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“Instead of Asking for Fare, You Ask Her to Pay with Sex”: Male Perspectives on the Factors Influencing Schoolgirls’ Participation in Age-Disparate Transactional Sex Relationships

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Abstract: Age-disparate transactional sex relationships are often coerced and exploitative. The gender and economic disparities between affluent men and economically disadvantaged girls often perpetuate these relationships, resulting in their exploitation. This qualitative study assessed men’s understanding of factors influencing schoolgirls’ engagement in age-disparate transactional sex relationships in two rural districts in Kenya. Four focus group sessions were conducted with men from two primary professions: motorcycle taxi operators (Boda Boda) and teachers from primary and secondary schools from two districts in Kitui South, Sub County, Kenya. Focus group data were analyzed using conventional content analysis. Several influential factors associated with schoolgirls’ engagement in these transactional relationships are discussed in three broad themes: access and coercion, parental influence, and peer-related factors. Study results indicate that schoolgirls in rural areas are more susceptible to predation by men willing to trade sexual favors with underage girls. These findings make it imperative to address the predation of adolescent girls by men involved in these transactional relationships by implementing comprehensive sex education programs that empower schoolgirls to recognize and resist coercion. Additionally, implementing measures involving community leaders, parents, and other stakeholders in a collective effort to combat the exploitation of underage girls is paramount. These measures should be accompanied by the stricter enforcement of laws and regulations to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions.

Keywords: transactional sex; adolescent girls; Kenya; age-disparate; perpetrators



Citation: Munala, L.; Mohamed, A.; Okunna, N.; Yewhalawork, B.; Kibati, P.; Kihuha, J. “Instead of Asking for Fare, You Ask Her to Pay with Sex”: Male Perspectives on the Factors Influencing Schoolgirls’ Participation in Age-Disparate Transactional Sex Relationships. *Adolescents* **2024**, *4*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/adolescents4010001>

Academic Editor: Elizabeth Reed

Received: 1 October 2023

Revised: 15 December 2023

Accepted: 18 December 2023

Published: 20 December 2023



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1. Introduction

Transactional sex (TS) is defined as “a commodified sexual exchange for economic survival, educational achievement, job opportunities, or various gifts that will boost one’s status among one’s peer group” [1]. These relationships are typically intergenerational or cross-generational, i.e., sexual relationships between non-married partners with an age gap of ten or more years [2–5]. In sub-Saharan Africa, heterosexual age-disparate TS relationships typically involve an older male partner, resulting in an imbalanced power dynamic [6]. Poverty and gender norms aggravate this age disparity [7]. Generally, men have significantly more economic power than women [8]. Further, women tend to have lower autonomy in many societies, particularly in rural areas [9–11]. Thus, age-disparate relationships are sustained by the pervasive wealth and gender inequalities between economically dependent girls and wealthy or more privileged men [12–16].

A review of the available literature shows that TS relations among adolescent girls are prevalent in many African countries, particularly in East Africa [8,12,17]. For instance, TS relations have been documented in South Africa [2,18], Malawi [19], Uganda [20],

Rwanda [1], Tanzania [21] and Kenya [22,23]. Research shows that motivations for engaging in age-disparate TS relationships include the need to obtain funds for school supplies, transportation or the obsession with material goods such as cellphones and fancy clothing, as well as pressure from parents and peers. While the motivations for engaging in transactional sex may differ in many African countries, these relationships are usually perceived as a means of survival, “to procure the basic requirements for subsistence” [2]. It is important to acknowledge that girls may navigate these transactions in certain contexts with a sense of agency in their ability to decide among their limited choices [24]. However, this agency is often constrained by broader societal inequalities, emphasizing the urgent need to address the underlying issues of poverty and gender discrimination.

