

# Male Sex Work in Mombasa, Kenya: Driven by Poverty or Identity?

S. Geibel, <sup>1</sup>Population Council, Nairobi, Kenya; S. Luchters, N. King'ola, and J. Okal, International Centre for Reproductive Health, Mombasa, Kenya; D. Lang'o Population Council, Nairobi, Kenya

## Conclusions

Male sex workers revealed diverse motivations when describing the reason for practicing sex work. While most participants were motivated by financial gain, concurrent sexual motivations varied among male sex workers. Insight into how men come to have sex with men may help Kenyan health workers better understand the social context of male sex work, and inform appropriate HIV counseling and treatment strategies.

## Background

Same-sex sexual practices are illegal in Kenya and remain highly stigmatized within government, religious, community, and health structures. Recent studies have highlighted the following:

- A 2006 enumeration estimated that 739 (95% CI: 690–798) male sex workers who have sex with men are active in the Mombasa area (Geibel et al, AIDS 2007; 21: 1349–1354).
- HIV prevalence was estimated at 25% among a cohort of 285 in the Mombasa area (Sanders et al, AIDS 2007; 21: 2513–2520). Overall HIV prevalence among men in Kenya is 5%.
- A 2007 behavioral survey of 425 male sex workers who have sex with men in Mombasa found that only 35% of respondents knew HIV can be transmitted through anal sex, and only 36% use condoms consistently in the past month with male clients. Over 80% of last male clients were Kenyan citizens (Geibel et al, Sex Transm Dis; 35: 746–752).

As the majority of their first male sexual partners and current male clients are Kenyan, it challenges the prevalent belief that male-to-male sex does not occur in Africa, but is directly influenced by foreigners and/or tourism. Further, there is continued debate in Africa regarding whether male sex work is driven by financial motives or sexual desire.

## Methods

Following the behavioral survey of 425 male sex workers in Mombasa, three focus group discussions (FGD) and 10 male sex worker in-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted. Among several topics discussed, male sex workers were asked to describe their first sexual experiences with other men, as well as their financial and sexual motives for engaging in sex work.

## Results

The stories provided by IDI and FGD participants revealed **three broad contexts through which they first had sex with men** including:

### (1) relationships with schoolmates or friends in the context of adolescent development;

*I started this when I was in school. I was young. I was introduced gradually through romance when I was 10, by a boy who was in a higher class. I always was feeling different from others, in that girls held no interest for me. He talked to me nicely and took care of me always when other boys and girls tried to make fun of me. He penetrated me when I was 14.*  
(21, IDI 5)

*This began when I was in school in class six and I was first penetrated by my school mate. I was not doing it for money at that time because I did not know what it was all about. All I know is that I loved him... after I finished class 8 I began commercial sex. This was due to financial problems we have in the family. My parents could not provide clothing and other things that I wanted, and here was money I could make.*  
(18, IDI 9)

### (2) as youth being lured or coerced by older men, often described as consensual in exchange for money or gifts; and

*The first man I slept with was older than me. He lured me to watch a movie, I was in Form 1 then. This person was working, he was my neighbor... After school he used to call me, then lure me over a long period of time. He was older than me. When we were on recess from school and he was at home, he called me to his place of work, then he removed his clothes then asked me to have anal sex with him. He did not actually force me, but he gradually led me into it. I would say that he lured me into having sex with him.*  
(44, IDI 6)

*I was employed as house help. One day my employer asked me if I wanted to have sex with him. He told me that he would add my salary. I agreed and that is how I started.*  
(35, FGD 2.4)

*I was young. I thought that all people were good people. I met an old man who bought me things and clothes as well. When he thought I was ready he asked to have sex with me.*  
(age unknown, FGD 3.3)

### (3) adopting male sex work during adulthood as a poverty alleviation strategy.

*When I came to Mombasa I was married and I never got a work, so I decided to do this as a means of earning a living... When someone who promised a job and never gave me the job...you know I couldn't survive...I had to survive, I needed a shelter so it came (that I started selling sex to men), and I cannot tell you it was planned thing.... Me coming away from upcountry and engage in this. But it just happened.*  
(28, IDI 2)

*When I first came to Mombasa, I used to go to (a local park). A man came in a car. He called and talked to me. At first I did not understand. He told me that he would pay me if I did what he wanted. Since I did not have money, I agreed.*  
(age unknown, FGD 2.1)

*The first time I was at a certain place in a house, living room and I was approached by someone who was one of my friends who had invited me to Mombasa. He wanted me to go and have sex with him in exchange for money. And because I had neither money nor a job I had no (choice) but to accept. He paid me, and after that I continued to do it more and more....*  
(39, IDI 4)

## Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the male sex workers who participated in this study. In addition, we thank Dr A Kahindi, Provincial Medical Officer, Coast Province for his administrative support; as well as Agnes Rinyiru, Dancan Otieno, and Masila Syengo of ICRH for their contributions.

For more information about the study and other related studies visit the **Population Council booth (#449)**; the Population Council website ([www.popouncil.org](http://www.popouncil.org)), or contact **Scott Geibel (sgeibel@popouncil.org)**.

*This poster is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and PEPFAR. The contents are the responsibility of the Horizons Program and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.*

