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Self- Reported Sexual Engagement of Ethiopian Undergraduate Students in the Context of HIV/AIDS Pandemic

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Abstract

This study is part of a broader investigation that explored the sexual experiences, sexual conduct and safer- unsafe sex practices of Ethiopian male and female undergraduate students in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic conducted using a mixed methodology: qualitative and quantitative methods. Explored in this paper are college students' narrated sexual engagements and their perceptions to their sexual relations and experiences. The bulk of the data for the current study was generated from focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with 20 college students of a diverse profile (10 female and 10 male students). The data generated from the FGD were also supplemented by ethnographic observations, field notes and documentary information. Part of the data was also gathered from a 43-item survey questionnaire administered among randomly chosen undergraduate students (N = 575) in Addis Ababa University. Data collected through the survey questionnaire revealed that 40% of the students were sexually active. Empirical materials garnered largely from the FGDs revealed that Ethiopian undergraduate students were sexually engaged dominantly with one another and less dominantly with non-college people. Students' sexual engagement with people outside included female students' sexual relations with "sugar daddies" and male students' sexual experience with high school students, and less commonly with commercial sex workers. Despite critiquing each other's motives, female and male students had generally positive perceptions towards the sexual relations existing amongst themselves. They were, however, critical of relations female students had with "sugar daddies", and sexual affairs between male students and commercial sex workers. For a richer understanding of college students' sexual engagements, the study called for additional investigations among students studying in regional universities and colleges situated in small towns as well as in private higher institutes that might have different dynamics.

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

As can be noted in the latest report released by UNAIDS, sub-Saharan African countries host the largest HIV/AIDS infected population: in 2006, nearly two thirds of all the people infected with HIV live in this region. Sub-Saharan Africa also accounts for 72% of the global deaths caused by AIDS. While it accounts for 10 % of the

world's population, the sub-Saharan region is “home to more than 60% of all the people infected with HIV—25.8 million people [23.8 million to 28.9 million]” (UNAIDS 2006).

Ethiopia, a sub-Saharan country itself, is one of the most severely affected countries by the pandemic. Ethiopia is believed to be the country hosting the third largest infected population, which is estimated to be two to three million (UNAIDS, 2004). And not surprisingly, it is not uncommon in Ethiopia to hear grim reports such as HIV/AIDS has reached an epidemic proportion. Available data indicate adolescents and young adults are the age groups that are at risk (e.g., Fisseha, Zakus, & Derege, 1997; Gemed, Assefa, & Tushunie, 2004). Obviously, this is the age group where most college students, particularly those in the undergraduate programs, the target group of the present study, are found.

Oddly enough, until recently, intervention strategies to curb the HIV/AIDS pandemic as well as research endeavors to address the problem are rather limited in this worst-affected region, sub-Saharan Africa. The situation in Ethiopia is even worse. Published studies that address the problem in general and this age group in particular are rather scanty. This is clearly observable in a recent study that investigated the reproductive health and awareness of HIV among rural high school students in Ethiopia (Alene, Wheeler, & Grosskurth, 2004). Reviewing the related literature, the authors underline that their study is “the first of its kind to address issues of sexual health in rural Ethiopia” (p. 64). Alene et al.'s (2004) and other related published studies (Astatke, Black, & Serpell, 2000; Fisseha et al., 1997) report that students' knowledge is not translated into protective behaviors.

Few studies, however, chronicle the sexual experience and safer sex practices of Ethiopian college students. This is the case despite recent findings in Africa (e.g., Bosompra, 2001; Iwuagwu, Ajuwon, & Olaseha, 2000) and elsewhere (e.g., Farrow & Arnold, 2003; Foreman, 2003) that college students are among at risk groups for HIV/AIDS. Their age, lack of immediate parental supervision and apparent freedom to experiment with new things (e.g., alcohol, drugs) are some of the factors contributing to their being at risk group. In the Ethiopian context, the environment where colleges are situated makes the situation even riskier for students. Until very recently, colleges are located in big cities and towns where the sex industry is “vibrant” and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS is very high. Since prostitution is not illegal in Ethiopia, commercial sex workers do their business at bars, nightclubs and even at hotels in unrestrained fashion. In Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, HIV prevalence rate is very high –about 16 % (Yassin et al., 2004). Not surprisingly, as shown in one study (Aklilu et al., 2001), about 74 % of commercial sex workers of Addis Ababa (arguably potential clients of male college students) are reported to be HIV-positive. In spite of these risky environmental and individual factors, few researchers investigated the sexual conduct and practices of college students. And I believe this lack of study in itself justifies the need to conduct the proposed study.

Purpose of the Study

This study explored the self-reported sexual behaviors exposing Ethiopian undergraduate students to HIV/AIDS. In specific terms, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the study sought to answer the following research questions: 1) how do female and male students perceive HIV/AIDS? 2) what are the behaviors/practices that expose the students to HIV/AIDS?

The Research Methodology

The Research Setting and Subjects of the Study

Even though there are a number of colleges and some newly introduced 16 regional universities, the target population of the present study was taken from Addis Ababa University, by far the oldest and the largest higher learning institute hosting over 40,000 students most of whom randomly assigned to it from all parts of the nation. The fact that it is situated in the capital city which has an impact on the sexual practice/behavior of students is an additional factor considered for choosing it as a research site.

Altogether, some 600 students took part in the present study. Twenty students, 10 female and 10 male, with diverse profiles in terms of academic class, ethnicity, religion and place of origin willingly participated in the focus group discussions (FGDS), the qualitative segment of the study. In line with the literature (e.g. Hoppe et al., 2004; Lear, 1995, 1997), FGDs conducted with the 10 female participants were moderated by a female moderator, Dr. Muluemebet Zenebe, a colleague from Addis Ababa University. I myself facilitated the discussions with the 10 male participants. For the quantitative portion of the study, 575 randomly chosen undergraduate students filled in a 43-item survey questionnaire prepared in accordance with Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior.

Why Mixed Methodology?

Integrating qualitative and quantitative methods in the present study is preferred for a number of reasons. To start with, a combined use of qualitative and quantitative methods would yields richer data. Justifying the need to combine the two broad methodologies, Fossey, Harvey, and McDermott (2002) succinctly note, “restricting oneself to any single paradigm or way of knowing can result in a limitation to the

range of knowledge and the depth of understanding that can be applied to a given problem situation” (p. 717). This is even more pronounced in sex related issues (e.g., Fenton, Jonson, & McManus, 2001; Smith & Debus 1992). Fenton et al. argue that it is difficult to get frank and valid data on sexual experiences and sexual conducts with one method alone. Since sexual behaviors and practices are greatly private activities influenced by religious, moral, cultural and at times legal norms, note Fenton et al., it is very challenging to get unbiased information/ data through survey research alone. Various studies (e.g., Catania, 1999; Fenton et al., 2001) have also demonstrated that women generally under-report whereas men over-report sexual engagements. The use of qualitative data may thus complement these shortcomings. While respondents may not necessarily be candid on sexual matters in a face to face interview or focus group discussions (in some cases they might even be more inhibited), many qualitative researchers (for example, Dodoo, Zulu, & Ezeh, 2007) argue that with a great effort on the part of researchers and by way of creating strong rapport with participants (e.g., dressing informally, responding positively to respondents’ accounts, avoiding being judgmental, being in friendly terms with respondents through time) and asking follow up questions, it is possible to garner frank narratives.

As a whole, unlike quantitative methods, qualitative methods that include in-depth interviews (e.g., Coleman, 2001)) and focus group discussions allow interviewers the chance to clarify questions that may arise during interviews and discussions, thus adding to the depth of the data. Researchers like Beardsell and Coyle (1996) even go to the extent of arguing that qualitative methods are better placed for exploring HIV issues in depth “due to their capacity for eliciting detailed, contextualized data” (p.740).

On the other hand, by using a survey questionnaire, it is possible to reach a larger sample of respondents chosen randomly, from which some generalization could be made about the target population. Though data collected through questionnaires seem to lack depth, their breadth is commendable.