Age-disparate TS relations are often coerced [25,26], and are therefore considered a form of sexual violence. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual violence as “any sexual encounter or attempt to acquire any sexual act, unwanted sexual comments, or advances against a person’s sexuality using coercion, regardless of their relationship to the victim and the setting of the act” [27]. For many young women, their first sexual encounter is unwanted or coerced [28]. An estimated one-third of adolescent girls globally report that their first sexual encounter was coerced [29]. This experience is associated with poor physical, psychological, and social development in women who were victims of sexual violence during childhood or adolescence [28].

In Kenya, 35% of girls aged 10–14 reported being victims of sexual violence, while 60% of girls aged 15–19 reported being victimized [30]. Girls are vulnerable to sexual assault on their way to and from school, water sources, and the market. In the first Kenya Violence Against Children Survey (VACS), 13–17-year-old girls who had experienced sexual violence in the preceding year reported that it occurred most frequently while walking to school [30,31]. Poverty, low education, and alcohol consumption are risk factors for sexual violence [32]. The available literature report that there is a high prevalence of sexual violence in transactional relationships [33].

Further, age-disparate TS relations are a form of exploitation [1]. Sexual exploitation is defined as “an actual or attempted abuse of someone’s position of vulnerability (such as a person depending on you for survival, food rations, school, books, transport or other services), differential power or trust, to obtain sexual favors, including but not only, by offering money or other social, economic or political advantages” [34]. The power dynamics inherent in such relationships, particularly when influenced by poverty, gender inequalities, and social constraints, can create conditions ripe for exploitation. These circumstances may force girls into transactional sex as a means of economic survival, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability. For instance, adolescent girls are preyed upon by teachers who use their institutional authority to sexually exploit their female students, especially those from poor backgrounds [35].

However, community perspectives on TS relations as a form of sexual exploitation vary [36]. In most contexts, TS relations tend to be regarded as an accepted social norm of reciprocity, and are thus tolerated and minimized [35,37,38]. In most instances, the young girls are blamed for being in cross-generational relationships, and their agency is assumed [36]. In particular, young girls are often victims of adultification, a phenomenon in which society perceives and treats young girls as more mature than they are, which can have severe consequences and pave the way for exploitation. This societal perception often leads to girls being held to higher expectations and having more responsibilities, limiting their opportunities for a carefree childhood [39]. Additionally, the adultification of girls can also contribute to the normalization of harmful behaviors such as early sexualization and objectification, putting them at greater risk of exploitation and abuse.

Matza’s Technique of Minimization is especially relevant when examining the disturbing phenomenon of blaming adolescent girls for their exploitation [40]. This technique operates through societal rationalizations that diminish the gravity of the abuse and shift responsibility onto the victims. In the context of exploited girls, victim-blaming often emerges as a prevailing form of minimization. Society may employ narratives that closely

examine the choices, dress, or behavior of these young girls, implying that they in some way solicited or deserved their exploitation. By engaging in victim-blaming, the broader community sidesteps uncomfortable truths about systemic issues such as power imbalances, gender inequality, and the failure of protective structures. This form of minimization not only perpetuates the harm experienced by the victims but also hinders efforts to address the root causes of exploitation and implement meaningful solutions. Recognizing and challenging these minimization techniques is crucial for fostering a compassionate and supportive environment that prioritizes the well-being and rights of adolescent girls.

Understanding the motivations behind perpetrators engaging in age-disparate transactional relationships is multifaceted. In many instances, socioeconomic factors play a significant role, with poverty driving both parties to seek transactional arrangements for financial survival. The power dynamics inherent in such relationships can be exploited by perpetrators who leverage economic disparities to exert control over younger individuals. Additionally, societal norms, gender inequalities, and the adultification of girls may contribute to the normalization of such relationships, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation. This normalization can further be reinforced by cultural attitudes prioritizing the family's economic stability over the well-being and autonomy of young girls. Consequently, addressing the root causes of these socioeconomic factors and challenging societal norms is crucial in breaking the cycle of exploitation and protecting vulnerable girls from transactional relationships. This qualitative study explored male stakeholders' understanding of the risk factors associated with age-disparate transactional sex for schoolgirls. By examining the complexities of transactional sex, we aim to shed light on the underlying social, economic, and cultural factors that contribute to its prevalence and perpetuation.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Setting

Qualitative data were collected from two rural districts, the Mutomo and Ikutha wards of Kitui South Sub County, Kenya. These districts were established as research sites due to their high poverty index, an indicator of elevated social challenges associated with an increased risk of sexual violence. In 2016, absolute poverty was estimated to be 47.5%, compared to the national average of 36.1% [41].

