

## TRANSACTIONAL SEX IN HAITI: EDUCATIONAL, SOCIOECONOMIC, AND SECURITY DIMENSIONS IN POST-CRISIS CONTEXTS

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the prevalence, incentives, and consequences of transactional sex in Haiti, as well as alternatives that can be offered to reduce the incentive to engage in transactional sex. The research focus is the education sector, with consideration of other sectors, including the work environment and situations of disasters and conflicts.*

*The study involved extensive desk research and key informant interviews. Transactional sex is a very common practice in Haiti, existing at all layers of society. It is closely related to a power imbalance, with a person having access to certain resources promising these resources to someone in a vulnerable position, in return for sex. Usually, men are the ones in a position of power, especially in this patriarchal society with stark gender discrimination. Most people agree to engage in transactional sex because they see no other choice. For them, it is a way to meet basic needs, such as access to food, education, a job, housing, or protection. The higher the vulnerability, the bigger the power imbalance, increasing risk of transactional sex in situations such as natural disasters and gang violence. There are also cases where people use transactional sex to keep up appearances of a more modern lifestyle. The consequences of transactional sex are severe and multiple.*

*The study recommends creating awareness and training about transactional sex. It is a social phenomenon, which requires a change in norms and values. There should be codes of conduct regulating accepted behaviour, safe procedures to file complaints, and predefined sanctions. The judicial system should make provisions to treat cases of transactional sex. Schools should be a safe environment, including mental health support. Initiatives to increase income-generating activities will likely reduce the need to engage in transactional sex. The involvement of various government institutions is essential.*



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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The UN defines transactional sex as follows: “The exchange of money, employment, goods or services for

sex, including sexual favours or other forms of humiliating, degrading or exploitative behaviour. This includes any exchange of assistance that is due to beneficiaries of assistance.”

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Documentation on transactional sex in Haiti is mostly limited to the situation of internally displaced women in tent camps after the 2010 earthquake, including the engagement of ‘blue helmets’ of the UN mission MINUSTAH in transactional sex with women (Lee, 2019). Very little information is available about the phenomenon of transactional sex at large, including transactional sex existing within schools.

There is no database available in Haiti with information on sexual harassment and violence against women. (BAI et al., 2016) Many women do not report rape or other forms of violence. The main context in which transactional sex has been discussed, is in terms of health risks, specifically transmission of HIV/AIDS and other diseases. The rate of transactional sex seems to increase in post-disaster contexts. In recent years, the humanitarian sector has been under the loop following allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian workers and peacekeepers.

A publication by Centres de Prévention et de Contrôle des Maladies (CPCM, 2014) found that one out of four girls and women and one out of five boys and men (both aged 13-24) suffered at least one incident of sexual abuse before the age of 18. About two thirds of them was sexually abused by a family member or local authorities. Male teachers were the main perpetrators of physical violence identified among authorities.

The main objective of this research is to examine the prevalence of and incentives for transactional sex, as well as alternatives that can be offered to reduce the incentive to engage in transactional sex. The focus is on the education sector. Research questions were defined as follows:

1. What is the prevalence rate of transactional sex?
2. What are the main reasons for engaging in transactional sex for both parties?
3. What would those selling sexual services need in order to stop engaging in transactional sex?
4. How can those purchasing sexual services and engaging in transactional sex be held accountable for their deeds?

## **2. RESEARCH STRATEGY AND DATA COLLECTION**

The security situation in Haiti has deteriorated considerably since 2019, due to increasing gang violence. Because of insecurity concerns, it was not possible to carry out any in-person visits, interviews, or focus group interviews. Interviews were held (by telephone) with individuals of relevant professions and based in different parts of the country, representing a variety of organisations and institutions, with specific previous experience in dealing with sexual violence, including transactional sex. The desk research brought to light several of such organisations.

Different sampling methods were applied. Given the sensitivity of the research topic and the specific target population, no random sampling techniques could be

used. A certain form of multistage cluster sampling was used, but without random sampling. Out of the 10 departments in Haiti, four were targeted, based on existing networks and contacts. A higher number of departments was reached than expected.

