but you just trust her. (IDI, Anna)

Young people highlighted the costs of spending most of their earnings on their families: it could interfere with their own life choices and their plans for the future and, unsurprisingly, sometimes avoided giving money to their family. Peers who had left home
...and had no family demands were characterised as successful. Family expectations for a young person to provide for family material needs were greater with only one son. Out-of-school young male respondents (R) reported in an FGD:

R1: Perhaps you are the only boy at home ... now it reaches a time a parent begins to depend on you ... if you get a small job and you earn Tsh 1000² you must give it out for food at home.

R2: Now another person gets out of home and succeeds in life ... now a young person could think, now my father depends on me. He does not bother to provide home supplies. Now you decide to have a change. So you leave your family and begin your new life.

R3: So he marries even though he has not reached the right age.

R4: Another one thinks of getting married so that she can be independent. (FGD, out-of-school young men)

The examples above show how traditional patterns where parents provided for their children could be reversed. This has implications for parent-child relationships, in particular, parental authority over their children. Young people could feel exploited and unable to progress in life as quickly as their peers who did not contribute to family material needs. As demonstrated, young people may think that since they provided for their parent’s family, they could also support their own and gain independence at the same time. This could potentially encourage early marriages before most young people are ready for it.

‘We go/change with the times’: social and economic change and parent-child relationships

Socio-economic changes affect relationships between parents, young people and other family members. Examples of changes observed include: young people having more access to education and income and making their own choices more often than was common in the past:

... for example a young person like me, you find that someone in my family has stopped me doing something. Now if my parents stop me, I take my own decisions. I come out of home by deciding it myself and begin my own life. (FGD, out-of-school young men)

When parents compared contemporary child upbringing, they reported that it was easier in the past as parents were their children’s’ sole providers. Both parents and young people talked about changes as resulting in an erosion of traditional communal parenting (Liljestrom 2004; Ntukula and Liljestrom 2004) whereby every adult was responsible for the upbringing of all young people in their community. The socio-economic changes they reported were: parents and young people spending less time together and young people being more educated than parents, having more confidence with adults, having access to income and to more entertainment options (e.g. videos, discos and radios), having a desire and expectation to own modern items (e.g. mobile phones) and making their own choices about sexual relationships.

A major change observed in families is the time parents spent with their children, particularly boys. Young men spent much of their time working, socialising in the evenings, relaxing (hanging out with friends, watching videos). Although parents complained about lack of time together, they recognised they could not do much to change this because they could not provide for all their material needs and hence young men had to work.

Family structure seemed to have an effect on parental authority, with many single mothers exercising less control. Marriage was seen as a valued institution in the study...
setting and single mothers (apart from the widows), were regarded with contempt—lessened somewhat if the single mother had a male child. Due to the social respectability that young men brought to their single mothers, their behaviours and movements were rarely questioned.

Most fathers reported that traditional sexual socialisation avenues such as the shikome were rapidly disappearing. This was an opportunity for male family members to sit and chat, discuss current issues and gossip. The shikome also offered an opportunity for the father/grandfather to discuss sexual issues and advise or incite their young men to approach particular girls or prove that they were ‘man’ enough. Young men reported that their fathers or grandfathers occasionally discussed their own sexual experiences in a proud way and sometimes tried to make their sons/grandsons feel that they were not sexually aggressive enough:

R1: Occasionally when you are seated at home as a family, all happy. Then may be jokingly you talk to each other. . . Father jokes about how he used to attract girls when he was young . . . it is possible that the old man [father] has not seen you with a girl. He wants to assess your ‘sharpness’. That I have narrated to you, it is now upon you.

R2: Or you may find that some fathers until now they love women . . . so his aim is to lure you. (FGD, out-of-school young men)

Male parents reported that young men had become ‘trendy’ and say ‘tunaenda na wakati’, literally meaning we change/go with the (modern) times. They had little time to sit and talk with their parents, unlike in the past. A 42-year-old father talked about young men’s preference for modern entertainment:

R: They no longer make shikome, they go to watch television. . . . But in the past for the male children . . . that evening fire was where we warmed ourselves . . . that was father’s main class . . . that is where a father gives permission for his son to marry. Sometimes he could teach them about their clan/ancestry. But nowadays you find that most homes don’t have shikome.