2.2. Participants

Study participants included boda boda operators and primary and secondary school teachers. A previous study [22] with stakeholders from these districts identified that, primarily, men in these two professions, i.e., boda boda operators and primary and secondary school teachers, frequently engaged in age-disparate TS relationships. Men from these professions were recruited through criterion sampling to select individuals who could speak to the phenomenon purposefully. Eligibility requirements for this study included men over 18 who reside in the Mutomo or Ikutha districts of Kitui County and are employed as either primary school teachers, secondary school teachers, or boda boda operators.

2.3. Data Collection

Four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, with 12 participants in each focus group. Two FGDs were conducted in private rooms in their respective districts with boda boda operators from the two districts, and two FGDs were conducted with primary and secondary school teachers from both districts. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and procedures and that their participation was voluntary. Participants could respond in English or Kiswahili based on their comfort level. All FGDs were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. All study participants gave their consent with full knowledge of the nature of the FGDs. One of the co-authors and a research assistant, both native Kenyans fluent in Kiswahili and English, facilitated the FGDs. The semi-structured interview guide included 22 open-ended questions with probes. The research

team created this guide after conducting an exhaustive literature review on sexual violence and TS relationships.

2.4. Ethics

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at St. Catherine University (Protocol #1164) and the AMREF Health Africa Ethics and Scientific Review Committee (ESRC-P661/2019). The research protocol was explained to the study participants, and informed consent was obtained from each participant to confirm their understanding of the study protocol and willingness to participate.

2.5. Data Analysis

The FGD recordings were translated into English and transcribed verbatim. Historically, conventional content analysis has been used to analyze data in a study aiming to describe a phenomenon with limited existing literature [42]. Due to the scarcity of perpetrator-oriented sexual violence research, conventional content analysis was used to analyze the data. This data analysis method requires multiple steps: Step one began with a thorough reading of the transcriptions to comprehend the collected data. Step two consisted of highlighting keywords and phrases directly from the transcripts that represented key concepts or ideas that met the research objectives, which then initiated the generation of codes. Step three consisted of limiting the developed codes and establishing a code hierarchy to identify key themes. Step four involved the creation of individual codebooks by each research team member. In the fifth step, the research team created a collaborative code book. The sixth step involved the development of definitions for each code from the collaborative code book. The research team met weekly to facilitate this ongoing process of collaboration and consensus-building regarding the final coding scheme and terms' definitions. The team then collated and synthesized the coded content to identify common themes and patterns across the dataset. The research team then examined the interrelationships and connections between the identified themes in an effort to achieve a holistic perspective.

3. Results

In exploring study participants' understanding of factors that influence girls to engage in age-disparate TS relationships, the research team identified three primary themes: access and coercion, parental influences, and social pressure.

3.1. Access and Coercion

The participants discussed several factors contributing to why girls in these districts engage in age-disparate TS relationships. They identified that most perpetrators were capitalizing on access to schoolgirls to coerce them to exchange sex for services they needed. This theme is subdivided into two subthemes: lack of transportation and lack of necessities.

Need for transportation: The participants mentioned observing girls initiating or being forced into sexual activity in exchange for transportation services to go to school. In particular, participants who were boda boda operators described instances in which male perpetrators initiated or coerced sex in exchange for their services or led girls to offer non-monetary exchanges for their services.

"Like us, the boda boda people, you can carry a schoolgirl; instead of asking for fare, you ask her to pay with sex."

—Boda boda operator

"Most of our ladies from these areas tend to cling to the boda-boda people in exchange for the free ride to whatever place they may be going, so that becomes sex from the Boda Boda guy and sort of an exchange for the service."