Methods of Analysis

The discussions my research assistant and I had in our respective groups resulted in about one-hour taped discussion each. Altogether, we were able to obtain a total of 13-hour taped discussions in both rounds, which were transcribed in 150 pages. As a whole, the method of analysis used in this study is an inductive analysis which roughly “means that categories, themes, and patterns come from data” (Janesick, 1994, p. 215). Similarly, in analyzing the empirical materials, I have also been guided by grounded theory methodology, which in simple terms is “*a way of thinking about and conceptualizing data*” (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p. 275, *emphasis in original*). Since the function of the part of the survey data was to supplement the qualitative segment of the study, it was only the descriptive statistics (scores of means and standard deviations of items on factors constraining/facilitating condom) that were used.

Results

Students’ Perception of Sex

Students’ overall understanding of sex

Prior to discussing the sexual experiences of Ethiopian undergraduate students, it is worth noting down that the students’ overall understanding of what sex is. Sex is tacitly understood by the FGD participants as an insertive vaginal sex between heterosexual couples. As shall be seen later in detail, sex between same sex groups is strictly frowned upon. Notwithstanding that most question the genuineness of sexual relation between college students, participants as a whole feel sex between students of

college like themselves, casual or steady, is quite acceptable. Still, it could generally be said that the students' views range from the most liberal perceptions to the most conservative outlooks. On the extreme liberal end of the continuum, some students advance the view that sex is desirable. Speaking along Freudian line of thought, Alebel, a fourth year Psychology student, has, for example, captured the appreciation of other participants of the discussion in his group, when he said:

For me, as Freud says, *sex is a flavor of life*. From psychological point of view, practicing sex is healthy and acceptable. A couple should be well informed about sex. But I'd generally say to have sex is ok and healthy. Not to have sex could be harmful. But I want to underline that young people need to go for safe sex. (*Male FGD-2, Emphasis in original, Alebel stresses the phrase*)

Gemeda, a fourth year student from the Department of Philosophy; Kuma, a graduating student of Psychology; and Sara, a female student of sociology as well as Elias, a second year student of Linguistics share Alebel's affirmative view of having sex by students of college age.

Though in a less a direct way, Sara concurs. As long as it is carried out properly, she says she has no problem with sex performed by college students.

Sexual practices considered appropriate and inappropriate

Female as well as male participants have opinions of such notions of appropriate and inappropriate sex. The most appropriate sex on which participants seem to have unanimous agreement is sex between heterosexual married couple. Some air a more liberal attitude to the notion of appropriate sex. They don't limit the issue of appropriate sex to matrimony alone. They speak in favor of sexual relations between boyfriends and girlfriends. For people of their age, they note, having sex is normal and

healthy. As noted earlier, Alebel, a fourth year psychology student in particular, speaking with Freudian language, empathically asserts that “sex is a flavor of life.”

A fresh idea that has emerged from the discussion of both sexes was the inappropriateness of non-egalitarian sex. The remarks made by two participants may make the notion much clearer. Maintaining a view that is rarely advocated by African women, Sara, a female student from the capital city, confidently notes that sex needs to be a source of pleasure for young women as well, and sexual practices should be performed in less archaic ways. Here is Sara’s eloquent observation:

Sara: There is consensus among my friends that sex shouldn’t be a five-minute ordeal in which the guy gets satisfaction from and ends it there like it was the case in the past. They [female students] do not accept the idea that sex is something out of which only the guy gets satisfaction. People say it shouldn’t be practiced in such a way it reflects the male dominance. We feel that sexual partners should take time to make themselves ready for it and get pleasure out of it. (*Female FGD-2*)

Though not a common finding in related studies, Sara’s observation reinforces an emerging sexual agency demonstrated by some of Holland et al.’s (1991) female subjects. Defying women’s presentation as mere sexual objects of men in most of related studies, the current study sheds light on women’s advocacy for sexual pleasure in the same way it is sought by men. Alebel, a male participant, advances the view that sex should be egalitarian in nature.

What appears to be underlined by both subjects is the outlook that women are entitled to sexual pleasure. Sara disapproves of a sexual practice in which women are viewed as objects of sex by their male counterparts. Alebel shares this view. Both Sara and

Alebel point out that sex is not something to be rushed. In a similar way that Sara rebukes “a-five-minute” sex, Alebel clearly expresses his disdain towards a sexual practice known as “short”—a practice where men go to sex workers and buy sexual gratification in the possible shortest time.

Despite the existence of such surprising and in a way progressive perspectives that challenge the previously held views by both sexes in Africa that promote men’s supremacy presenting them as “conquering heroes and macho risk-takers” (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002, p. 232), highly conservative views are forwarded in parallel. A discussion on these issues has, for example, revealed theological views that admonish any sexual activity before marriage.

A more or less similar view is held by Adey, a female participant from Tigray an ethnic group which is stereotypically said to have conservative views:

Adey: Personally, I disagree with what my friends have just said. I don’t believe it is important to have boyfriends and girlfriends.

Muluemebet: *Tell us your reasons, will you?*

Adey: If you ask how many of the students [in this university] are strong and whose love relations last, the answer you get will be about 5 percent. If a guy had a freshman girlfriend, he would drop her the next semester and would start a relation with another. So, friendship between opposite sexes in this campus is not lasting. And I would assume it [having a girlfriend/boyfriend] has no any advantage whatsoever other than being a hindrance to your studies. It may also expose you to different problems. (*Female FGD-2*)

Though not in great detail, and not consensually, sexual practices of double dating, promiscuous sexual relations, having sex without condoms, having sex prior to getting tested for HIV, western-style sex with “disgusting” positions, and raping a girl in groups, and sex performed at indecent places, as discussed earlier, are identified as

inappropriate sexual behaviors/practices. Strange sex such as incest and sex with animals are also presented as abnormal.

It is, however, the practice of sex between same sexes that has instigated great horror among the male participants of the two FGDs. My research assistant's attempt to find the female participants' view on the issue, though in a less direct way than mine (e.g., she asked them what their idea of abnormal sexual practice is) didn't work at all. Contrary to their female counterparts, the male students were more vocal. Knowing very well that Africans in general and Ethiopians in particular are homophobic⁵ (see Tadele, 2007), I did not want in any way to delve into this issue at all. In the course of the study, however, I have changed my mind for two reasons. First, participants began mentioning words such as lesbians and homosexuals, and I didn't want to discourage them from talking about it. Coupled with this is the degree of openness they demonstrated about the homosexual practices and the ease at which they talked about the subject.

As indicated earlier, despite accepting the existence of the practice, male participants seem to strongly object to the practice of homosexuals. A participant, for example, acknowledges that there are men having sex with men in his hometown and the identity of these people is an open secret. But he is quick to add that those men are forced to have that kind of sex as a result of incurable disease. Another participant in the same group gives an even more abhorrent reflection on the practice. He starts his story by explaining how MSM (Men Having Sex with Men) in Addis has become so

⁵ Despite the paucity of systematic studies investigating people's attitude towards homosexuals, a recent ongoing study by Tadele (2007) has indicated that men having sex with men "suffer from internalized and externalized stigma and discrimination".

prevalent. He then says that the practice has become so common so much so that the homosexuals there have opened a gay bar.

Bizarre as they may seem, the stories by the two young men are reflective of the degree of negative perception people have about men having sex with men. Male participants' stories from the other FGD, though not as objectionable, indicate that the practice of MSM is deplorable. When asked about his opinion of abnormal/inappropriate sex, a participant in this group first talks about incest, sex between human beings and animals. A little later, this is what he says:

Regassa: There is some other thing I forgot to mention. Having sex with same sex! Men having sex with men! Lady with a lady! For me, this is completely abnormal. (*Male-FGD-2*)

I can tell the other participants were too shocked to talk on the subject further. Their grimaces say it all. When pushed to air their views, almost all of them say it is quite abnormal, unreligious, and culturally unacceptable. My attempt to know whether the practice of having sex with same sex is practiced among college students have, however, resulted in divided opinions. Other than two students (a participant from each FGD) who, with a sense of disgust, report that there are lesbians, most participants say they are unaware of such a practice. Regarding to the practice of MSM, some five students say, albeit infrequently, the practice is there. Their stories, however, represent homosexual college students as people who lurk at night to rape straight men.