I: Why don’t they have shikome?

R: You find changes, young people say, ‘we change with the times [trendy]’ . . . now in the evening young people go to hangouts [market/village centres], now who will have time to light the shikome? . . . To be honest we can say that morals have deteriorated . . . we can say it is development but if I analyse it, they have deteriorated. Young people rarely sit with parents to talk about morals, how to live because in most cases they are not at home . . . they meet with parents at meal time. (IDI, Paulo)

Young men agreed that father-son relationships were not close. They reported that due to the present economic circumstances, they had to be away from home working and whenever they had free time they preferred to spend it talking with their peers at market centres or watching movies rather than sitting at home with their fathers.

Some male parents interpreted the unavailability of their sons as a loss of control and felt unable to contain them and complained about being ignored by their sons. They said they were lonely compared to the past when they could sit together and chat as a family. It is clear that contemporary entertainment structures are quickly taking over the time young men used to spend with their parents. As male parents feel abandoned and ignored, the relationships they develop with their children are less close. They no longer feel obliged to correct them and apply the same punishments as in the past. They reported that five to ten years ago, children who would not listen to parental advice were taken to clan elders and if they did not change they were excommunicated from their family and village.

Parents blamed socio-economic change for young people’s behaviour and hence their increased risk to HIV. They complained about young people of today not following traditions of respect, fear and seeking advice. The changes parents referred to were those
that gave young people freedom and parents reduced authority. Male parents reported that young people became infected with HIV because they did not heed parental advice:

They have changed. Modern young people don’t observe customs and traditions … if a child doesn’t listen to you finally s/he may bring the things you didn’t expect … for instance even AIDS. … Someone who listens to his/her parents, can’t be careless [have sex] … but for the one who thinks ‘this one is wasting my time’, it is very easy to get those things [diseases]. (IDI, Ben, a 44-year-old father)

One view expressed was that most young people were better educated, they were more knowledgeable about SRH and HIV/AIDS and so parents did not know how to advise their young people concerning HIV and AIDS. Moreover, older parents mentioned that this was a new disease to them as it never existed when they were growing up. A recognition that societal change came hand-in-hand with a change in values was also reported, however, alongside a sense that the strategies adopted to respond to young people’s problems should reflect these changes and take the different context into consideration. Mathayo, a 71-year old father said:

Every generation has its own things. … Because in the past, there were no instruments of communication, for example, these phones … the bicycles came but the desire that everyone should have it didn’t exist … may be cows. At present cows are for old people … it is old men’s interest, but for young men, no one has an interest in that … I mean it appears every generation has its own things. … Therefore in order to prevent someone from doing something [engaging in premarital sex], you must have high powered strategies … but even though you can’t prevent, you only reduce. … Ee, now you must understand the surroundings that drive someone to indulge in such things. (DI)

The participant above divided changes that happened in their society into old and new, accepted differences in values and acknowledged that young people’s risky behaviour could not easily be changed but could be reduced. He suggested ‘high-powered strategies’ that took an individual person’s context into account.

‘Do what I say and not what I do’: parents’ behaviour and effect on parental authority

Since behavioural control is also very much linked to role modelling (WHO 2007), parents’ own behaviour was important in determining what they told their children concerning desirable sexual behaviour. If a father behaved in a manner perceived as undesirable (e.g. heavy drinking, coming back home late in the night, misuse of family resources and having extramarital sex), it affected the way his family perceived him and his authority to discipline his children. His authority as family head and decision-maker could be challenged:

In some homes you find that father is an alcoholic, so whenever he goes drinking during farming season the children and their mother do farming. … After the farm harvests, he goes to sell the paddy and uses the money on beer. Now because of that respect for him reduces and children won’t listen to what he tells them. (FGD, out-of-school young men)

Parents also felt that their advice concerning SRH of their children would be questioned if they were known to engage in extramarital sex:

If the person telling you has behaviour of going after men or women, you can’t be satisfied with what s/he is telling you. (IDI, Saulo, 42-year-old man)