—Primary school teacher

“If a girl in a day school walks to school daily and you carry her for free today, the next time you ask her, “will I be carrying you [giving you a ride] for free?” she will understand and start sleeping with you.”

—Boda boda operator

Motorcycles are the most popular mode of transportation among Kitui schoolgirls. Transport infrastructure is severely underdeveloped in rural areas, including the study area. Most residents, who are frequently poor, cannot afford to own their own mode of transportation and, therefore depend on boda boda operators. Poor girls who cannot afford the fare are increasingly vulnerable.

“You find that a girl comes to you and you are a boda-boda man. She says that she has a small amount of money that can get her to the place she wants to go, but to some extent, you end up asking the girl what else she can do about not having enough fare. You tell her to let us move. We will get there and come to an understanding. So, it goes to the sexual intercourse route.”

—Boda boda operator

“What happens here in Ikanga [another district]? In my opinion, you can carry a schoolgirl, and then she will tell you that she does not have money, but she can give you something else in exchange for the service.”

—Boda boda operator

“The boda-boda guys are involved because a girl may want to be taken somewhere and may not have money.” She may request to be carried [given a ride]. The Boda boda guy may ask, “If I carry you, what will you pay, yet you have no money?” The lady will then decide to sleep with the guy.”

—Boda boda operator

Security was identified as one of the reasons why girls engage in risky sexual behavior with boda boda operators. Schoolgirls opt for boda boda transportation services due to the perceived dangers of walking long distances between school and home alone.

“Due to the great distance between their homes and schools, schoolgirls are vulnerable to coerced sex with boda boda guys.”

—Boda Boda operator

“The distance between the schools and homes is quite long. You find that a girl child may be walking about ten or twelve kilometers to reach school. So, the distance between the schools is also wanting, and she may end up being tempted to get free rides for sex.”

—Primary school teacher

“I can find a schoolgirl on the road, and if she does not have money, I can carry her [give her a ride] in exchange for sex.”

—Boda boda operator

Sex for grades: Participants identified primary and secondary school teachers as perpetrators of age-disparate TS. Teachers take advantage of their position and ability to grant passing grades to female students; they typically hold greater influence in relationships. Girls from low-income families who struggle to fund their education are frequently subjected to academic pressure. This pressure increases the likelihood of them engaging in TS relationships with teachers to pass classes.

“Much pressure is coming from home as these kids got to perform [excel] because parents are pressurizing the kids that they need [good] grades. So, at that time, you find that if they are not doing very well in class, they may be tempted to sweet talk the teachers to get such grades because the teachers got the grades, and then they got something in exchange.”

—Secondary school teacher

"In our case, mostly is leaking [previewing] the exams because you cannot just input any grades in the system which does not have a source. So, they tend to leak the exams to ensure this student knows all the questions. Then she will pass and be able to show, 'This person has an A.' This is his paper. 'Yeah, that is the case.'"

—Secondary school teacher

"Those teachers fresh [newly graduated] from campus, they come there and find there are beautiful girls. Then this girl comes and tells them, 'Teacher, help me here,' or the teacher goes to the student because maybe she is beautiful and maybe they want to do something to her, and maybe she is not doing well in class, or maybe you tell her 'I will help you do this and then you will help me with the other one [sex].'"

—Secondary school teacher

"The girls engage in sexual activities with teachers to get higher grades."

—Boda boda operator

School Fees: Participants explained that girls in this county frequently come from impoverished families that cannot pay their school fees or provide them with school supplies. Girls who are compelled to drop out of school or find an alternative source of income are susceptible to sexual exploitation by men of higher socioeconomic status in exchange for school fees or supplies.

"It can happen for education, whereby a young girl, because their background is not able, tries to look for a man who is a bit more stable [financially better off], and then the man will be able to pay for the school fees and also care for her pocket money and her shopping."

—Secondary school teacher

"You find a girl whose parents cannot pay school fees. It is like an old man paying fees for a student. So, when he pays, it gets to a point when he stops paying and lures her with money to be on his side so that he can pay her fees."