College Students' Sexual Experiences

Prevalence of opposite sex relations in colleges

One common question raised and discussed in all the four focus group discussion triggering similar responses was the following query: *To what extent do you think it is*

common to have a boyfriend/girlfriend among college students? That is probably the only question that elicited more or less uniform responses among all the 20 participants.

For someone like me who went to the same university and who, as a student, witnessed a completely different scenario, the information was quite stunning. During my stay at the university, students who had boyfriends/ girlfriends would be the talk of the campus. The prevalence of such intimate relation was even more startling to my research assistant, Muluembet, who had neither a boyfriend while in college nor an acquaintance with a boyfriend as a college student. When I let her listen to the recordings of the FGDs I held with my male participants so that she could have an idea of how I moderated the discussion, she could not hide her astonishments with the stories of the men. I was myself skeptical and I, too, partly shared her concern. It was thus with a note of skepticism that we were looking forward to what the young women had to tell us. To our amazement, the stories Muluembet got from the discussions with female students was a confirmation of the stories narrated by the male students. When asked to say how common having boyfriends/girlfriends was in their colleges, female participants in both discussion groups, like the male students, were quick to say, “It is very, very common”. The following excerpts from discussions held with the female students may be representative of the shared feelings among all the female participants:

Muluembet: *To what extent do you think it is common to have a boyfriend/girlfriend among college students? Why not start with you, Melat?*

Melat: The way I see it, it is very, very common to have a boyfriend/girlfriend here in a very astonishing manner. Given the enormity of the practice, one would think it is a must to have a boyfriend/ a girlfriend. The way it is done, it gives you the impression that university is not only a place for academic study but also for starting this kind of relation. Without even knowing what they are doing, students start relations and you see couples hanging out.

Adey: Well, I'd say this idea of having a boyfriend and a girlfriend is widely practiced in this university. As my sisters already explained, the first thing you are expected to do as a first year student is to have a boyfriend and to have a girlfriend. You see girls, those from Addis as well as those from the regions, rushing to have a boyfriend. Sometimes you wonder places like Beg Tera and the football field is deliberately arranged for this purpose. If you happen to go to these places, you see couples doing all sort of things like animals. It's only animals that do these sorts of things without worrying whether people see them or not. (*Female FGD-2*)

Perhaps out of curiosity, Muluembet also asked participants to guess what percentage of the student population had boyfriends/girlfriends. 70% was the figure given as the least estimate. The overall estimate was 80% and above.

Irrespective of their gender and academic class, all the FGD participants strongly note that opposite sex relations among campus students is a very common feature. Citing some of the colloquial language they use to describe the situation may perhaps make the prevalence more vivid. While some say, "having boyfriends/girlfriends is considered synonymous with joining college," for others, sexual relations emanating from joining colleges is equated with "some kind of common course" given to every college student.

Emerging from the theme of intimate opposite sex relations prevalent in colleges were other related sub-themes such as: the frequency of such relations even at lower academic settings among much younger students, the degree and nature of the intimacy and what the intimate relations involve. Perhaps with the idea of making the opposite sex relations widespread in their institutions appear quite acceptable, it is with a sense of sarcasm that participants talk about the frequent occurrence of intimate relations even at primary schools. Male as well as female students say that much younger students than themselves indulge in opposite sex relations. Considering the way they ridicule the behaviors of younger students, they seem to be saying, "No

wonder the opposite intimate relations among us is widespread; after all we are university students. But look at what our much younger siblings are doing!"

Making fun of the intimate opposite sex relations taking place at lower levels including preparatory schools (schools containing grades 11 and 12 but offering courses equivalent to college freshman programs), they are at the same time appreciative of/justifying the sexual relations existing on campus. On top of that, in as much they disparage relations among students from lower levels, they seem to idolize such relations taking place among college students in the past. In your time, says a male participant named Alebel looking at me, a university was where you get your future partner. In the same vein, participants tend to condemn younger students having intimate relations. Surmised from their discussion, is in fact that sexual debut among students is decreasing at a speedy rate—an observation reported in studies conducted in Ethiopia (see Adamu et al., 2003; Belayneh et al., 2004). In connection to this, Esegenet recounts an interesting anecdote she has recently heard on the radio on music selection program. The story goes as follows: A very young female student, she says she could tell from her voice, calls the program host and asks him to select and invite music to “her boyfriend”. Suspecting that she is too young to choose music to her boyfriend, the program host asks her what grade she is. Imperviously, the girl responds she is a six grader. She goes on telling how she loves him, when she met him, how frequently they go out, and all that.

Opposite sex relations taking place in colleges, as articulated by most participants, have different manifestations. Not surprisingly, the dominant opposite sex relations is the one that exists between boyfriends and girlfriends involving sexual relation. Unfortunately, the ways participants paint this special friendship are rather bleak. In the first place, some think the relation is materialistic. According to almost all male

participants and a couple of female students, college women start relations with an aim of getting some material advantages.

Some participants go to the extent of detailing the benefits enjoyed or required by girls. According to them, before starting a relation with a man, a college woman makes sure whether the man approaching her is capable of meeting her material or academic demands. Thanks to consumerism promoted through global commercials, a typical demand made by various female students these days revolves around cell phones whose use has recently become so fashionable. Some women, for instance, want their boyfriends (actual or prospective) to buy them pre-paid phone cards. Others expect men to buy them cell phones that are stylish. The more demanding ones even ask their boyfriends to secure them mobile subscriptions. Occasionally, a boyfriend may be required to fulfill all these demands. Alternatively, boyfriends may be asked to take their girls out and invite them to lunch or some snacks. Even though a great majority of students (women as well as men) are provided with food and accommodation, they are not happy about the food they eat free of charge in the student cafeterias of the university. Be it poor or rich, whenever they can afford it, they avoid the cafeteria food. And it is this requirement of better food that boyfriends are expected to meet. Boyfriends with no adequate financial resources should at least be academically strong. As high achievers, not only would they assist female students in their semester works, but they will also be a source of pride. Linked with this is women's preference for dating men who are academically senior to them.

According to participants, a substantial portion of university students also forms opposite sex relations (have girlfriends/boyfriends) out of romance. Contrary to their experience while they were at high- or preparatory schools, students get the chance to reside together, dine together, and to study together for relatively longer periods with

fellow college students. Partly because of the intimate relations created as a result of staying together for a length of time, students consciously or subconsciously develop romantic/intimate relationships leading to sexual relations. Add to that the expectations they bring to colleges along with them about campus life. While joining colleges, some students come with the expectation that college is not just an academic institute but also a place to enjoy life. What a participant has said, and in a way an idea subscribed by other members of the FGD, is reflective of such a belief. “Life n Mekchet”, a hybrid of English and Amharic terms which literally means “To Enjoy Life” is a norm held by the majority of university students.

Sex performed in campus sites and students’ reactions

The prevalence of sexual/intimate relations among college students becomes more apparent when one looks into the settings they have sex. To the surprise of my research assistant and myself, participants including the female students openly say that students commonly have sex in different campus sites “suitable” for the purpose. These sites include places like: Beg Tera (Sheep Quarter), Kuas Meda (the football field), Love Street, and ‘Space.’”

Female participants’ accounts about campus sites frequented by sexual partners are affirmations of stories narrated by men:

Haregewoin: All in all, all dark places at every corner of the campus are used for... what can I say. In fact, the football field is known as “Mosvold”.⁶

Muluemebet: *What is ‘Mosvold’? Sofa?*

Haregewoin: It simply means a place of comfort. In fact, people have sex there.

Muluemebet: *Are you sure?*

Esegenet: The football field is used as a mattress at dusk. After 6:00.

⁶ Mosvold was a company with a high reputation of selling luxurious furniture including bed and mattresses.

Haregwoin: Love is made everywhere in this campus. Sex is performed even in OCR [Old Class Rooms]. That's why I earlier said that the *campus had better be called sex center* [emphasis mine]. If you walked in campus at night you would see couples making love everywhere it is dark.

