

# RISK TAKING BEHAVIOR AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN KAMPALA SLUMS.

A STUDY OF YOUNG PEOPLE SERVED BY UYDEL.

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## **Introduction**

The unprecedented upsurge in risk taking behavior is becoming the mode of daily living among young people in many slums of Kampala. As a result, there is increased vulnerability among young people in our society today as more and more are engaging in risk taking behaviors' a factor that creates questions in the researcher.

Joseph Malinga in his article, "The platform: Addressing information needs of the poor and the marginalized" notes that hardly day passes without a young person out of school getting involved in risky behaviors with the hope of bettering their living conditions. For females, the risky behaviors might involve early sexual affairs for material gains while for males, issues of drug abuse that lead to reckless sexual life are eminent (Panos Eastern Africa, January 2011). Although there are several significant socio-economic factors that influence risk taking behaviors' among young people, the article has only focused on those that emerged out of interactions with the young people in slum areas of Nateete aged 10-24 years.

The causes of this phenomenon are enormous however the following have been explored; parental upbringing styles, nature and wealth of households, educational attainment of young people, the role of the community and media influence. All of these aspects are very crucial and ultimately lead to risk taking behaviors. A total population of 167 slum youth from Nateete-Lubaga Division was considered and constituted of 24 young boys and 143 young girls. The use of young people's case studies and assessments were used to generate the information. Findings suggest that socio economic status is a contentious issue in promoting risk taking behaviors among young people.

## **Socio economic drivers to risk taking behaviors' based on related literature and UYDEL experience in Nateete**

### **Parental upbringing styles**

Families are one of the strongest socializing forces in life. They teach children to control unacceptable behavior, to delay gratification, and to respect the rights of others. Conversely, families can teach children aggressive, antisocial, and violent behavior (Wright & Wright 1994). For example, the parents disciplining more harshly, often predicts continuing problems during adolescence, as well as adult criminality (Prochnow & DeFronzo 1997). Children who live in homes with only one parent or in which marital relationships have been disrupted by divorce or separation are more likely to display a range of behavioral problems than children who are from two parent families (Thornberry, et al. 1999). Previous research has demonstrated associations between exposure to parental divorce and marital discord while growing up and children's psychological distress in adulthood (Amato & Sobolewski 2001). One young person had this to say, *"After the death of my parents, my young father (not biological) took me up and was the one supporting my education. He was not married by this time. When he married, his wife could not allow me to stay with them as she said they needed some privacy but the actual reason was, she did not want her husband to pay for my school fees. I was taken to stay with my auntie. My auntie didn't have the potential to accommodate me and so, she decided to take me back to the village in Masaka. While at Masaka, I got a friend who convinced me to come with her to Kampala such that we could get something to do. When we came, we arrived in Nateete and she straight away introduced me to the commercial sex business. I also joined the business and the money we got from this business; we decided to rent a room in Nateete. Each of us contributed to the rent which was 50,000 shillings per month. By this time, I was still young. I was only 14 but I used to go with men I should not have gone*

*with who were too mature for me.”Another young person added, “What made me leave home were my parents. They were too tough to live with!!!”*

Asiimwe et al (2003) showed that there are many traditional practices spread across Uganda that increase risky sexual behavior among adolescents. In Eastern Uganda – for example, there are ethnic groups which circumcise and during such occasions, casual sex among adolescents is common and is traditionally encouraged. In many parts of Northern Uganda, male adolescents 15 years and above are generally considered to be adults and live in their own huts hence receive less parental monitoring which increases their vulnerability. In Western Uganda, some sections of the population have been reluctant to adopt condom use allegedly because it is incompatible with their sexual styles. The Northern part of the country has a variety of traditional functions which tend to promote casual sex among adolescents. UYDEL experiences from Nateete clearly show that young people who are rejected by their parents; those who grow up in homes with considerable conflict; or who are inadequately supervised for instance parents often not knowing where the child is, whom the child is with, what the child is doing or when the child will be home finally engage in risk taking behaviors. Monitoring becomes increasingly important as children move into adolescence and spend less time under the direct supervision of parents or other adults and more time with peers. These findings are further supported by Kim, et al (1999) whose study found out that coercive parenting and lack of parental monitoring contributes not only directly to boys’ antisocial behaviors, but also indirectly as seen in the contribution to their increased opportunity to associate with deviant peers, which is predictive of higher levels of delinquent acts. Walklate (2003:106) adds that if a child has low parental supervision, then the likelihood of a child offending is increased. The laxity in supervision of young people by parents, guardians or other care takers has caused a lot of problems and accounts for the good percentages of young people engaging in risky behaviors.