—Boda boda operator

"They take care of the children, and you get that the man is engaging himself in sexual affairs with the girl to be able to provide for or facilitate the child's schooling. That is something I have mostly observed with many older men and very elderly men supporting young girls from poor families, and even having sexual affairs with them."

—Boda boda operator

Basic needs: The girls involved in TS relationships lack food, pocket money, clothing, and a source of income. The girls become more vulnerable and likely to engage in sexually risky behaviors in exchange for monetary resources to meet their needs. Participants described the various demands made by girls in exchange for sexual favors and how young women become victims of coercion.

"These girls go on trips, and because she wants to spare one hundred bob [shillings] from her parents, she will have sex with a certain guy who will buy her some goat meat."

—Primary school teacher

"They do that for their survival. So those that cannot get from their parents, they get from men."

—Secondary school teacher

"Most people do not reach the required standards. Like school fees, food access is a problem. Girls go to school without what we call pocket money or the necessities, so you find people or older men who prey on these girls. . . Maybe even the bus fare to the school is not enough. Here is where people come in like they are coming to help, but there is an agenda. They are taking advantage of this saying, 'Do not worry about pocket money, do not worry about your shopping money, I will do it for you.'"

—Boda boda operator

“Even if she accepts, it is because she may not have a choice. There must be something forcing her because she does not have money. For instance, hunger; if she has not eaten something, you meet her and offer her 100 shillings. She would be forced to take it even if she did not intend to. So, there is consent, but it is forced because she does not want to, but she is forced to accept.”

—Boda boda operator

“Most girls are born in families that are not well off, yet they have needed to take care of. A boda boda guy like me can decide to be with her and help her, but later she starts demanding things like nice clothing. Since she does not have money, I will cater for that. She may also demand things, chips, and so on, resulting in sex.”

—Boda boda operator

3.2. Parental Influence

Parental Approval of Transactional Sex: Participants explained that parents frequently encouraged schoolgirls to engage in TS. Mothers were identified as a major influential factor in age-disparate TS among school aged girls. They do this by making requests from their daughters for items without providing the funds to purchase them. Mothers also encourage their daughters by praising them with the phrase “you did well” when they bring stuff home.

“You find that the guy will be welcomed into a family by the mother of the girl or both the parents, and they will go to sleep and leave the guy there with the girl. So what are they doing? They are accommodating that act of achievement because probably the man has come with a kilogram of sugar and bread.”

—Primary school teacher

“Yes, in some families where there are girls, they are sent to the market, and the mother tells them to come back with sugar and one kilogram of flour. What does that mean if the mother has not given the girl money? Moreover, she even goes on to persuade her that she sees the state of the family and should try her best to bring sugar home, and that is a girl with no money, so where is the girl supposed to get the money from?”

—Primary school teacher

“The parents, in a different way, force girls into sex. Maybe they are students, and they do not have pocket money. When the student asks for money, they are told, ‘now you have grown into a woman, go get money.’ This is a different way of telling them, ‘you have something that can give you money, so go exchange it for something.’”

—Secondary school teacher

“There are those family members who know that this child of so and so is involved with a certain old man, and that relationship is encouraged by her parents.”

—Boda boda operator

Familial Poverty: Girls are under pressure to find a source of income to help support their families, especially if their parents are dependents and/or unemployed. Due to the lack of employment opportunities in Kitui, schoolgirls are providing for their families and taking on supportive roles, making them more susceptible to age-disparate TS relationships.

“Even the parents tell their daughters, ‘You see how we live? You saw that we had to sell land to get your school fees the other day? Do you see how we are struggling?’ So, in one way or the other, the girls will know they have to find a means for themselves if they want to finish secondary school.”

—Primary school teacher

“A parent has sent a girl to the market. Let us say they have sent her two kilograms of sugar, and when they go home, they find the child has brought two kilograms of sugar and a loaf of bread, and she or he is not following where this bread has come from. So, you

find that they have also involved their girls in this sexual violence because they go and bring food supplies home, and the parents say, 'thank you, thank you. You have done well, daughter.' But they do not care where the money is coming from."