Muluemebet: *There aren't enough lights in this campus? Is it dark everywhere?*

Haregwoin: Even though there are lights here and there, many of the places are very dark.

Esegenet: The funny thing is there are security guards patrolling the campus to check this. But I always wonder what they are patrolling. (*Female FGD-1*)

In comparison with the stories by the male participants, Female students' accounts are more telling. In the first place, the female students talk about specific instances they have personally witnessed. Besides, their stories shed light on why students have sex on campus.

Men tend to make both the female and the male sexual partners responsible for what is happening in these kinds of sexual events (see Albel's remark above). But they also say having sex in different places and college premises sometimes take place during day times. Let's 'hear' what Gameda has to say:

Gameda: Let alone in the evenings, I have even seen people doing it during the day. In fact, the people we saw having sex were not embarrassed when they noticed we were watching them. On the contrary, they were furious that we paid attention to what was going on. And it was we who were humiliated and moved away from the scene. (*MaleFGD-2*)

The fact that students commonly have sex in relatively secluded places of the university is surprising to the FGD participants as well as to me (including my research assistant of course) in many ways. To begin with, during orientations given to freshman students upon joining the university, students are told in black and white that "having sex in campus" would face dismissal from colleges for good. Some of the participants, in fact, go on to the extent of criticizing the leniency the campus

administration has shown in deterring the “shameful” sexual practice, to use Sara’s term. Some even suggest ways of terminating sexual practice done in campus.

Participants also express disgust with the physical and emotional discomfort brought by having sex in these places on “actors” involved. Physically, since such people have sex standing or sleeping on fields or concrete benches, participants feel the whole venture is rather inconvenient. Similarly, since students having sex in these “secret” places of the campus perform it at night, participants feel the weather would be rather cold and thereby ill-timed for the purpose. In emotional terms, considering the private nature of sex and given that people involved might possibly be seen by other students, the female as well as male participants wonder how college students dare to engage in such sexual practices. They also wonder if they would enjoy the experience at all. Interestingly, some of the female participants put the blame on the men involved. The prime movers of such a practice are, for them, male students. Not only they feel the practice is physically discomforting to their fellow female students but also decry it as something demeaning. In their eyes, the males are blamable because they are inconsiderate.

While a couple of participants express some sympathy with students having sex in the secluded places, most of them are highly critical of such a practice. Participants sort of sympathizing with these students say, “students having sex on campus do it because they cannot afford to have sex” in decent places like hotels. For the sympathizers, having sex in hotels requires a lot of money and most university students are poor and they simply don’t have the money. There are also participants who feel such students cannot logically think about the physical and emotional damages caused by such practice when they are in the heat of the moment. Most of the participants, however, condemn the practice in the strongest terms possible. As can be understood from the

excerpts quoted earlier, while some feel it is totally indecent to have sex in public places, some others equate it with “animalism.”

Done in “public” or in private, FGD participants are generally dismissive of the opposite sex intimate relations existing among college students. As indicated earlier, some say the relation is materialistic and in a way devoid of love. Male participants are by and large critical of the female students along this line. Similarly, there is a consensus among female participants that most of the opposite sex relations are formed with sexual motives in mind. In this regard, male students are accorded with the greater blame. While men are presented as people who are misleading, sex mongers, female students are pictured as naïve and as people seeking more lasting and more meaningful relations from men the same way Hoppe et al.’s (2004) research participants from high schools viewed their sexual relations with boys.

Partly because of women’s fascination for materialistic benefits and men’s obsession with gratifying their sexual needs while involving with intimate relations with male students, opposite sex relations among the college population under investigation are described as transient and inauthentic. Said differently, the discussions held with both sexes reveal that genuine relations between boyfriends formed out of love are rare. Participants, women and men alike, are also of the opinion that meaningful relations having marriage in mind are a rarity in the college settings. No sooner than students start some relations, participants decry, that they rush themselves to sex. At the center of most of the relations is thus sex.

Despite the overall feeling among participants that the relationship between sexual partners in the university is not good saying that it is quite transient, nothing beyond sex, and quite casual, there are participants who say it is unfair to attribute opposite

sex relations to sexual motives alone. While some say opposite sex relations could potentially lead to future marital bond, some others feel it is a strategic friendship used to jointly withstand challenges in campus life. This is corroborated by personal account of Regassa, a third year student from the DFLL.

Regassa's understanding of a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship as something beyond satisfying sexual need is shared by some female participants as well. For Yetnayet, in addition to being a source of mutual benefit for both sexes, such a relation can also bring some sense of security to female students. She explains that a female student having a boyfriend, can for example, be protected from all possible harassments coming from "bad guys."

Surprisingly enough, sexual gratification resulting from such a relation is either hushed up or condemned out rightly often on the pretext that it is momentary and superficial/ transient. To put it differently, most of the participants don't want to accept sex between college students is pleasurable.

Mechanisms used by college students to form intimate relationships

Whatever their motives, sexual or otherwise, college students, men as well women, use different mechanisms while forming opposite sex relationships. Though college men have sex with non- college people, their sexual partners are dominantly fellow college students. The FGDs conducted with both sexes reveal that sexual relations take place between female freshman students and senior college male students (men in the second year and above). Not surprisingly, most often it is young men who take the initiative in forming the sexual relations. Not only do they take the initiative, they also leave no stone unturned to have girlfriends/sexual partners at any cost, and most succeed in having at least one. By way of referring their success and the efforts they

exert to start sexual relations, male university students refer to the period when freshman students join campus as “harvesting season”—a season when new girlfriends are harvested. For the sake of convenience, we will examine the techniques used in terms of gender.

Male students’ mechanisms

Men use various mechanisms to recruit girlfriends, and after the fact, girls are also aware of the methods used by their male counterparts. In fact, it is female participants who talk more articulately than the men about the techniques used by the latter. One of the most commonly used mechanisms is offering to show women around the campus. Let alone for students coming from the country and from small high schools, the enormity of the main campus could be quite overwhelming even to students from big cities including the capital city. Men who are aware of this complexity of the campus offer to act as considerate hosts, and bewildered new female students do not often turn down such offers. Relations formed that way serve usually as an inception for future intimate relations. A female participant gives details on offering to show around and highlights its real motive:

Frehiwot: There is some other technique. This thing of showing you around places! When you are fresh, you see guys waiting for you at the gate. Myriads of them storm you! Then one of the guys offers to help with your luggage. Then he offers to show you around after you leave your luggage in your dormitories. He tells you, “This is OCR. That is NCR!” Things of that sort! For example, it was a guy who showed me around the first time I came here. When I arrived here first, I was not sure which is which. Thinking I went to OCR, I would go to NCR. And while I was meant to go to NCR, I would find myself in OCR. As I was saying, it was a fourth year student who showed me around here. He has graduated now. When he saw me standing carrying my luggage, he asked me where I wanted to go. He then took me to the dormitory building and I left my luggage. Fortunately, for me the guy was a good friend of a girl from my place. And nothing followed. Anyways, guys spend a great

deal of time with you showing you different places until you feel you are indebted to them. Then they ask you to go out for coffee or tea. And girls usually readily agree. Some would feel too indebted to say no. Others would agree for they would be considered uncivilized (*fara*) if they decline the offer. Relations start as easily as that, and they soon change their courses. (***Female FGD-1***)

Male college students hosting women who come from their hometown also use the opportunity to form intimate relationships. Notwithstanding that there are well-meaning men, female participants say, most male students use this common origin as an excuse for recruiting future sexual partners. Approaching them as people who are there to give them help about life in campus—how to withstand the academic rigors of universities, how to deal with university professors, how to prepare for exams and things of that sort—men often act as counselors. But relations formed in this manner would soon take the directions men want. First, the couple stick together, going out for tea or coffee. Through time, they turn out to be boyfriends and girlfriends or sexual partners. As reported by female participants and understandably so, it is men who “propose”. Women would then comply with the request out of a feeling of gratitude, and not out of love.