It is apparent that not every family that exists can carry out its socializing tasks equally and effectively as expected. However, it is important to note that the development of any society both socially and economically depends entirely on young people’s mode of action and behavior. Many parents have forgotten their primary roles in the socialization process. They have failed to teach sex roles to their children. Parents move with their children in bars where all social evils are learnt. Parents have no time for their children unlike the past where girls would be with their mothers and aunties while boys would be with their fathers and uncles. This has resulted into children growing up without knowing what they have to do as responsible girls and boys and thus engaging into risky behaviors.

### **Educational attainment of young people**

Education is a key input to development, young people’s experience of school is another important influence on their risk taking behavior. The type of educational institution attended and the place of residence of the student have all shown the influence in determining sexual behaviors-suggesting that these behaviors are also influenced by the degree of freedom accorded to the young person [Ann N Y Acad Sci,2006)

It is not surprising that many illiterate parents think that their children can also earn a living without going to school and therefore their children are involved in risky behaviours because they are not

occupied at many times as the saying goes “*an idle mind is a devils workshop.*” Failure to send children to school has a lot to do on discipline of children. It is well known that a school does a lot as far as disciplining young people is concerned thus it means young people who have not been sent to school totally miss out on such disciplinary measures a factor attributed to risky behaviours in the community. Over 85% young people at Nateete drop –in-center were primary five-primary seven drop outs with various reasons such as; loss of interest in school, lack of school fees, orphan hood, mistreatment by teachers, bullying at school, early pregnancies and some stopped by parents/guardians. This educational level cannot allow a thorough analysis of life issues a factor that pushed such young people in risk taking behaviors. The 2006 Demographic and Health Survey in Uganda reports that age mixing in sexual relationships is more common among young women with only primary-level education and those who do not know where to get a condom. These factors often leave young women vulnerable to high-risk sexual behavior and HIV infection. Further analysis indicated that these were children of parents who never attended formal education as confessed by the young people. Important to note is that young people who passed through institutions with rampant strikes have acquired observable behaviors as rudeness, carelessness and many of them are unsympathetic to others.

### **Nature and wealth of house holds**

Due to cultural and societal expectations in Uganda, men generally have more power in sexual relationships and are not expected to be faithful thus having many partners and thus the prevalence of polygamous families. Young people from polygamous families are usually exposed to risk taking behaviors as many of them do not experience parental love, some harassed by step parents, lack basic necessities as a result of being so many to be equally provided for by the bread winner. The social congestion in polygamous families force young people to copy and develop antisocial behaviors such as being jealousy, greed, negative competition that at times force young girls to accept favors from men in exchange of sex to show off economic status to their fellows.

Young people from such poor households normally stand at a risk of engaging in sexual risk behaviors, with their economic status motivating them to partake in transactional sex and serving as another limitation in their negotiating power with respect to condom use as stated by J Obstet Gynecol Neonatal Nurs. 2008. This is true based on the UYDEL experience in Nateete where most of the project beneficiaries come from poor households. It is important to note that parents of these young people have different levels of income which are not dependable at all. For those involved in subsistence agriculture and other petty activities like charcoal selling, alcohol distillation, local breed poultry keeping and sale of simple items during market days fetch little incomes for the families. This is why young people from poor peasants fail to buy scholastic materials as required at school. They lack basic necessities of life which puts them in a desperate condition and thus engage in risky taking behaviors to achieve the demands of life. One young person expressed this; *“No one of us was going to school and some times, we lacked what to eat at home. Conditions at home made me easily accept favours in exchange of sex from men because I thought I would get better. Unfortunately, I was heavily mistreated by some men who could at times use me without a condom because things just got worse. I now have three children with different fathers and with no help.”*

As a result of desperacy, young people are willing to take on whatever comes their way whether good or bad because they are left with no choice. The need for young people to live a luxury life and yet coming from poor households is a considerable factor towards engaging in risky behaviors. For example, accepting favors from strangers who only want to fulfill their selfish desires. This is where trafficking of these young people and even migrating on their own comes in. Most Young people in Nateete are trafficked from Masaka, Mpigi, Rakai, Mbarara, Rukungiri, Mityana, Mubende, Sembabule, and Kisoro with Masaka having the highest numbers. Others come from Luweero, Nakasongola, Wakiso. Kiboga,