—Boda boda operator

3.3. Social Pressure

Peer Pressure: According to the participants, schoolgirls are also influenced by their peers who engage in TS relationships. The perceived benefits, like receiving new clothing, cell phones, and transportation in exchange for sexual activity, influence girls to engage in these relationships.

"Some girls influence themselves that they can get a man who is rich so that they can show off the status that they have, so you find that she influences others to follow the procedure she has used to find money, and then also, there is the other influence of the parents that number seven has talked about. You find that the parent does not give their child time for interaction."

—Boda boda operator

"Those who engage in this in most cases are the ladies, because they want to catch up with technology, and she comes and asks me, 'Buy me a smartphone.' So, if I buy you the smartphone, I will tell her what I want. At the end of the day, I will buy her the smartphone, and she will do what I ask."

—Boda boda operator

Girls feel compelled to engage in TS relationships to achieve the same benefits and social status as their peers by having more or living a better life.

"The school children I have observed require support for pocket money and other materials they use in school. So that when they go to school, they can show off to their fellows, 'you know my boyfriend takes care of me, he does this and this for me.' They need that praise while they are in school. They see themselves as better than others."

—Boda boda operator

"You have seen your friend/you have seen a friend with something beautiful, if you ask her, she tells you 'It was bought for me by my boyfriend'. So, she begins looking for a boyfriend so that she can be treated [financial benefit] like her friend."

—Boda boda operator

Social Standing: Another reason why girls engage in TS with their teachers is to improve their social standing. Teachers are viewed as "affluent" and accorded a high status in the community. Girls in TS relationships with their teachers receive exam questions and/or passing grades in exchange for sex. In addition, the girls' relationships with teachers are regarded as trustworthy, earning them praise and admiration from their peers, i.e., the perceived benefit of a higher social status than their peers.

"You see, the girl being with a teacher sees that as prestigious and she takes pride in that and no one can offend her less she reports him or her, which creates fear more so when such stories start spreading as rumors and many confessions from the girls with teachers. When the other students go home, she takes her assignment to the teacher, and even when the teacher says he has work to do, she insists on her work. When the parents discover it, they think it is a myth."

—Primary school teacher

"We have a school going. . . girls, who are maybe going out looking for money in those men, who can actually give some money and in our area, mostly you find the working class and even the guys who ride boda boda, so these young girls tend to be associated with the working class, merely because those are the guys who can give some cash."

—Secondary school teacher

“You will find the teacher has his salary and what do these girls need? There are not Many things that they can buy to take to school. So, you buy them some candies. They cannot cost much, so you find a teacher is enticing more than ten girls in one school.”

—Secondary school teacher

4. Discussion

This study assesses male stakeholders’ understanding of the factors influencing school-girls to engage in age-disparate TS relationships in two rural communities. Study findings show that perpetrators tend to capitalize on their access to young girls. In particular, the underinvestment in rural infrastructure increases girls’ vulnerability, as they find ways to fend for themselves with the men in their proximity, who are often teachers and boda boda operators. Similar to findings from a previous study, this study identifies boda boda operators as perpetrators of sexual violence. Study participants report that they frequently engage in coercive TS relationships with girls in exchange for transportation to school when they cannot pay, in addition to other predatory behaviors [22]. Recent research from the National Crime Research Center further confirms these findings, indicating that crimes committed by boda boda drivers included rape (17.2%) and that the consequences of these crimes include an increase in teen pregnancies and the rate of school dropouts (9.8%) [43]. Research shows that poor transport services, particularly in rural areas, force school children to take long walks and travel distances of over an hour one way to school [44]. Boda boda taxis are a reasonably reliable, quick, and inexpensive service that can traverse unpaved roads and steep terrain typical of rural areas. The affordability and accessibility of motorcycles compared to taxis and buses in rural areas make girls more vulnerable to motorcycle operators as perpetrators than girls in urban areas. Additionally, study participants pointed out that the distance from home to school is roughly 5–10 km, making it easy for boda boda drivers to coerce girls into engaging in sexual activity in exchange for rides.