The other common opportunities created by men take place after the female freshman students settle and they are related to helping them succeed in their studies. Men provide women with materials known as handouts (e.g., lecture notes taken the previous year, reading materials supplied by previous instructors, and previous exam papers). Related with this is academic support given by male students to their female counterparts in the form of informal tutorial commonly referred to as “*Mastenat*”, an Amharic phrase. “*Mastenat*” (giving informal tutorials), though most common among freshman students, is also exercised among senior college students. As shall be seen in the discussion below, despite male students’ attempt to sound genuinely helpful, the

female participants feel only few men want to offer true academic help. While the tutorial can take place either in the open air or in a place known as “space”, couples (more truthfully men) make sure that it is done in the absence of other students. That gives potential lovers the opportunity to have privacy, which through time leads to creating special friendships. This is what participants say describing such mechanisms:

Haregewoin: Materials. When we were freshman students, they approach us by offering handouts for courses. Then they ask which department we are in. That way, relations start. And as you know women are vulnerable. Guess how many of us are confident enough to resist males’ sexual advances. Girls tend to see the things done to them positively. But guys do these things purposely. *They know what to expect in return.* The feedback is obvious... Anyways, guys’ major technique is to offer [course] materials. (*Female FGD-1, emphasis mine*).

Mulugeta: Well, if you ask me, forming sexual partnership through friends, by belonging to same origin and things of that sort doesn’t make sense for me. Very few people with a permanent relation in mind may do that sort of things. But what the majority’s motive here is sex. They approach girls on the pretext of providing them with test materials of the previous years, course materials and when things are conducive, they rush them to sex. (*Male FGD-1*)

Other than mechanisms used by both senior and freshman students, the FGDs have also revealed, that there are ways of initiating opposite sexual relations often used by senior students. Senior students make use of verbal communications as well as non-verbal cues when initiating opposite sex relationships. Rather traditional as it may seem, “winking” is reported to be a prominent non-verbal signal commonly used by male college students. Men who are sure of themselves wink at women they are attracted to in order to express their desires. They do this in libraries, the university cafeterias (canteens) or recreational places after making sure that they are not observed by other students. Steps the “winkers” take following that obviously depend on the signals sent back to them by “the winked”. If the winked, for example, reacts to the winking by smiling, the men are encouraged to take further actions (say, going to

the women and introducing them, waving hands or inviting women out for tea or coffee). For “lucky men”, introductions initiated as simply as that may develop into close relations. In situations where women demonstrate negative signals (e.g., make a face, get angry, and frown), men often vanish from the site and the sought relation aborts there and then. Some of the participants say less timid men may go on taking further steps like harassing young women. The understanding among male participants is that generally “winking” works out fine for men.

Demonstrating qualities that girls think men should possess are other non-verbal cues used by male students at college. What male participants call *erasin metebek* in the vernacular –literally means “watching over oneself”—makes up a portion of qualities appreciated by female students. Watching over oneself includes: dressing well (e.g., dressing fashionably, dressing up), keeping oneself neat, and looking sportive, and most importantly refraining from different addictions (chewing *chat*, smoking, and drinking alcohol). Since men know that possessing these assets makes dating women easy, FGD empirical materials indicate, male students often try and demonstrate these dispositions—that is, if they can afford to. Exhibiting verbal qualities as a cheerleader, entertainer, and good talker—features considered appreciable by women students in general.

Of the various ways of starting opposite sex relations included under verbal communications, the following merit detailed discussion: offering to help company at night, *lekefa*⁷, and talking to young women in person. Though *lekefa* could roughly be translated as “teasing”, its use, as shown in the FGDs, has positive connotations and sexual impulse is embedded in it. Sounding rather provocative at face value, *lekefa*, a

⁷ Roughly translated as “teasing”, in the Ethiopian context *lekefa* can better be understood as a subtle/witty remark by people wishing to open a conversation with an opposite sex.

subtle remark made by interlocutors on anything related to the hearer is often considered complimentary by the latter. Teasing (*lekefa*) may range from ordinary remarks like, “You look nice” to subtle compliments such as, “God forgive your boyfriend for letting you go alone.” Alternatively, it may be expressed in the form of offering some assistance. This is what a male participant says on how *lekefa* could be expressed and on its potential for creating future relations:

Minyichel: There are various mechanisms to start a relation. One mechanism is what we call ‘*lekefa*’ (teasing). It has some sexual implication. Nowadays, the library is open for 24 hours. And the maximum time our sisters can stay up to is 2 o’clock or three o’clock. When a girl wants to go to her dormitory at that late hour, a guy will have the opportunity to offer a company. Whether he knows her or not, the guy would say, “Why not I accompany you? Aren’t you afraid of going alone at this time of the day?” If the girl knows the guy, she will readily accept the offer. As you know, darkness by itself is frightening for human beings. So, these kinds of *lekefas* open doors for further introductions. When these guys meet and exchange greetings, through time, they may be accustomed to each other and that may lead to developing special friendship. (*Male FGD-1*)

At the same time, the discussion with male students has indicated that *lekefa* could be perceived negatively when misplaced:

Minyichel: Female students look down upon freshman students. When provoking remark are thrown at them by guys they consider freshmen, they say, ‘Forget him. Most likely he is fresh; still he has the courage to be teasing!’ (*Male FGD-1*)

Mulugeta: I believe there is limited relation between people from the two groups [rich and poor students]. There is a joke [told on campus which is] indicative of this relation. A guy, apparently from a low-income family, tries to date a girl who owns a car. She was not happy about it. When she later meets her close girl friend, she complains “Guess what. I just have had the most humiliating experience. A café-eater [a guy eating in the university canteen] kind of ‘teased me’! (*Male FGD-1*)

The unwritten rule about the game of *lekefa* is that its players, the teaser and the teased, should be potentially equals.

Going directly to women and stating their feelings in explicit terms, though rare, is also a technique some college men use. Young men who do this, the FGDs show, resort to this method after taking their time and when other less direct methods fail:

Frehiwot: Personally, I believe friendship is formed by chance.... when a guy sees a girl he is interested in he goes and talks to her when she is alone. Or, a guy might follow her when she goes out for shopping or for something and he finds every excuse to open a conversation and that way a relationship begins. For many guys, telling a girl how they feel about her is something done as a last resort. (*Female FGD-1*)

Female students' mechanisms

Contrary to the case with that of male students, when we talk about mechanisms used by female students to form intimate relations with college men, it is having senior students (second year and above) in mind. Female students who have the courage to show their sexual interest to men (mostly, implicitly; in rare cases, in explicit terms) are reported to be those who have stayed in campus more than a year. Women as freshman are practically out of the game. Not surprisingly, non-verbal cues are the techniques senior female students commonly use when they want to start intimate relations with their male counterparts. When a woman is interested in a man, she makes sure she is in a perpetual contact with him. She creates every excuse to be around the young man she is attracted to. In situations where the man needs her assistance, she readily does that and constantly so. She provides assistance to him to the extent that the man feels indebted and be tempted to take the initiative to start a relation.

In the event that these clues go unnoticeable, participants candidly say, college women do things comparable to communicating their desires in explicit terms. When they are with men they are interested in, they do all sorts of tempting things. They dress up.

