

BACKGROUND

Young people in developing countries are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection, sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies. Many efforts are being done to influence young people to adopt safe sex, but result only in small and insignificant changes in sexual behaviour¹. While much attention goes to studying sexual behaviour of young people – using indicators like ‘condom use at last sex’ and ‘the number of sexual partners in the last months’ - only little attention goes to studying their sexuality and relationships and the cultural environments in which reported sexual behaviour occur². This study aims to describe the current norms of Rwandan youth concerning sexuality and relationships and to assess if these norms differ by gender, age, socio-economic status, sexual experience, relationship status, alcohol consumption and subjective importance of traditional culture.

METHODS

The study is a cross-sectional study among students of the 6th year of secondary education in Rwanda that uses a standardized questionnaire to measure norms, values and sexual behaviour. Boys and girls administered the questionnaire separately and no persons of authority were allowed to enter the study site. Data-entry was automated using Optical Mark Recognition. Statistical analysis was done in PASW18.

RESULTS

285 respondents between 16 and 34 years (median: 21) completed a valid questionnaire. The majority were males (61.4%).

1. Sexual behaviour

About one third of the respondents was sexually active (34.5%), of which half used a condom at last sex. One fourth (23.8%) never had a relationship and 56.2% was currently in a relationship. 12.2% of the respondents ever had a relationship with a partner who was ten or more years older. 23.8% of respondents ever had two or more sexual partners at the same time.

Males were more likely to be sexually active ($p=0.000$) and to have multiple partners ($p=0.036$) and less likely to be in an age-disparate relationship ($p=0.002$). Those sexually active were more likely to drink alcohol ($p=0.000$), to be or have been in a relationship ($p=0.000$) and to find traditional culture less important ($p=0.015$). Concurrency is associated with more alcohol use ($p=0.002$) and with higher socio-economic status ($p=0.031$).

2. Norms concerning relationships

Relationship mutuality and investment were measured through 5-point Likert scales of respectively five and twelve items with maximum scores of 25 and 60^{3,4}. One item measured the need for a relationship. The Rwandan youth scored high on all three measures. Mutuality in a relationship had a mean score of 21.66 (s.d. 3.60), relationship investment a mean score of 47.24 (s.d. 8.55) and need for a relationship 3.76 (s.d. 1.21). In general, girls had higher scores on the three relationship scales, but this difference was only statistically significant for relationship investment ($p=0.018$).

3. Norms concerning sexual behaviour

In general, Rwandan youth have a restrictive attitude concerning sexual behaviour. The majority agrees that boys and girls can go out on dates (56.3%), but not that they can have sexual intercourse (12.7%).



Casual relationships (having sex with someone you don't know well or with someone you don't want to have a relationship with) is only accepted by a small minority of respondents (respectively 3.4 and 9.6%). Fidelity is considered important (82%). Many agree that they would regret having sex before marriage (52.2% for girls and 31.5% for boys). The minority approves of having multiple partners (13.9% for girls and 22% for boys). Age-disparity is more accepted for girls (26.9%) than for boys (19.5%). The norms are significantly more restrictive for girls than for boys.

Respondents who ever had sex ($p=0.000$), ever had a relationship ($p=0.019$) and consume alcohol ($p=0.000$) have significantly less restrictive attitudes.

4. Multivariate analysis

We performed multivariate analysis for norms concerning three types of risky relationships. Casual relationships are more approved by young persons (0.388 [0.141], $p<0.001$) who are sexually active (2.720 [0.689], $p<0.0001$) and often consume alcohol (5.961 [1.797], $p<0.0001$).

Multiple partnerships are more approved by respondents who are sexually active (0.665 [0.369], $p<0.01$) and less by respondents who have a high appreciation of traditional culture (0.313 [0.152], $p<0.01$).

The approval of age-disparate relationships is higher among those who often drink alcohol (3.573 [1.101], $p<0.001$) and who have a lower socio-economic status (0.353 [0.191], $p<0.01$).

CONCLUSION

The data show a complex reality: norms for girls differ from boys, traditional norms are mingled with western, romantic norms. There are no uniform norms concerning sexual behaviour and relationships. Norms vary by age, gender, sexual activity, relationship status, alcohol consumption, importance of traditional culture and socio-economic status. HIV prevention and reproductive health promotion interventions for young people should take into account this great variety in types of relationships and the different factors influencing young people's opinion thereof. This also requires action on the structural level (socio-economical). More research should be done on the important role of alcohol consumption in sexual decision making and perceptions of youth.

