

International
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Social Studies

Transactional sex in war-torn DRC

5 November 2023

Marie-Rose Bashwira and Thea Hilhorst

hilhorst@iss.nl

Transactional sex

Sex provided in exchange for something, but the literature shows that interpretations of transactional sex are culturally determined and constructed.

Engagement in sex in exchange for cash, goods, services, commodities, or privileges in order to meet the needs and wants of the parties involved.

Often set aside from sex work...

- Reference to boyfriend/ girlfriend
- May be differently perceived (SSA)

How about TS in highly violent or conflict-affected areas?

Isumbisho Mwapu, D. Hilhorst, M. Mashanda, M. Bahananga and Ruhomya Mugenzi (2016) Women engaging in transactional sex and working in prostitution: Practices and underlying factors of the sex trade in South Kivu, the Democratic Republic of Congo. Secure Livelihood Research Consortium (SLRC), : http://securelivelihoods.org/publications_details.aspx?resourceid=394,

Formson, C. and D. Hilhorst (2016) The many faces of transactional sex: Women's agency, livelihoods and risk factors in humanitarian contexts: A Literature Review. SLRC working paper, 20pp <https://securelivelihoods.org/publication/the-many-faces-of-transactional-sex-women%20s-agency-livelihoods-and-risk-factors-in-humanitarian-contexts-a-literature-review/>



ListenH

ListenH is a four-year long (2021-2025) research project which addresses the perplexity that surrounds transactional sex (TS) in humanitarian contexts and the resulting inadequacy of support to individuals and communities who practice it, living through or recovering from conflict and disaster.

Colombia, DRC and Pakistan

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Complex discussions

Between *violent power abuse*

- High prevalence of conflict-related sexual violence
- Scandals in the humanitarian sector on sexual exploitation and abuse →
foreclosing many discussions

And *agency*

- Searching for livelihoods
- Using sex as a venue to advance in life

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ListenH

- What are the motivations for, practices, and consequences of transactional sex in humanitarian crises situations based on the perspectives of people practicing it?
- How do these relate (or not) to views and assumptions embedded in humanitarian and policy responses to transactional sex in crisis situations?
- How can the needs and problems of people involved in transactional sex be more effectively addressed?

- Seeking to understand TS in context
- Navigating between power abuse and agency
- Primarily through
 - Listening → possibly peer-researchers
 - Seeking dialogue between practitioners of TS and humanitarians

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Preliminary data from DRC - humanitarians

Sexual abuse and TS in and around humanitarian operations rampant

- Direct abuse: sextortion; sexually transmitted tokens
People using power or resources to enforce sexual acts
Humanitarians, police, representatives
- Despair TS: aid is not enough – TS to survive in IDP camps
- Often encounter of power abuse and agency:
 - The HRM manager bartering jobs for sex
 - The job applicant aiming to get a job

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Cultural and social practice

- Context of entrenched gender inequality
- Religious influence: women are at fault in all extra-marital sex
- Surrounded by myths, such as men need sex; sex workers cannot be raped.
- Peer/ family pressure:
 - Why don't you find a sugar daddy like all your friends
 - You must contribute to the survival of the family

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PSEAH policies: help or hinder?

Abuse in humanitarian sector has triggered stringent policies and investigation mechanisms.

Views are mixed between positive and cautious...

For instance: no relationships are allowed in area of work.

- Triggering secret perhaps more abusive relations
- Glosses over the livelihood aspect: humanitarian only salary-earners in town

General view: policies written in HQ without voice of people experiencing TS
→ need for dialogue

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Conclusion

- Not yet
- <https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-projects/understanding-transactional-sex-situations-humanitarian-crises>

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Erasmus University Rotterdam
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