They put on make-up. And in extreme cases, they dress and act “sexy”. This is how a female participant named Esegenet (who says women are good or even better than men at communicating their desires) unguardedly sums up the seductive ways discussed by fellow participants:

Esegenet: I don’t think there is a serious disagreement in what you’ve said. It is the style that you are disagreeing with. The direct way of asking is not just saying, “I love you!” There are other ways of asking. If you kind of start harassing a guy, you are asking him. That is as good as taking the initiative. If I act sexy in front of a guy, it is tantamount to proposing. Women express their love to guys well. In fact, we are good at it. I think we women find it difficult to hide our emotions. When we love, we love full heartedly. And we have different ways [of communicating that]. To go tell a guy you love him is just one way. To dress up and be consistently visible to him is still another means. Assisting him is one way. If I am always there whenever he needs some assistance, that is one way of expressing my feelings... Without we knowing about it, we all somehow express our love to guys we love. (*Female FGD-1*)

To send indirect non-verbal signals of expressing their desire, some women buy gifts. Some deliver the gifts to their prospective boyfriends/sexual partners via a third party. More courageous ones present the gifts in person to men they are attracted to. The gifts may be as little as pen and pencils or they could be stuff that is more precious. Be it ordinary or precious, presented in person or via a go-between, gifts have one common purpose: they serve as a way of communicating female students’ wish to start opposite sex relations with their male counterparts. A male participant expresses the role of gifts given by women more eloquently:

Gemeda: I wouldn’t say they [girls] would express their love in direct terms. But they have ways of expressing their affection. They buy guys gifts. The gifts may be some expensive stuffs or inexpensive tokens like pens. But the important thing is the symbolic value attached to them. There are girls who buy oranges and send to guys they are interested in. And this gradually leads to intimate relations. (*Male FGD-2*)

Albeit often indirectly, female students also express their interests verbally. Some, for example, look for cell phone numbers of men they are fond of. They then make calls to them and give clues about their desires. Some others tell men the positive qualities they seek from men knowing well that those young men possess those very qualities. Still some others haphazardly give favorable comments about their favorite men— say about their looks, about the way they are dressed, and that sort of things. While some daring women directly speak in favor of the men they are attracted to, others do it indirectly. They say endearing words about a man as if to their friends, but they make sure that they are overheard. Here is a story told by a “victim”:

Alebel: Girls fall in love. And they have their own ways of expressing their love. Why not I tell you my own experience? There was this girl from Gondar. Once we were taking part in Epiphany celebration with friends of mine. Just behind us, my friends and I heard her saying to a friend, “Look, this guy looks like my brother.” Interested in her remarks, my friends responded: “Hey, listen. He can still be your brother. Why don’t you two meet?” Following that introduction, our relation soon grew to intimate friendship eventually ending up in [having] sex. (*Male FGD-2*)

Peer and normative pressures

In the preceding discussions, we have attempted to see the sexual engagement of male and female college students and the mechanisms they make use of in order to start opposite sexual relations with each other. In doing so, our emphasis was examining the traits of individual students that lead to sexual engagement. The impact of peers and environmental factors contributing to the sexual practices of college students in college as well as non-college settings have not been dealt with. That does not, nonetheless, mean the influences of peers and environmental factors have been found to be of little importance in our research setting. On the contrary, consistent with the literature (see Agha, 2002; Campbell et al., 2005; Campbell & MacPhail, 2002; Cohen & Lederman, 1998; Longfield et al., 2004; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001)—though not

solely in college settings and not necessarily in negative ways—the empirical materials reveal that peers as well as college norms have been equally influential and in some cases even more powerful in shaping the sexual practices of our target groups. The focus of this section is, thus, examining the accounts of the students themselves about the impacts of peers and the college environment on students' sexual lives.

Peer pressures: Private as it may seem, the sexual life of male and female students, the FGDs show, is greatly influenced by peers in various ways. The influence begins with a dramatic change in the overall lifestyle of the students following their joining colleges. Contrary to their lifestyle in high schools and in preparatory schools, students begin to live in dormitories and stay together in various non-academic and academic settings. Freshman students are, for example, made to live with a number of many other fellow students. Partly because of lack of space, women at a freshman, for instance, share a dormitory with other 30 students. Naturally enough, these students form some kind of friendship and begin to share information on mutual interests of various nature (sometimes in pairs and other times in small and large groups). At the earlier stages, discussions would revolve around the new environment and subjects of discussion might include 'ordinary' topics such as food, accommodation, and academics. As the students get closer through time, they would naturally begin talking about personal matters and at times start sharing secrets.

The discussions held both with male and female students, for example, reveal that female students play a considerable role in involving other female students in opposite sexual relations. As shown in earlier sections, female students are somehow dragged into starting relations with senior students who are equipped with deceptive mechanisms. (In a way, the various techniques used by male students can be considered as peer pressures on female students). Ironically, female students in opposite sex relations would directly or indirectly later influence peers to follow suit.

Female students in a relation, for example, serve as matchmakers. Compared with students who haven't started intimate relations with men, male students can comfortably ask female students who have got boyfriends to introduce them to women they are interested in. Understandably, these students in a relation in most cases comply with the request; at the same time, 'single' students find such a favor rather awkward. Interestingly, there are campus colloquial languages used for the purpose. Matchmaking requests are often made quite lightly. Belyou's response below to how students commence to have boyfriends/girlfriends is typical of the matchmaking practices taking place among college students:

Muluemebet: *Your discussion is all interesting. But let's dwell on some other issue. How do students start having boyfriends/girlfriends?*

Belyou: I think it is the result of peer pressure from girls. It is usually under the influence of our friends that we start a relation. Outdated as it may seem, matchmaking is quite common in this campus. There are people known as matchmakers (*Atabash*). Well anyway, when guys want to be match-made, they come to you and say, "this friend of yours kind of suits me" (*yich guadeгнаh's temechechign*)." This expression is commonly used by guys here. (*Female FGD-1*)

In addition to playing a role of a matchmaker, female students in a relation also play a more direct role of pushing fellow female students to sexual relationships. They often do this by candidly telling their friends about their own boyfriends. Some emphasize the enjoyment they get as result of having boyfriends/ sexual partners. Others, as reported in the work of Longfield et al. (2004) capitalize on the material benefits (money, gifts, mobile apparatus) or academic assistance they obtain from their partners. Still others say that there is nothing wrong and it is in fact acceptable to have boyfriends for college students. That college is a place where one has to enjoy life (i.e. have sex, drink, smoke), that the age college students are in is appropriate for starting opposite sex relations, and that forming sexual relationships in colleges is an

acceptable norm are some of the explanations given by some pushing friends to start a relation.

As briefly noted above, some of the peer pressures coming from female students are somewhat direct and are easily detected by women who haven't formed opposite sex relations. Discussions held with men and women reveal that college female students with no sexual experience often envy the experienced ones in many ways. It is, for example, very common for women with boyfriends to get messages from their partners to come to Beg Tera (the Sheep Quarter). Female students who frequently get messages or frequenting places of romance like Beg Tera, particularly female freshman students, often pride themselves for possessing captivating qualities (e.g., being good looking, well-dressed, fashionable) that attract college men. In contrast, female students not asked "to report at Beg Tera" think that they are plain and in turn have feelings of inferiority. They feel that they are not interesting enough for the male students. In other words, they feel that they are unwanted. And sooner or later, they find themselves doing everything they can to attract men.

Pressures put on women to be involved in sexual relations do not, however, come from their women friends alone. When it comes to the actual engagement of sex, female students encounter stronger pressures from men. Until they eventually give in to their sexual requests, men wouldn't "give them a break." And in most cases, women concede to men's uninterrupted sexual pursuits for fear of losing them for good. Here are two interesting observations made by two of the female participants from the two different discussion groups:

Frewhiowt: ... the pressure from guys is very high. When a girl meets a guy, it is in fact he who persuades her to have sex with him. Guys usually need to satisfy their immediate sexual desire. Once a guy satisfies his immediate needs, he may say, "Go to hell!" The girl usually gives in for fear that she might be

left out. She might love him. “If I don’t have sex with him, I might lose him for good,” she thinks. And guys try all their best to persuade girls to have them. (*Female FGD-1*)

Yetnayet: Once students form a relation as boyfriends and girlfriends, I still believe, the pressure for having sex comes from males. Female students who actively seek sex are very few. It is for fear that their boyfriends will abandon them if they refuse to have sex with them that female students accept males’ request. (*Female FGD-2*)

The portrayal of young women as people who easily comply with sexual advances made by young men for fear of losing the entire relationship is observed in FGDs held with male students as well. Though in a negative sense, a male student named Mulugeta (a participant in Male FGD-1) says the thing that worries women most in this campus is being made redundant by their boyfriends. As a result, the participant adds, campus women do their best not to lose their boyfriends. Again, the pressures coming from me are not limited to insisting that they have sex with them. Even before a relation starts, it is often men who actively nudge female students to form the very opposite sex relation. As cunningly expressed by a female participant, the way college men deal with freshman women give one the impression they are competing among themselves to drag them into opposite sex relations. The excerpt below may give a better idea and the flavor of the student’s opinion:

Muluemebet: *So you are telling me a girl who had no boyfriend will have a boyfriend when she joins college?*