Mukono, Jinja, and Iganga but these are few in numbers. Non Ugandans include mostly the Rwandese. They are trafficked on grounds of getting for them jobs (employment). When they reach the places of destination, many are abused sexually, emotionally and physically among other kinds of abuses. This makes them leave the places of work where they were placed by the traffickers. By the time of leaving, many are already used to town life and do not opt to go back to their villages. They decide to join friends who introduce them to another world of their own where they are free to do whatever they want especially for survival purposes. This is where risky behaviors especially commercial sex practices come in due to the demand for money. Girls are mostly trafficked on grounds of working as house maids. However, it is important to note that some young people migrate to Kampala by their own initiative due to false beliefs that in Kampala they will get everything they need. A young person confessed that; *“I ran from home in Kiboga to come to Kampala to work as a house girl. My grandmother wasn’t treating me well. Besides, I grew up not knowing who my real parents were. I am being accommodated by a friend in Mutundwe but I need help. Activities I engage in at the moment for a living include, Karaoke and attending to a bar in Mutundwe.”*

Uganda’s economic conditions have been adverse and demanding thus some young people have been forced to find better and tentative alternatives that can provide balance with the daily demands of life. The rising costs of living aggravated by the devastating state of our economy pose uncertainty to young people and force some of them to take a negative course.

### **The role of the community**

Families and friends help to create a sense of identity and inclusion in a community and also provide important psychosocial support. However, the values and norms that define this community can encourage young people to develop attitudes and behaviors that compromise their wellbeing. For example, close ties to peer groups that provide social and emotional support but also advocate smoking can encourage young people identifying themselves as part of this group to also smoke (Morrow, 2001). Research on smoking among young people described how social networks and friendships influence health risk taking behavior. Consequently, for them, smoking was custom. Many of the young people interviewed as part of this research discussed how their lives and friendship groups might change if they quit smoking and their concerns about feeling excluded from friendship groups where smoking was the norm (Amos, et. al., 2006). One of the UYDEL beneficiary who was negatively influenced by her peers had this to say; *“I ran away from home in Mbarara to join my friends in Kampala who were in karaoke. Through these friends, I joined the commercial sex business where I started earning daily incomes.”* Peers with a more coercive interpersonal style tend to become involved with each other, and this relationship is assumed to increase the likelihood of being involved in delinquent behavior (Cashwell & Vacc 1996).

Low community educational levels and the unfavorable economic environment are also associated with the increased likelihood of risky taking behaviors. Living in a community characterized with a low level of educational attainment may also provide a bad model of behavior against which young people can judge their decisions on sexual behavior. UYDEL center is situated in a slum area characterized by petty businesses such as small markets selling vegetables, selling maize on the road; selling sugar canes on bicycles; collecting scrap; frying chapatti’s among others of the like and one finds that through these businesses, community members collect meager amounts of money. Why they take on these businesses is largely dependent on the levels of education. Information derived from young people shows that most parents and guardians are school drop outs and others never received any formal education at all. Important to note is that these are the parents / guardians and relatives of the young people received at the centre. It is not surprising however that young people take on this path too. They resort to petty businesses like selling alcohol in local bars and selling roasted maize along roads to earn some income

for survival. As a result, they are exposed to drunkardness, smoking, drug use, pre marital sex, formation of gangs, fights all of which are risky behaviors.

### **Media influence**

In addition to family, friends, schools and neighborhoods, other societal messages about health behavior can influence young people’s attitudes about risk taking. Recent qualitative research with young people in Australia suggests that representations of smoking in television, movies and magazines gave young people between the ages of 13 and 16 the sense that smoking was a natural, normal and a part of everyday life. They also perceived it as way to relieve stress, as was often suggested by images in the media (Watson, *et. al.*, 2003).

Ugandan media is not exceptional, quite often alcohol and drugs are advertised on local radio stations, billboards, local television stations and local news papers such as Red Paper, The New Vision, Bukedde, Rupiny all of which employ more sensational words that young people cling on and become inseparable from the acts of alcohol and drug abuse which in turn accelerate the rate of risk taking behaviors in young people. The media work hand in hand with the music industry, today’s music has lost meaning in the country, it is rather focused on making young people explore more in terms of love relationships instead of delivering developmental messages.