Participants in the study reported that the girls’ parents in this community encouraged their daughters’ transactional relationships, either directly or indirectly. When the parents learn of their daughter’s relationship with a wealthy man, they neither discourage nor attempt to end it. Furthermore, parents would pressure their daughters to bring the entire family food, such as bread and sugar, without questioning where the money came from. The girls are praised and encouraged, invariably making the parents financially dependent on their school-aged daughters. These results are similar to a study conducted with women and girls in eastern Congo who were compelled to engage in sexual activity in exchange for food, shelter, cash, or school fees [45]. This finding highlights the adultification of young girls. When girls are prematurely burdened with expectations and responsibilities beyond their years, they may be more vulnerable to manipulation and abuse. Predators who take advantage of adultified girls’ perceived maturity and lack of experience might target them. Furthermore, this premature expectation of maturity may limit the girls’ ability to assert themselves and establish boundaries, making them more susceptible to coercion. The consequences of adultification extend beyond immediate harm, potentially impacting the girls’ long-term well-being and perpetuating a cycle of exploitation that hampers their personal development and societal contributions. Addressing and challenging societal attitudes that contribute to the adultification of girls is crucial in creating a safer environment that fosters their healthy growth and protects them from exploitation.

In addition, peer pressure was cited as a significant factor in girls’ decision to engage in age-disparate TS relationships, according to participants. Schoolgirls are often motivated by material goods such as cellphones and cash, which are ‘flaunted’ by their peers, and thus are compelled to employ the same strategies. As the poverty index in Kitui County is high, most girls cannot ask their parents for money for non-essentials, so they turn to men with money. These study findings are similar to the results of previous studies, which show that peer pressure is an influential factor in engaging in age-disparate transactional relationships [4,46]. This finding presumes the agency of young girls engaging in TS rela-

tionships. However, the convergence of gender inequality and socioeconomic deprivation among adolescent girls from disadvantaged households creates a precarious context that often exposes them to exploitative sexual relationships as a means of achieving economic security [47]. Research shows that despite the progress made in female children's education, girls who reside in rural areas remain at risk of not enrolling in or completing primary and secondary education [48]. Further, in addition to the low enrollment rates, girls are often allocated fewer resources for their schooling due to pro-boy biases that still exist in low-income countries [49,50]. Due to the persistence of age- and gender-related biases, these adolescent girls experience a lack of access to economic and educational opportunities. The limited viable alternatives may lead them to resort to engaging in transactional sex as a perceived means of last resort.

This study's findings identify factors that influence the engagement in TS relationships among schoolgirls in Kitui, Kenya; these have profound implications for their health and well-being. Unplanned pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases are possible outcomes associated with missed school days, resulting in schoolgirls having lower levels of education than their peers. According to a South African study [38], young women in age-disparate relationships have low school attendance and high dropout rates. Further, these relationships increase the risk of intimate partner violence. Victims of sexual violence face negative outcomes, including physical and psychological damage such as sexually transmitted illnesses, unwanted pregnancy, infertility, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder [51]. Thus, public health interventions specific to the community must be developed, particularly policy interventions that address factors associated with this risk-health behavior.