Unstable family relations, pregnancies out-of-wedlock and widowhood were reported as responsible for the increase in single parent families in the study setting. Both parents and young people reported that single mothers experienced the challenge of being good role models more than the married women. They were sexually active and sometimes had
multiple and casual partners. They sometimes sneaked their sexual partners’ home and occasionally their children saw this. However, they understood the impact of their own sexual behaviour on their authority over their children and tried to be discrete:

I: How many lovers do you have?
R: Only one.
I: And where do you meet?
R: He can’t come at home, if I will bring him at home the children will see him.
I: And suppose the children see him?
R: They will also do that [imitate], they will not respect you … they won’t listen to you when you advise them. (IDI, Maria, 46-year-old single mother)

Discussion

Our findings have demonstrated that the socio-economic change, such as education, economic needs provision, items perceived as valuable, modern entertainment options and alternative sources of information, empower young people and potentially disempower their parents. These changes affect parent-child relationship dynamics, particularly parental authority over their young people’s sexual behaviour, in many ways: young people have become important players in their families’ economic circumstances, parents are unable to provide adequately for their young people’s material needs and hence have minimal say in their sexual decision making, young people are increasingly more educated than parents and therefore more knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS, condoms and modern contraception and, owing to a proliferation of sources of information and modern entertainment, young people rely less on parental advice and the traditional forms of sexual socialisation.

Young people in this context, especially out-of-school young men, are increasingly mobile, engaging in money earning activities. As a result, they sometimes had more income than their parents, who rely mainly on the diminishing returns from subsistence farming. Young men relied less on their parents for advice and decision making and chose their own sexual partners. As noted by others (Madulu 1998; Wight et al. 2006), given that young men rely less and less on parents for bride wealth, parental advice on issues related to choice of sexual partners and sometimes marriage is less relevant. Young men and women’s ability to select partners has provided them with freedom to choose when and with whom to have relationships, but, on the other hand, it has left them with little social support when they have a conflict with their partners.

Given the secretive nature of sexual relationships in the study locations (Wight et al. 2006), most young people may not get to know their partners properly before they decide to marry. This could partly account for the high turnover of partners and marital dissolution, further risk factors for HIV and other infections. Boerma et al. (2002) observed that marital dissolution and high turnover of partners was common in the study setting among the 15–44 year age-group, with 5% of men and 10% of women separated or divorced and 34% of the currently married reporting a past broken marriage.

The emergence of single mothers as heads of families, and the role young people play in the functioning of such families, has bestowed increased decision making power on the youth compared with the notional family head, the single mother. This was especially the case for male children. Due to the fear of losing the ‘male presence and support’ that male children brought, single mothers rarely questioned their sons’ behaviours. Wamoyi et al. (2010a) observed that parents who rarely provided for their children and depended on their children’s contribution to the family’s material needs often gave ambiguous abstinence and other SRH messages to their children. Moreover, since single mothers were often
away working to earn income, they were unable to monitor their children’s activities, leaving young people from such families with uncontrolled freedom. This may imply that children of single mothers may be at an increased risk of SRH problems.

These findings highlight gaps in recommendations from studies on parenting, which tend to focus on the role of parents in the provision of children’s material needs (WHO 2007), with little attention to what children provide for their families (Wamoyi et al. 2010a). We argue that due to their new provider roles, young people have gained power in decision making concerning their own lives and sometimes those of their families. Most parents are ill prepared for this and feel challenged and undermined. These feelings have resulted in a conflict between parents and young people, especially with regard to father-son relationships. This creates a barrier to parent-child communication about SRH (Wamoyi et al. 2010c). An examination of the shifting balance of power between parents and children should be central in studying and designing interventions, especially where young people have become major players in the family’s material needs.

As young people become better educated than their parents, this affects parents’ confidence about providing advice on SRH. Moreover, educated young people perceive modern life as fashionable and are not always willing to take advice from their ‘old fashioned’ elders, hence their remark ‘we change with the times’. On the part of parents, a lack of appropriate SRH knowledge is a drawback to their efforts to communicate prevention messages to their children and may slow down the progress they might make to overcome cultural inhibitions on cross-generational communication about SRH (Wamoyi et al. 2010c; Wight et al. 2006).

