

Cohabitation, marriage, and ‘sexual monogamy’ in Nairobi’s slums

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Abstract

The current study investigates the extent to which sexual exclusivity—the restriction of one’s sexual engagements to a single partner—prevails across various marital status, union type, and co-residence categories among Nairobi’s poorest residents, slum dwellers. This question is central to the spread of HIV in the increasingly urban and poor, high prevalence countries of sub-Saharan Africa, where transmission is primarily via heterosexual sex. In many circles, sexual exclusivity is considered a prominent feature of the marriage institution. Yet, marriage and cohabitation are often not easily distinguishable in sub-Saharan Africa, meaning that the frequent use, as a proxy, of the “in union” category, which includes married as well as cohabiting persons can, at best, be considered tenuous. Using the 2000 Nairobi Cross-Sectional Slum Survey (NCSS), this paper confirms that marriage is associated with higher reports of sexual exclusivity even in settings where poverty provokes risky behavior. The finding, here, is of lower risk of HIV infection for married respondents, with a smaller effect observed among non-married cohabiters. Converse to the implied benefits of marriage, though, women with co-wives are more likely to report multiple partners. The implications of these findings are discussed.
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Introduction

The question of whether sexual exclusivity—the restriction of sexual engagements to a single partner—is the purview of monogamous marriage is implicit in the discourse about the value of marriage. In western countries, sexual exclusivity is considered a prominent feature of the institution of marriage (Nock, 1998). While some like Waite (1995) suggest that cohabitation is associated with

lower levels of exclusivity, others like Cherlin (2000) argue that the benefits of marriage, and particularly those that derive from the pooling of resources as well as from economies of scale, may also attach to cohabiting, non-marital unions. Marriage, however, presumably confers enforceable trust that obtains from the public declaration of the relationship by the principals and the attendant commitment of friends and relatives to the cohesion of the union.

In much of the developing world, and particularly, sub-Saharan Africa, even monogamous marriages remain potentially polygamous (Bledsoe & Pison, 1994; Pebley & Wariara, 1989), a situation

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not unrelated to the nature of the marriage transaction through which men (but not women) gain exclusive sexual rights to their spouses (Dodoo, 1998a). Implicit therein is the suggestion that even monogamous marriages may be compromised vis-à-vis the extent of sexual exclusivity, and Watkins (2003) and others have highlighted the elevated risk of HIV infection for married women because of their husbands' extramarital affairs. Contrary to the expectation of female fidelity that derives from the patriarchal marriage arrangements that culturally dispossess women of any sexual rights, recent evidence from Nairobi suggests that very poor married women in urban settings, too, may be flouting the conventions of sexual exclusivity, and doing so at quite high rates (Zulu, Dodoo, & Ezeh, 2002). These findings, based on proxy measures of urban poverty because the national level data they lean on do not demarcate urban slum settings, insinuate that the poorest of married women in urban settings are compelled to engage multiple sexual partnerships to help make ends meet for their families.

In the face of these seeming contradictions about poverty, gender, marriage, and sexual behavior, we utilize a unique and hitherto untapped data set (of actual slum residents) that comprises a representative sample of residents from all the slum communities in Nairobi, Kenya to investigate whether sexual exclusivity prevails across the various marital status and co-residence categories in the poorest of metropolitan settings. In exploring the extent to which married women remain sexually exclusive, rather than adopt risky, HIV-related sexual behaviors in these data—a question central to the discourse on the spread of the disease in high prevalence countries where transmission is primarily via heterosexual sex, and cohabitation, marital instability, and multiple sexual partnerships are relatively high (Raley, 2000)—we speak to whether the idea that marriage affords shelter from risky sexual behavior is a mirage in contexts of extreme poverty.

Background

Marriage and cohabitation are often not easily distinguishable in sub-Saharan Africa, such that the frequent use of the “in union” category, which includes married as well as cohabiting persons can, at best, be considered tenuous. Discerning the complex spectrum of marital types in Africa can be difficult, which is probably why either co-residence or a formal ceremony are frequently

employed as a delineator of “in union” status in surveys (Bledsoe & Cohen, 1993). Even in this variegated picture of marriage, women are consistently disadvantaged in the manner in which the payment of bridewealth asymmetrically conveys to men legal rights to the sexual fidelity of their wives (Caldwell & Caldwell, 1990; Comaroff, 1960; Goody, 1973).

Union formation varies greatly across ethnicity and lineage in sub-Saharan Africa. Marriage is typically not reducible to a distinct event, rather being a process that easily take years to complete, depending on the couple's lineage and associated traditions (Meekers, 1992). All of this makes marriage more difficult to capture in surveys. Beyond marriage and cohabitation, visiting unions—where married individuals do not co-reside—and polygamous unions are not uncommon in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Meekers, 1992).

Western research on the institution of marriage posits that economic hardship leads to instability in unions (Raley, 2000). The recent spate of research on Kenya's urban poor suggests similar findings, with transactional sex—where one engages in sexual relations in exchange for money, food, or favors to meet their needs—presented as a survival strategy in focus groups discussions by residents of Nairobi's slums (Dodoo, Sloan, & Zulu, 2003, Chapter 8; Dodoo, Zulu, & Ezeh, 2006; Zulu et al., 2002; Zulu, Dodoo, & Ezeh, 2003, Chapter 12). Further, throughout the region, the distinction between sex work, transactional sex, and sex between romantic partners is often elusive (Caldwell, Caldwell, & Quiggin, 1989). Greater fragility of unions and higher motivation to engage in transactional sex (Zulu et al., 2002), comprise two factors that potentially undermine sexual exclusivity in Nairobi's slums. With the rapid rate of growth of urban poor populations (and the increasing prevalence of slums) in sub-Saharan Africa (Zulu et al., 2002), and the uneven distribution of HIV-infection across rural and urban space in Africa, this study of sexual exclusivity bears significance.

Marriage, co-residence, and union formation in Kenya

Caldwell et al. (1989, p. 187) have pointed to a “distinct and internally coherent African system embracing sexuality, marriage, and much else” that centers on the importance of lineage and fertility. With marriage difficult to define, reviewing how

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