Poverty is a significant risk factor for sexual violence in Kenya [28]. Many parents reportedly cannot afford school fees, desks, chairs, uniforms, textbooks, sanitary towels for girls, or school meals for their children [28]. In particular, poverty has been identified as a driver of age-disparate TS relationships in Kitui, and reducing Kitui's high poverty rates may reduce the prevalence of such relationships [22]. The high prevalence of poverty in Kitui can be reduced by implementing scholarship programs for school girls in this region. Identifying funding sources to assist the most vulnerable families with school fees and essentials could aid in reducing the prevalence of age-discriminatory TS relationships. It is imperative to consider interventions and community efforts to combat the negative health and social outcomes associated with low levels of education, such as the provision of bursaries for disadvantaged girls and bus fare subsidies. TS motivated by poverty may also be mitigated through income-generating initiatives for the parents of schoolgirls residing in this locality. When parents can support their families, it is improbable that they will encourage their daughters to pursue TS relationships to help support their families. The different perspectives presented in this study highlight the need for comprehensive strategies focused on eradicating gender inequalities, creating educational and economic development opportunities, and cultivating a supportive environment that protects the well-being and rights of marginalized adolescent girls. The primary objective of these interventions should be to establish a correlation between poverty and vulnerability to engaging in transactional sexual relationships. By addressing the multifaceted challenges marginalized adolescent girls face through the implementation of targeted interventions, we can pave the way for a future characterized by equality, empowerment, and stability.

While this study provides valuable insights into the motivations behind age-disparate TS relationships, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, the generalizability of the study results is also limited by the small sample size and study settings in only two rural districts in Kenya. Secondly, the reliance on the perpetrator's beliefs to ascertain the motivations of young women introduces a potential bias, occluding women's agency in this account. The absence of direct engagement with the young women themselves, especially regarding themes of social pressure and social status, limits the depth of understanding. Additionally, while the motivations of male perpetrators are explored, there is room for enhanced engagement with their perspectives. Further, researchers were unaware

of whether the study participants engaged in TS relationships with schoolgirls. Because the data were collected through focus group discussions, men who engaged in TS relationships may have been apprehensive about revealing personal accounts in their narratives. These limitations highlight the need for caution in generalizing the findings and underscore the importance of future research incorporating direct input from young women involved in TS relationships for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding.

5. Conclusions

This study was conducted with men in occupations notorious for age-disparate TS relationships in this region. The results of the FGDs revealed this to be the case. Understanding the motivations behind perpetrators engaging in age-disparate transactional relationships is multifaceted. In many instances, socioeconomic factors play a significant role, with poverty driving both parties to seek transactional arrangements as a means of financial survival. The power dynamics inherent in such relationships can be exploited by perpetrators who leverage economic disparities to exert control over younger individuals. Additionally, societal norms and gender inequalities in the adultification of girls may contribute to the normalization of such relationships, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation.

In general, perpetrator-focused sexual violence prevention interventions are not the norm, with most interventions focusing on victimization, environmental factors, education, and the empowerment of women and girls. Given that the main offenders in age-disparate TS relationships are boda boda operators and male teachers, there is a need for specifically targeted interventions aimed at members of these professions to minimize the incidence of such partnerships. Future research and targeted interventions must address the deep-seated cultural and societal factors that contribute to the normalization of the explicit coercion and exploitation of girls by men. Beyond symptomatic measures, comprehensive strategies should explore and challenge the existing norms and values that sustain the perpetration of age-disparate TS. This necessitates a nuanced examination of the perpetrators' perspectives and motivations, questioning their understanding and recognition of the ethical consequences of their actions. Interventions should extend beyond individual behavior change to include community-wide initiatives, aiming for a transformative shift in attitudes and behaviors. By fostering an environment that actively discourages and condemns explicit coercion of girls, these targeted interventions can significantly contribute to dismantling the systems that perpetuate age-disparate TS and promote lasting societal change.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, L.M., P.K. and J.K.; methodology, L.M., P.K. and J.K.; Data Analysis, L.M., A.M. and B.Y. Writing—original draft preparation, L.M., A.M. and N.O.; writing—review and editing; L.M., A.M., B.Y. and N.O.; supervision, L.M. and N.O.; project administration, L.M. and J.K.; funding acquisition, L.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work was supported by an Innovative Scholarship Grant under the GHR Foundation's Academic Excellence Grant to St. Catherine University.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at St. Catherine University (Protocol #1164) and AMREF Health Africa Ethics and Scientific Review Committee (ESRC-P661/2019).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Acknowledgments: We thank the Catholic Medical Mission Board (CMMB) Kenya for providing ground support.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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