Respondents included people who have been approached to engage in transactional sex, as well as people who are aware that transactional sex is practised and know people involved. While carrying out the interviews, referral sampling (more specifically, snowball sampling) was used to increase the number of interviewees (Bernard, 2006; Burger & Silima, 2006).

In total, 24 key persons were contacted with the request for an interview. Semi-structured interviews were used (Mathers et al., 1998). A guide with questions was developed in Haitian Creole and translated into English. Detailed notes were taken. Key persons included representatives of women’s organisations and other non-governmental organisations, government institutions, journalists, mental health workers, teachers, and students. 10 individual interviews were held, all by telephone. Nine of these were conducted in Haitian Creole and one in English. Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes. The more interviews were held, the more similar themes, observations, and explanations returned, although each respondent came with their own perspectives and new insights. While further respondents might have led to additional inputs, it appears that the point of saturation had been reached.

The respondents were located or working in different departments of the country, including Grand Anse, North, Northeast, West, Artibonite, Centre, and Northwest. Among them were psychologists, social workers, mental health workers, legal practitioners, students, teachers, and education inspectors.

While statistics are hard to get on this sensitive topic, desk research is an important tool to compare and verify information gathered through interviews. The desk research includes resources in English and French.

All respondents pointed out that there is no data available on this topic. The results therefore remain in the sphere of qualitative research. It was not possible to gain insight on the number or percentage of people engaged in transactional sex, neither in total, nor specified by sector (such as education and employment) or geographic region (department). However, it does appear to be more common in urban areas than rural areas.

## **3. DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES AND REPLICABILITY**

The data collected was documented and organised, based on recurring themes or often used words and expressions. Different categories and themes were identified, as well as connections between concepts and factors (O’Connor & Gibson, 2003).

With qualitative research, the focus is on analysing text to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Many data are collected on a limited number of

cases, with a focus on meaning and description. It is an in-depth, detailed study, with sensitivity to the context. A combination of case studies and narrative analysis was used, with phenomenological analysis added on a personal level (Schutt, 2019). Reliability and validity were ensured by comparing information retrieved from interviews with other studies found through a literature review. Interviews were held up to the point of saturation. Anonymity and confidentiality of respondents were ensured. All respondents provided consent before participation (Creswell, 2007; Golafshani, 2003; O'Connor & Gibson, 2003; Schutt, 2019).

#### **4. PREVALENCE OF TRANSACTIONAL SEX**

All respondents agreed that the phenomenon of transactional sex is very common and happens frequently, existing everywhere in the country. While there is no data available on the prevalence of transactional sex in Haiti, each of the respondents was able to give examples of their own experience or experiences of acquaintances. It is a daily occurrence in the education system and work environment but also exists in politics and the religious sector. In rural areas, there is less power imbalance, and financial requirements are lower. Given that universities and employers are concentrated in the cities, especially Port-au-Prince, prevalence might be higher in the capital and other urban areas, although it exists everywhere. There are factors that can amplify the situation or put people at higher risk, like situations of natural disaster or conflicts, or areas where gangs have taken control.

##### **4.1 General factors influencing transactional sex**

The most important and frequently mentioned characteristic of the parties involved in transactional sex is a power imbalance. The person requesting sexual services is in a higher position in the hierarchy, a position of authority, influence, and power, however little power they might have over someone who is weaker. This person has resources available, assets, or financial resources, the possibility to offer gifts or money. The person offering sexual services is usually in a vulnerable position, or in a difficult economic situation, with no opportunities of employment. They can find themselves facing needs that can be met through sexual exchange (Kassa et al., 2018; Wamoyi et al., 2019b).