On the other hand, some media have tried to shape young people positively. Y.E.A.H. has made significant progress stimulating dialogue and action around "Something for Something Love," using its popular "Rock Point 256" radio drama series and reinforcing media materials and community outreach activities. In terms of the influence of knowledge on behavior, some studies have demonstrated that many young people, despite knowing the risks associated with unprotected sexual activities, still engage in these activities [J Obstet Gynecol Neonatal Nurs. 2005] Young people in Nateete who possess Reproductive Health knowledge but do engage in risky behaviours are driven by the low self esteem which is associated with lack of negotiating power, failure to make decisions and revenge among others. For instance, one young person lamented; *“After being infected with HIV, I also decided to engage in commercial sex work such that I can infect others because it wasn’t my choice to infect myself also.”* Another young person is quoted to have said, *“Some men do not want to give you money; they want to just use you.”* This indicates lack of negotiating power. As an indicator of failure to make decisions, One young person made this clear by saying; *“I normally charge between 2000 – 4000 shillings but if a customer gives me 15,000 shillings, I go without a condom.”* Reifman *et al* (2001) adds that there is evidence that an individual’s personal values can safeguard against developing opinions that can lead to risk taking behavior. For example, young people who value their health have been shown to be less likely to abuse alcohol.

### **Young people’s responses on socio economic drivers and risky taking behaviors**

Socio-economic drivers	Sub- factors	Gender		Total number of cases received	%ges
		Males	Females		
Upbringing	Young people not supervised	24	79	103	60.5

practices	Young people living with single parents	24	93	117	70
	Young people living with both parents	-	05	05	4.2
	Reports on domestic violence	3	42	45	26.9
	Young people who receive sex education	07	102	109	65.3
Educational attainment of young people	Young people who attended strike prone schools	11	74	85	18
	Those who dropped from p1-p4	02	50	52	31.1
	Dropped from p5-p7	18	67	85	50.9
	Dropped from s1-s2	01	11	12	7.2
	Never attended formal education	03	15	18	10.1
Nature and wealth of households	Young people from families without income generating activities	05	71	76	45.5
	Young people from families with low incomes	08	83	91	54.5
	Young people from polygamous families	24	108	132	79
The role of the community	Young people from communities that do not uphold values and norms	24	143	167	100
	Young people from communities with low economic status	24	134	158	95
	Young people from communities with high economic status	-	09	09	5
The influence of the media	Young people who listen to radio talk shows promoting sexual behaviors	21	132	153	91.6
	Young people who watch pornography on televisions and blue movies	13	148	161	96.4
	Young people who read pornographic materials like sengas, kamunye, onion	16	118	134	80.2

### **Interventions to impact on young people's risky behaviors**

Parenting characterized by warm and supportive relationships with children, reasonable and flexible discipline is most likely to achieve positive outcomes and reduce risk taking behaviors among young people.

Activities such as, reducing the sales of cigarettes to young people under-16 years of age, media campaigns and increasing the price of cigarettes may have some impact on the perceptions of smoking that hitherto have facilitated smoking uptake among young people. A restriction in the sale of cigarettes to young people may reduce the perception that cigarettes are relatively easy to obtain and thus may change smoking behavior. Also, school-based drug education programmes led by peers showed some evidence of effectiveness and were in fact found to be superior to adult-led programmes in effecting a reduction in drug use. When peer leaders were combined with teacher-led programmes effectiveness was reduced, but adding a peer component to already effective programmes increased effectiveness (McGrath *et. al.*, 2006).

Sharing experiences with young people in school as a strategy for reducing the incidence of teenage pregnancy and social exclusion. Some of the suggestions include, increasing young people's involvement in the development and management of their school, equipping young people with skills for forming positive relationships with peers and resolving conflicts, providing learning support for students who are falling behind in their studies, increasing parental involvement in education, broadening future expectations and providing targeted support for young people experiencing difficult circumstances.

### **Interventions for commercial sex workers;**

Provide opportunities to complete formal education for some and vocational skills for most others. Stimulating self employment through handcraft and creative workshops will furthermore contribute to income generation.

Maintain and expand the activities of the drop-in centres as important meeting places for sex workers to share their experiences and counteract their social isolation and help build their self esteem.

Establishing services for sex workers within larger buildings with services for the general public may lead to better access and less stigmatization. Professional supervision for staff of NGOs working with sex workers is considered very important to prevent burn-out. There is need of a respectful attitude towards sex workers and support of their choices.

Community strengthening of sex workers can be enhanced through external training seminars and social activities. Provide skills training on how to communicate and negotiate with clients; document human rights violations and use these case studies for advocacy on a national and international level; stimulate leadership development within the sex workers community by supporting sex workers organizations.

### **CONCLUSION**

Young people have problems that are damaging their mental, physical, emotional and spiritual development. Many are living without adequate livelihood and security; including lack of economic resources for proper survival, protection and development. Poverty is a key factor which tends to

render young people more prone to exploitation, abuse and neglect. UYDEL through its services of treatment, vocational skills training and life skills trainings among other services has greatly helped to restore the plight of these young people

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