

# ***An idle mind is devil's workshop: transactional sex and adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes among young women in urban slums during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in South Africa.***

Obasanjo Bolarinwa, Clifford Odimegwu, Kobi Ajayi

## **Background**

The worldwide spread of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown has profoundly impacted many sectors of society, with young individuals in urban slums, especially vulnerable groups. Shaped by its deep-rooted socio-economic challenges, South Africa observed negative sexual and reproductive health consequences, like sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies, among its young female population. These outcomes have not been thoroughly addressed. Consequently, this study explores the link between transactional sex and these adverse health outcomes among young women in South African urban slums during COVID-19.

## **Method**

A cross-sectional survey data collection was conducted in four urban slums during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa among 800 young women aged 18 to 24 years using an Android version of the Open Data Kit mobile application. The study outcome variable was adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes (sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy), while the key explanatory variable was transactional sex. The frequency distribution of all the variables was displayed, followed by chi-square and bi-variate analysis depicted by graphs and multivariable logistic regression with an alpha precision of less than or equal to 0.05.

## **Results**

The prevalence rate of adverse sexual and reproductive health among young women during COVID-19 in the included urban slum area in South Africa was 13.5%; specifically, sexually transmitted infections were 12.0%, and unintended pregnancy was 12.4%. The prevalence of transactional sex was 7.1%. Young women in urban slums who were involved in transactional sex had higher odds of reporting sexually transmitted infection [aOR=3.3; 95%(CI=1.6-6.7)] and unintended pregnancy [aOR=2.3; 95%(CI=1.1-4.7)] compared to those who were not involved in transactional sex. The selected covariates showed that young women with 3-5 and 6 & above sexual partners were more likely to report any of the adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes compared with those with 0-2 sexual partners.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this study showed that transactional sex among young women in urban slums in South Africa during the COVID-19 lockdown is associated with adverse sexual and

reproductive health outcomes. Furthermore, those young women with more than two sexual partners were more likely to report sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy. Multifaceted interventions involving community engagement in sexual health education within the urban slums are required to reduce these adverse health outcomes in future pandemics.

**Keywords:** Transactional sex, Sexually transmitted infections, Unintended pregnancy, Adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes, Urban slums, South Africa