Cultural and gender norms are also important factors. In various cultures, women and girls are usually financially dependent on men, due to limited opportunities of education and employment. The man is the head of the family and provides material and financial resources. The woman has primarily a role as mother and wife, with responsibilities in the domestic realm. Women are overrepresented in the informal economy, low-skilled jobs, and seasonal work, while few women hold positions of power. Therefore, women seek out men with money, resources, skills, or a good job, as a way to make sure

they are provided for. Gender norms and expectations limit women's economic opportunities and prescribe specific roles for men and women within sexual relationships. A gendered segregation of employment limits women's employment opportunities and increases their food insecurity. Especially women from poor households and with little education become victims of sexual violence (ASFC et al., 2019; Duby et al., 2021; Freedman et al., 2021; Hunter, 2002; Stoebenau et al., 2016; Wamoyi et al., 2019a; Wamoyi et al., 2019b; Weiser et al., 2007).

Peer pressure and parental pressure can push young women and girls into transactional sex. Parental pressure usually arises from the need to provide for basic needs, while peer pressure relates to how one looks and dresses, to give appearances of so-called modern lifestyles (Chatterji et al., 2004; Freedman et al., 2021; Formson & Hilhorst, 2016; Stoebenau et al., 2016; Wamoyi et al., 2019b).

In general, transactional sex can be used to meet basic needs, such as food or school fees (survival), but also for improved social status, to get a different lifestyle with more luxury items, including clothing, cosmetics, or cell phones. Food insecurity and poverty can induce transactional sex, but so can economic inequality. Peer pressure can be specifically strong in university settings (Chatterji et al., 2004; Duby et al., 2021; Gukurume, 2011; Hunter, 2002; Lorway et al., 2011; Stoebenau et al., 2016; Wamoyi et al., 2019b; Weiser et al., 2007).

The taboo of discussing sex in certain countries makes it more difficult to warn against the consequences of transactional sex. It also means that it is kept a secret and takes place in hiding. It is therefore important to speak openly about the existence of transactional sex and the risks involved (Amo-Adjei et al., 2014; Chatterji et al., 2004; Oyeoku et al., 2022).

##### **4.2 Education sector**

A 2009 study by SOFA found that the phenomenon of transactional sex in schools in Haiti is disproportionate, where girls are forced to provide sexual services in exchange for passing grades (GASECHS & IDEH, 2015). All respondents recognised that transactional sex exists at all levels of the education system. It is most common at universities and secondary schools but even exists in primary and middle schools. Many students are involved. Especially female students are addressed by teachers or others in a position of hierarchy. Women in universities run a higher risk of engaging in transactional sex, when they leave their parents' homes to go to the city, where their needs increase.

While both teachers and students can take the initiative, most respondents agreed that it is more common for teachers to take the initiative, because this is related to a power imbalance. The teachers are the ones who have something to offer, who can help a student pass. When students fail their exams, they can approach a teacher. When a student renders the teacher sexual services, he can do something for her.

Drivers for students to engage in transactional sex include passing an exam, getting the grades they deserve (under the threat of lowering their grades), passing to the next level, paying school fees or other education materials, getting instructions or a spot in school, getting special treatment, avoid being beaten, getting exam answers, receiving money to take care of the family or other needs. Students are blackmailed into having sex, to avoid getting lower marks than they actually deserve, or threatened that teachers will make it impossible for them to get their degree if they do not agree to offer sexual services. Especially when students move from rural areas to cities without their families, their financial needs and vulnerability increase. Gender-based violence at schools has a direct impact on the education of girls, as it can be a factor that pushes girls out of school (Atwood et al., 2011; Bajaj, 2009; Devers et al., 2012; Freedman et al., 2021; Louis, 2021; Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et Européennes, 2012; Mwapu et al., 2016; Plan, 2014; Stoebenau et al., 2016).

Examples of transactional sex abound at universities, although only as rumours that are not openly discussed. One respondent spoke out of personal experience that it was difficult for her female student friends, especially those who were intelligent or beautiful, to be approached by teachers who clearly stated that if they did not agree to sleep with them, they would not pass their exams. Some had to accept in order to finish school. Those who did not accept, had to abandon university. No measures are taken to reduce the phenomenon or to sanction those involved. There are no negative connotations with the teachers' behaviour. Or if there is, the blame is on the students rather than on the person in a position of power. Sometimes children aged under 18 are involved. With minors, transactional sex is considered a crime.