As noted in this study and others (Bohmer and Kirumba 2000; Oyefara 2005; Remes et al. 2010), until recently, parents and the wider family played an important role in shaping young people’s sexual behaviour. In addition to targeting SRH interventions at young people, these findings point to the need for education programmes to improve parents’ knowledge to prepare them for establishing friendly and open relationships with their children.

Although study findings improve our understanding of the impact of social and economic changes on parent-child relationships, particularly behavioural control, the research has its limitations. The inclusion in the sample of young people in their late-teens and early-twenties and those out of school has provided useful and interesting insights, but may have resulted in a picture that reflects mainly the views of those who are more independent, leaving out the voices of younger, less articulate teenagers. Moreover, what was observed here may be different from what happens in urban settings where both parents and young people may have different socio-economic conditions and levels of education.

Parents exercising less behavioural control with young people who contribute to the economic needs of the family has implications for their parental authority and young people’s sexual behaviour. Changing socio-economic circumstances, which increase numbers of single mothers, mean that women are increasingly becoming important players in the economic functioning of families and there is likely to be a power shift if this trend continues, starting with single mother families.

It is evident that traditional socialisation systems (such as the shikome) are slowly disintegrating and being replaced by modern socialisation avenues. Parents and fathers in particular are feeling increasingly frustrated by these changes and these feelings might be attributed to their diminishing power over their sons’ activities (sexual and non-sexual). It is, however, worth noting that some of the messages that were delivered by the fathers at the traditional socialisation avenues such as shikome, encouraged young men to engage in
sexual activity and might have been detrimental to their – and their partners’ – sexual health. In that respect, it might be argued that the socio-economic changes that impacted the shikome might protect young men from the enticements of older generations to prove their masculinity by engaging in premarital sex.

Our findings demonstrate that issues of parenting and young people’s sexual behaviour are complex and interrelated. Increased levels of education among young people (Ministry of Education 2008) may have an impact on their families and contribute in unexpected ways to changing social structures. Policy and interventions addressing young people’s sexual health problems should certainly consider the influence of the family and parents on young people as well as that of young people on their families. We conclude that addressing the needs of families and young people may entail making efforts to support parents, enabling them to respond to emerging challenges and changes in their families and society.

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Notes
1. Parents here included biological parents and other adult caregivers.
2. At the time of the research, the exchange rate was approximately Tsh 1,250 to US$1. The official minimum monthly wage (which was more than many labourers actually received) was Tsh 60,000.
3. An evening fire lit outside the house, where male family members gather to talk before and after dinner.

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Résumé


Resumen

En este artículo analizamos de qué modo han influido los cambios socioeconómicos en Tanzania en las relaciones entre padres e hijos, en particular en el control parental sobre el comportamiento de los hijos y la influencia parental en la conducta sexual de los jóvenes. Los datos fueron recabados a partir de la observación de los participantes, de las charlas en grupos y de entrevistas exhaustivas con jóvenes (14-24 años) y sus padres. Los cambios socioeconómicos (educación, cambios de valores, dotación de necesidades materiales) afectaban a las relaciones entre los padres y los jóvenes. Los jóvenes contribuían a las necesidades económicas de sus familias y los padres que recibían o esperaban más apoyo de sus hijos ejercían menos control conductual (en materia sexual y no sexual de sus hijos). Los padres y los jóvenes dedicaban menos tiempo a estar juntos que las generaciones anteriores. Los padres informaron que pensaban que sus hijos tenían más conocimientos en materia sexual y de salud reproductiva que ellos. A medida que los jóvenes recibían más educación y contribuían más al bienestar económico de sus familias, tomaban cada vez más decisiones por cuenta propia y la influencia de los padres se debilitaba. En las intervenciones políticas sobre la salud sexual y reproductiva de los jóvenes debería considerarse cómo influye la familia en los jóvenes y qué influencia tienen los jóvenes en sus familias y la autoridad parental. Las familias, y en concreto los padres, deberían recibir apoyo para responder a los nuevos desafíos y cambios de sus familias y la sociedad en general.