Frehiwot: Yeah that is right. No sooner than they are here that they begin to have boyfriends. They delve into it without thinking about it. The maximum time they need is a couple of days. [laughter]... This is due to the pressure from guys. Right from the day she registers, a guy would begin to follow her up and he wouldn’t give her a break [*fata ayesetatim*]

Muluemebet: *How come he wouldn’t give her a break? What does he exactly do?*

Frehiwot: You know what? The way I see it, *there is some kind of competition among guys*. They compete to have a girlfriend among freshman students. So guys use every means to secure a new relation with a fresh student. If one fails,

another would do his best to form the relation. (*Female FGD-1, emphasis mine*)

In the same way female students are influenced by their peers in their sexual lives, the sexual engagements of male students in colleges are also influenced by their friends. In agreement with the findings of some related studies (e.g., Cohen & Lederman, 1998) the desire to share one's private sexual experience by some students, on the one hand, and the apparent readiness to listen to these stories on the part of some other students, on the other, is reflective of the pressures peers can have on another at a wider level. Participants' narratives may make this assertion more vivid:

Getnet: *What factors encourage young people like you to have girlfriends/boyfriends?*

Elias: Well, in the first place there is age factor. As you grow older, you tend to be more and more interested in sex and in opposite sex relationship. And that is normal. There is nothing wrong with that. But living on your own and living in groups have different impact on this. When we join colleges we live in groups, at a minimum in sixes. We all have different backgrounds and experiences. If, for example, two of these guys start dating and begin sharing their experience with us, we begin to be inspired by what our dorm mates do. And the same is true with girls. Then the guy will try and go out for himself. And after the experience, he too will have something to talk about. He won't be a bystander. He begins to be active participant. (*Male FGD-1*)

Kuma: Young people in dormitories enjoy talking and listening to sex related matters. People have sex and they talk about it. Sometimes, including matters that are too private. And inexperienced guys listen actively often asking all sorts questions. (*Male FGD-2*)

The above quotes merit additional explanation. Obviously, the peers who are likely to be pressurized to follow suit are those enthusiastically listening to their friends' sexual encounters. Their enthusiasm primarily implies their need to do the same as their friends and enjoy the experience firsthand. On top of that, they

have an implicit desire of sharing their new sexual experience and in a way the need to look for peer recognition in the form of interested audience.

Normative Pressure/Environmental Factors: The unprecedented freedom found in colleges giving every opportunity for male students and female students alike to do whatever they like is perhaps the strongest normative pressure/ environmental factor hugely affecting their sexual lives. In harmony with the literature (see Cohen & Lederman, 1998; Farrow & Arnold, 2003; Ferguson et al., 2006; Foreman 2003; Helweg-Larsen & Collins, 1994; Lewis et al., 1997; Roberts & Kennedy, 2006) stories told by FGD participants corroborate this trend. Expressing the absolute freedom enjoyed by campus students, a fourth year student of Theatre Arts named Adey uses an Amharic saying “*Netsanet Bakafa*” which literally means “Freedom with a spade”. (Note that the metaphoric use of spade in the Amharic context is implicitly contrasted with a spoon and implies an excess supply of the thing under consideration). Minyichel, a third year student pursuing the same field of study, shares Adey’s view but in a more articulate and detailed manner:

Minyichel: While we were with our parents at home, most of us were strictly supervised. Parents would impose curfews on us. If we don’t observe the curfew they would say to us: “where the hell have you been? Who the hell were you with?” Things of that sort were common. *Here the world is all ours. Who knows what I do and what I don’t? I’m on my own.* As a result of that freedom, students want to try out what their peers do. It doesn’t mean students are unaware of the possible consequences of what they do... They don’t want to feel inferior to downtown guys. Well, the city guys may do this because it brings them happiness. Perhaps they don’t do well in academics. What worry me are the deeds of village guys. They just follow suit. (**Female FGD-1, emphasis mine**)

That the impacts of newly earned freedoms are particularly stronger on students coming from rural places is a subject further picked by female participants.

Haregewoin's rather lengthy but dramatic observation is shared by all other participants—an observation which sheds light on how young women coming from too strict family are influenced—is worth quoting:

Haregewoin: Ese[Esegenet] has a point. In fact, it is a girl from the countryside who takes the lead in having boyfriends. You can tell that she had no [sexual] experience whatsoever before joining college. She would be under strict parental control. All she would be allowed to do is just go to school and come back home from school. She would know few places other than her school and home. Maybe she knows few other places when she is sent to fetch water or when she is sent shopping to the nearby shops. But such a girl gets her complete freedom when she comes here. There is nobody to ask her, “Where the hell have you been?” So, when she is here, she wants to blast off (mefendat new yemfelgew). Why not I tell you the way these kind of girls dress? When they come here, they are dressed with foot length traditional skirts. But after a while, they end up wearing Vale Velt. It is these girls who want to have boyfriends. (**Female FGD-1**)

Expectations that students bring along with them when joining colleges—that college is not just an academic setting but also a place to “enjoy life”— is also a normative belief that pressurize students of both sexes to have sexual engagements. This normative belief is expressed through hybrid of English-Amharic expression, “*Life n mekchet*” mentioned earlier. This belief held among the student community is not limited to promoting young people to sexual culture. As shall be seen in more detail, substances like *chat*, liquors and shisha (most of which push users to more sexual engagement) are believed to form features that make life in colleges quite enjoyable. A remark made by a female participant is indicative of that:

Yetnayet: Having a boyfriend/ girlfriend [in this campus] has become quite a necessity that everyone has to do. If a girl doesn't have a boyfriend, she is regarded as unrefined person. And if a boy doesn't have a girlfriend, people would say, “Aren't you a man? How come you still don't have a girlfriend?” Before I joined this campus I had a lot of information about it in terms of friendship between opposite sexes. After I came here what I see is a confirmation of what I heard. (**Female FGD-2**)

As if to make the students' newly earned freedom and their expectations quite conducive, students witness abundant places in the university campus where students have sex. Upon arrival, students are given informal orientations by fellow college students about places like Beg Tera, Kissing Pool, the Football Field, to mention a few—places with legendary traditions of intimate relations, before even being taken to the University libraries, classrooms or clinics. For students like Yetnayet, coming to colleges with the expectation that colleges are places where life is enjoyed, that kind of familiarization of students can obviously give an inflated image of sexual practices in colleges. This is further complicated by the stories students hear about the high prevalence of sexual practice in colleges. To reiterate, FGD participants emphatically note that the campus environment is conducive to sex. And no wonder that a female participant, with a note of bitterness, says that the campus had better be renamed “sex center” rather than a university.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Empirical materials, primarily the data gathered from FGDs conducted with the 20 participants, indicate that the undergraduate students are tremendously engaged in opposite sexual relations. Participants of both sexes (female students, prompted; male students, unprompted) guess at least 70 percent of the students are in sexual relations. The empirical materials further revealed that male and female students perform sex, dominantly with one another, and less dominantly, with non-college people.

Three major factors seem to have contributed to facilitating the sexual practices taking place amongst the students. In conformity with related studies, (e.g., Cohen & Lederman, 1998; Farrow & Arnold, 2003; Foreman, 2003) the first factor has to do

with the absolute freedom students enjoy in the new environment, a college setting. Students assume complete responsibility in managing their own life, including their sexual practices. Related with this new environment is the expectation the students bring with them about life in university. Most students equate colleges as places to enjoy life. Joining colleges is thus considered as some kind of entitlement to having sex for students. While there is nothing wrong in having sex as a young adult, this sense of complete entitlement to sex coupled by a feeling of absolute freedom in an environment where HIV/AIDS is widespread (Aklilu et al., 2001; Yassin et al., 2004) is indeed a cause for concern.

The second factor facilitating students' sexual activities is peer pressures on both sexes. In comparison with the male students, the pressures on female students were found to be much stronger. Using various deceptive mechanisms (approaching them as counsellors, as academic tutors, or as considerate friends belonging to the same ethnicity/place of origin), male students gradually drag college women into unwanted sexual relations. Though less stringently, female students are also gravitated towards sexual relations via fellow female students with sexual experience who play the role of matchmakers.