As for the teachers, what can push them towards transactional sex is first related to society. Schools generally represent the same power dynamics as society. In a society dominated by men, male teachers might consider it normal to have the same position of power in school and expect girls to obey them. Weak infrastructure or quality control, as well as unsatisfying work conditions and violent or sexist teaching methods are other factors that can contribute to gender-based violence (Plan, 2014; PRB, 2007). When teachers can have affairs with students, flirt with them, engage in transactional sex, or impregnate them without being sanctioned, this only encourages teachers to continue such behaviour (Bajaj, 2009). Maybe they are attracted to the physical beauty of a girl, or to her intelligence. In the end, none of the reasons justify such a relationship.

#### **4.3 Work environment**

Another little spoken of, but relevant issue, is the existence of transactional sex in the employment sector, where women are forced to have sexual relations in exchange for getting or keeping a job, promotion, or internship. Given high unemployment rates, the consequences of losing a job are so big that women see no other choice than to give in to the sexual demands of

their employers. In these cases, there is no real possibility for reporting of such incidents. Young graduates who are just starting at the employment market have no experience. Sexual favours make up for this lack of experience. Data on sexual harassment are little, despite the fact that estimates of prevalence are concerning. GASECHS & IDEH (2015) estimate that as many as 47% of workers have had sexual relationships with employers or supervisors in order to keep their job (Edwards, 2017; Formson & Hilhorst, 2016; GASECHS & IDEH, 2015). In 2015, SOFA and RNDDH carried out a research regarding sexual harassment in the workplace. This research emphasised that sexual harassment remains a topic of taboo, with the victim often condemned to silence for fear of losing her job and joining the ranks of the 70% of the population that is unemployed. SOFA and RNDDH also make reference to sexual harassment in schools, public administration, private enterprises, NGOs, and among housekeepers. They estimate that 75% of workers (men and women) are victims of sexual and moral harassment. Over 63% of them have sexual relations with their employers or supervisors in order to keep their jobs (SOFA & RNDDH, 2015).

#### **4.4 Transactional sex in a (post) disaster context**

Research has shown that the incidence of transactional sex can increase in a post-disaster situation, when women who lost their income-generating activities see no other way to provide for a living. In this case, the main reason is usually mere survival (Mwapu et al., 2016). There is more need. The degree of vulnerability of people increases. The higher the vulnerability, the more options predators have. People who are in a situation without any reserves or resources, become victim of those who exploit their situation. Staff of organisations providing humanitarian aid might ask for sexual services. The material aid they give is supposed to be for free, and for people in need, but they abuse their position of power to ask for sexual favours, because they have something to give, something that the other person needs.

Human Rights Watch (2011) reported on women's and girls' rights after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. They found that the precarious situations in internally displaced people's camps pushed women and girls to engage in transactional sex. They had lost their homes and assets, with no income and no way to provide for a living. The driving factor here was survival, accessing food and money, even though the amounts of money were small. This coping mechanism led to health problems and unwanted pregnancies, at a time when the health system was under high pressure, with hospitals having been destroyed and many people injured during the earthquake. (MADRE et al., 2010)

These findings are confirmed by Luetke (2020), CHR & GJ (2011), Daniel and Logie (2017), who state that the prevalence of sexual violence increases in post-disaster settings in general, and after the 2010 earthquake in particular. Young girls and adult women traded sex for food, money, protection, or shelter. This became a more common survival strategy after the earthquake, as

reported especially in internally displaced people camps, although data remain limited.

Jagannath (2011) writes about an increase in gender-based violence following disasters in general and following the 2010 earthquake in particular. Most women depend on the informal sector to make a living. The economy collapsed after the earthquake. Women lost their merchandise and thus their source of income. Even before the earthquake, many families were struggling with structural poverty. This only worsened when they suffered extreme losses as a result of the devastating earthquake.

