**The Impact of Transactional Sex on Adolescent Mental Health in Sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges and Interventions**

Transactional sex involves engaging in sexual acts in exchange for money or other goods. It is important to recognize that this practice can be harmful to those involved due to the lack of health precautions and its significant impact on mental health. According to the International Journal of Adolescence and Youth’s Artice, Adverse Life Experiences and Mental Health of Adolescents in Ghana: A Gendered Analysis, globally, 10-20% of adolescents have mental health disorders, and adolescents and young adults are the majority of the sub-Saharan Africa, making it an elevated risk factor for psychopathological behaviors (Adjorlolo et al., 2022). When connecting the number of youth that make up sub-Saharan Africa, it is important to understand the risk factors that can contribute to these mental health disparities, which can include many different intersections between a child’s ecological system. It is essential to connect the barriers in the ecological system to why adolescents could be seeking transactional sex and how these connections, directly and indirectly, impact the mental and physical well-being of adolescents. Additionally, familial influences in Ghana can often play a significant role in the decisions made by these adolescents, often glamorizing transactional sex and masking its harsh realities (Sekyibea Addo, 2024). Familial norms can sometimes present transactional sex as an acceptable or even desirable means of economic survival, thereby influencing young individuals to engage in it without fully understanding the potential risks and consequences (Sekyibea Addo, 2024). This glamorization can obscure the serious physical, emotional, and psychological harm associated with transactional sex, making it more challenging for adolescents to make informed and safe choices. In contrast, the lack of familial support and community can also be a risk factor that contributes to why an individual may engage in transactional sex. Addressing these familial factors and increasing adequate education on these health-related topics is crucial in creating a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the dangers of transactional sex, thereby helping to protect and support vulnerable youth.

*Transactional Sex Among Adolescents*

Adolescents engage in transactional sex for various reasons, which can manifest in multiple forms. These reasons often include economic necessity, coercion and exploitation, lack of education, and peer pressure or social influence. For many adolescents worldwide, transactional sex may be the only means to earn money or receive gifts. In sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, transactional sex is frequently a method used to afford basic life essentials, such as sanitary pads (Citi Newsroom, 2023).

***Economic Needs and Long-Term Consequences***

While the motivations for engaging in transactional sex are diverse, economic needs are a predominant factor. Although transactional sex provides financial gain, the amounts earned are typically insufficient for long-term sustainability. Consequently, individuals engaging in this activity often have to maintain multiple sexual partners, which increases their risk of contracting HIV. It's essential to consider the broader socio-economic and cultural contexts. The lack of access to education and employment opportunities exacerbates the situation, as does the influence of societal norms and expectations. Addressing transactional sex among adolescents requires comprehensive strategies that include improving access to education, creating economic opportunities, and providing health and social support services. Additionally, raising awareness and implementing policies to protect adolescents from exploitation and coercion are crucial steps in mitigating the prevalence and consequences of transactional sex.

***The intersection of Transactional Sex and Mental Health***

*Mental Health Challenges Faced by Adolescents Engaging in Transactional Sex*

There is a significant intersection between the reasons for engaging in transactional sex and its impact on a person's mental health. Transactional sex often arises from a lack of resources and a limited ability to generate sufficient income, which can be due to educational gaps, family insufficiencies, and substance misuse. These factors are already well-known risk factors for mental health issues. When transactional sex is added to the equation, individuals may face additional concerns regarding their safety and health, exacerbating the potential for mental health problems.

Transactional sex can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, low self-esteem, and body image issues, further contributing to mental health challenges. The stigma associated with transactional sex can result in social isolation, which is detrimental to psychological well-being and can manifest into depression, anxiety and/or substance abuse, and other risky behaviors. The constant worry about contracting sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and the fear of violence or exploitation from sexual partners, oftentimes because of the sexual partners not wanting to use a condom (Sekyibea Addo, 2024), can lead to chronic stress and anxiety about their worth and overall health.

*Addressing Mental Health in the Context of Transactional Sex*

To address the mental health impact of transactional sex, it is crucial to provide accessible mental health services, including counseling, therapy, and support groups for those involved. Enhancing educational and economic opportunities through programs offering educational and vocational training can help individuals secure stable and legitimate employment, reducing their reliance on transactional sex. Raising awareness and reducing stigma through public awareness campaigns can foster a more supportive and understanding community, helping individuals feel heard and seen, thus reducing stressors like isolation. Additionally, implementing protective policies that safeguard individuals engaged in transactional sex from exploitation, violence, and coercion is essential for ensuring their safety and well-being. By addressing these areas, we can create a more supportive environment that helps mitigate the mental health issues associated with transactional sex and provides individuals with the resources and opportunities needed to improve their overall well-being.