For male students, the sources of peer pressures are other male students with sexual experiences. By sharing adventurous and treacherous stories including dating multiple sexual partners, they pressurize other students to follow suit—in a way they encourage them to assert their masculinity. Stories shared with “the innocent” include overstaying women until campus curfew, and getting them drunk and then taking them to bed. By consistently telling their fellow college men that having sex is a kind of “coming of age” and a sign of manhood, peers also pressurize their fellow male college students to assert their masculinity.

Normative pressures are the third factors that facilitate the flourishing/mushrooming of opposite sex relations in college settings. The fact that there are many legendary places where students enjoy romantic relations, including having sex, is one of the major normative factors encouraging them towards forming opposite sex relations. Practices such as drinking alcohol and *chat* chewing, arguably closely linked with sexual practices that embolden students to pursue sexual relations, can also be considered as normative pressures/ environmental factors. Relatedly, the unprecedented access to porno sites accessed from computers in the university libraries has, according to FGD participants, motivated students not only to start sexual relations but also tempted them to experiment what they watch there.

In non-college settings, despite many other types of sexual relations college students reportedly form, three major patterns stood out clearly. One is the sexual relations taking place between female students and “sugar daddies”—an opposite sex relation observed in a couple of studies conducted in other African countries (Longfield et al., 2004; Iwuagwu et al., 2001) . Female students are allegedly having relations with “sugar daddies”, much older but rich men, in exchange for financial or other benefits. This is a troubling relation based on miscalculated hypotheses by both sexual partners. “Sugar daddies” often go after college girls with the belief that they are sexually inexperienced and they tend to perform unprotected sex. On the other hand, college women, mostly with an aim of maintaining sexual innocence, a quality appreciated by “sugar daddies”, refrain from negotiating safe sex or more specifically from suggesting condom use. Some also reserve the job of the protective sex to the “sugar daddies”, the more mature partners.

Male students, freshman students in particular, also delve into comparable sexual relations in a non-college setting. Since their academic status would not entitle them to date college students who usually look down upon them, they hunt for girls from surrounding high schools who give high regard to their status as college students. Like that of the sexual relations between female college students and “sugar daddies”, their relation is based on miscalculated anticipation about each other. Using metaphors such as “buds,” “flowers” and “onions,” expressions suggestive of freshness and virginity, the male college students approach the school girls as people who are sexually innocent. On the other hand, mainly because of their high regard to college, the school girls form relations with these ‘learned’ men with a sense of being in good hands. As a result, protective sex such as condom use between these partners is unthought-of. Empirical studies, however, indicated the assumptions and expectations of both groups are unfounded (see Astatke et al., 2000; Fisseha et al, 1997; Mulatu, Adamu & Haile, 2000).

In non-college contexts, most troubling of all these relations are, however, the sexual relations existing between some college students and commercial sex workers. As has been found in other related studies conducted in Ethiopia (e.g., Fitaw and Worku, 2002; Gebrekidan and Azeze, 1995), a segment of students have sexual affairs with commercial sex workers considered as most at risk groups. To make matters worse, college students in the current study are believed to involve themselves in these kinds of risky relations motivated by the combined effects of *chat* and liquor; when under the influence of alcohol, students are unlikely to use condoms.

On the whole, students believe having sex is acceptable for college students of their age. Some male participants even underlie that satisfying one’s sexual needs is as necessary as meeting one’s primary needs like food and shelter. Despite subscribing to

notions of righteousness of having sex for college students, participants are at the same time critical of most of the sexual practices that students have. While positively perceiving sexual relations existing among college students, they are, for example, critical of each others' motives behind the opposite sex relations. Female college students paint male students as people who rush to satisfy their sexual needs and as inconsiderate people who see little beyond sexual gratification. Citing the physical and emotional discomfort female students have while having sex in various campus spots "designated for the purpose," female participants accuse men of lacking concern for their sexual partners. On the other hand, male students accuse of female students as money mongers and materialists.

Students having sexual experiences/ relations with commercial sex workers are, however, despised and men experiencing it make a secret of it. While students' disdain of sexual experiences with sex workers is a positive sign, its secretive nature is a cause for concern. Though not comparable to male students' negative reaction towards the sexual relations between men and commercial sex workers, by and large, women's relations with "sugar daddies" are perceived unfavourably. Notwithstanding that there are a few women who would show off such a relation, most women keep it secret. Peers also equate female students' sexual affairs between young women and "sugar daddies" with prostitution, knowing very well that that former's motive is financial.

Despite this overall norm of keeping sexual relations confidential, there is an emerging sub-culture of unusual frankness among a certain group of female students. A discourse of entitlement to sexual pleasure which Fine (1988) decries as "the missing discourse" in the sexual lives of young women is encouragingly apparent at least among a segment of young women with urban background. Challenging the common assumption that gratification from sex as something reserved for men alone, and

giving empirical support to a recent study conducted in Africa (Tawfik & Watkins, 2007), female participants reflected on recent view held among fellow young women. As was nicely described by Sara, a female participant, the consensus among conscious female college students these days is that sexual partners must get mutual pleasure from their sexual practices. Gone are the days, Sara tells us, of viewing sex as a five-minute ordeal out of which only men would get satisfaction. Female participants' acknowledgement of young women's entitlement to sexual pleasures (a view shared by some male participants as well) is an issue advocated by a number of qualitative researchers (e.g., Aggleton & Warwick, 2002; Campbell et al., 2005; Campbell & MacPhail, 2002) but a practice missing in the sexual lives of young people in Africa.

Recommendations

Contrary to the assumptions made by previous related studies in Ethiopia and elsewhere, the reliance on provision of knowledge about HIV/AIDS and some preventive mechanisms would do very little by way of bringing behavioural changes. Students themselves have become increasingly cognizant of this disconnect between knowledge and behaviour. We should thus think of more practical and workable preventive measures.

Whatever our attitudes and preferences towards sexual relations existing between young people of college age might be, most young people are increasingly involved in opposite sexual relations with one another. Including young women, the youth are openly and boldly telling us (and rightly so) that they are entitled to sexual pleasures. Instead of making a futile attempt to prevent the youth from sexual engagement by instilling fear in them (e.g., a fear of catching HIV/AIDS), we need to openly acknowledge their right to sexual pleasures and help them pursue it in a more responsible manner. Narratives of young people from educated families brought up in

less conservative environments have shown that they are less vulnerable to risky behaviours. That could be educative.

Despite expressing positive attitude towards sexual engagement between them, college students themselves have admonished some sexual practices (e.g., sexual relations between students and sex workers, sexual relations between female students and “sugar daddies”). There is thus a conducive situation for intervention by way of mitigating these admonished sexual affairs that are potentially very risky. The sexual involvement of female students with “sugar daddies” is partly attributable to the poverty characterizing people from developing nations like Ethiopia and it needs to be addressed at a macro level. Female students date “sugar daddies” in exchange for financial benefits which they would otherwise find it difficult to secure. Identifying poor female students and helping them earn some money through part-time jobs available in colleges may be a short-term solution. Raising the awareness of parents about the female students’ financial difficulties and its repercussions might also help. Because parents believe students are provided with food and shelter by their respective colleges, they may not feel obliged to financially support their children. Addressing the more troubling sexual engagement, the sexual relations between male students and commercial sex workers is closely linked with students’ consumption of alcohol and *chat* chewing. Students are reported to “visit” sex workers motivated by liquor and *chat*. The University’s attempt to prevent the students from chewing *chat* by making the practice illegal has not worked at all. The same can be said of drinking alcohol. Further research that would help students to minimize chewing *chat* and drinking alcohol is needed.

Finally, it is highly recommended that related studies (preferably studies that involve a mixed methodology) be conducted in other colleges particularly in newly established

regional universities and private higher institutes (PHIs). Studies to be conducted in the regions(markedly different from colleges situated in Addis Ababa, a city characterized by a vibrant sex industry and metropolitan values) and PHIs may give us additional picture on the sexual experiences, sexual conduct, and safer/unsafe practices of Ethiopian undergraduate students whose number is on the increase.

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