

Youth contribution

Pressure around sex in exchange for necessities is a setback in the fight against HIV among adolescent girls living in fishing communities in Kenya's Lake Victoria region

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When you are poor, you have limited power to make choices about your own body. Most decisions are made for you by either culture/traditions or the government. For adolescents, their right to bodily autonomy has been severely constrained, leaving them with no agency, resources, knowledge or skills to protect themselves.

According to the Kenya National AIDS Control Council (NACC), about 16% of the population in Kisumu is HIV positive. In 2020, data from the National AIDS and STIs Control Programme (NASCOP) revealed that Kisumu had recorded 4,661 new HIV cases, with adolescents and young people aged 15–24 accounting for most of the new infections. This is largely attributed to people engaging in sex in exchange for basic needs.

Along the Lake regions, fishing is the main source of livelihood. Many families survive on fishing, as a source of food and income they use to cover basic expenses such as schooling costs. Fishers are exposed to risks such as HIV and alcoholism; and due to limited financial literacy, many are unable to educate their daughters on ways of accessing better livelihood opportunities from the little fishing earnings.

Here in Kisumu, in our community, fishing has been a good source of cash income, attracting many people to work in the fishing industry. However, many have used their easy access to cash to indulge in multiple sexual relationships, commonly known as ‘sex for fish’ (*jaboya*). This tradition in our culture involves women and girls having sex with fishers (a male-dominated industry) in exchange for fish to sell or eat. Due to high poverty levels in Kisumu, many adolescent girls have succumbed to *jaboya*. Often, they are forced or lured by the fishermen into sex. Many fishermen even believe they are helping girls through the practice of *jaboya*, framing it as benevolence. As one fisherman said: ‘We give them fish for sex because they are unable to afford [basics]. We see this as an opportunity to help in the fish business’.

For girls, this type of transactional sex – albeit a violation of their rights – is a way to feed their family. The tradition has contributed to increased rates of HIV transmission within the Lake region’s population. Poverty has further pushed many adolescent girls into sex work at the lakesides to get money to meet their basic needs, whether food, school expenses or even menstrual pads.

The *jaboya* tradition discourages girls and women from owning boats and participating in fishing activities. As well as denying them economic independence, it also subjects them to risky sexual activities, including contracting HIV. It limits their potential and robs them of the opportunity to protect their health and well-being, now and in the future. I have witnessed my age-mates or agemates and even younger girls getting into early marriages because of the fishing tradition. In my family, HIV and AIDS have affected us directly. We had to lay a couple of family members to rest.

The patriarchal culture that underlies the widespread *jaboya* tradition continues to rob girls and women of their agency and voice. Many girls and young people grow up believing that ‘sex for fish’ is the only way to survive and to meet their basic needs. Orphaned girls and widows are particularly vulnerable to getting involved in *jaboya*. Orphaned adolescent girls often have to provide for their younger siblings, so see sex for fish as the only way to do this. Widows also have few options for meeting their basic needs, and so may be exploited by these fishermen, who also look to have a sexual relationship with the woman’s daughters too.

Growing up in Kisumu, I have known about *jaboya* since childhood, and it has been my desire to change the narrative and practice around ‘sex for fish’ by tackling the drivers of the harmful practice with different generations, including the elderly, adults and young people. I started by volunteering with a non-governmental organisation (NGO), Nyanam International, where in 2019, I trained 400 young people on healthy relationships during a five-day youth camp in partnership with a local church. We covered topics such as sexual and reproductive health, parenting, harmful cultural practices, and sexual relationships involving informed decision-making. We have also been running forums that discourage parents from subjecting their daughters to ‘sex for fish’ and encouraging them to find alternative sources of income to meet their basic needs.

Since early 2022, we have been engaging with young people in our community as youth mentors. During the school holidays, they facilitate community-based sessions for adolescents and young people, covering various topics that seek to change people’s behaviours in order to prevent the spread of HIV and promote sexual health and well-being. Although young people have embraced these sessions and the behaviour change, we are promoting, it has been more challenging to engage elderly people, so we are using intergenerational dialogues as the best approach to address this.

Although Kenya has made significant strides towards ending the HIV epidemic, practices such as *jaboya*, which limit girls’ and women’s economic independence, impede further progress. There is a need to enable and encourage young women to participate in the fishing industry, as fishers – providing them with relevant skills, techniques, equipment and other inputs – or to pursue other livelihoods such as farming. Helping girls and boys to stay in school for longer and achieve higher grades will complement other efforts to eradicate the ‘sex for fish’ trade.

In Kisumu, we’ve been working with community members to provide sustainable farming techniques that allow women to use small-scale farms to grow food that they can use at home or sell to earn an income. Vocational training institutions in local communities have a role to play, not just in teaching girls and women the skills they need to earn a livelihood and run a business but also equipping them with other knowledge such as how to protect their rights and challenge exploitation and abuse.



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