UNHCR (2011) did a study to hear directly from women in internally displaced camps, who were at risk of engaging in transactional sex after the earthquake. They wanted to learn more about the link between food insecurity and transactional sex. The research confirmed that transactional sex in these camps was widespread. The main reason women adopted this strategy was to ensure the survival of their children. The situation of the women had changed and their vulnerability increased, as they had lost their home, belongings, source of income, and their support network of neighbours and relatives, who were also affected by the earthquake. Moreover, they were uprooted out of their community and ended up with people known and unknown in a camp, with very different dynamics. Young women also engaged in transactional sex to earn enough money to afford education (Daniel & Logies, 2017; MADRE et al., 2012). Transactional sex already existed before the earthquake, mostly as a survival strategy. However, the incidence of transactional sex increased after the earthquake. Women who did not engage in this practice before, saw no other choice than to adopt this as a mechanism to cope with changed circumstances, even though their reward was often little, below the legal minimum wage. Women were now more vulnerable than ever. Aside from physical suffering, they also suffered severe psychological trauma, feelings of shame, lack of self-worth, fear, and insecurity. They resigned to having to engage in transactional sex, but they detested it (MADRE et al., 2012).

Formson and Hilhorst (2016) identify transactional sex as a coping mechanism in times of humanitarian crisis. They state that transactional sex is influenced by socio-economic and cultural factors and often takes place in a context of limited choice and opportunities of women. In humanitarian crises, transactional sex is mostly motivated by basic needs, such as food, shelter, or security. In such situations, survival sex not only helps the women themselves to survive, but also their families. In conflict situations, women and girls are vulnerable and at risk, while social structures are weak, income and livelihoods opportunities few, and displacement rampant. The more food insecure and vulnerable women and girls are, the higher the probability they will resort to coping mechanisms such as survival sex. Women engaging in survival sex are exposed to emotional abuse as well as sexual and gender-based abuse (Formson & Hilhorst, 2016; Mwapu et al., 2016).

Luetke (2020) observed similar findings after hurricane Matthew caused major damage in especially the southern part of Haiti. Women who were directly impacted by the hurricane and had relatives who passed away or were injured, were more likely to engage in transactional sex, to experience food insecurity, and to be impoverished. Those with fewer economic resources and more food insecurity have few reserves or savings. Social security or a safety network is absent in this context. Women in this situation might not see any alternative options to survive other than engaging in transactional sex. This is especially the case for female-headed households.

#### **4.5 Peacekeeping**

From 2004 to 2017, UN peacekeeping mission MINUSTAH was present in Haiti (Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti). Many of the UN soldiers engaged in sexual relationships with Haitian women and fathered children. These relationships were based on inherent power inequalities. The men had access to money and goods, which the women needed. Women relied on transactional sex to meet basic needs, increase life opportunities, and improve their social status. The main driver was economic, to stop hunger, and survive, or to secure protection. Foreigners are also considered as having access, or being able to provide access, to opportunities otherwise not accessible for these young women or girls (Bartels et al., 2021; Vahedi et al., 2021; Vahedi et al., 2019).

Peacekeeping missions are another context in which those who are supposed to protect vulnerable people have in fact been found to exploit them. Around the world, examples abound of programme participants (beneficiaries) being forced to trade sex for goods. Poverty is often the main reason for transactional sex relations, as women need education, food, and other material goods, and they are looking for ways to take care of their family. They need jobs and protection. Even to access water women sometimes have to provide sex (Malik, 2019). Those working for peacekeeping forces and having power to extend or withdraw goods are in a position of power, which they abuse. Preexisting situations of poverty are exacerbated in contexts of insecurity, conflict, or war, when social, familial, and economic protective structures and safety nets dissolve (Bartels et al., 2021; Fraulin et al., 2021; McGill, 2014; Westendorf & Searle, 2017; Westendorf, 2021).

The UN prohibits transactional sex. It is seen as a serious offense, based on unequal power dynamics. In theory, the UN applies a zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation, abuse, and transactional sex. In practice, transactional sex exists (Vahedi et al., 2021; Vahedi et al., 2019).

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) has six core principles to protect affected communities from sexual abuse and exploitation within humanitarian operations. Principle 3 prohibits transactional sex. Principle 4 goes on to prohibit “any sexual relationship between those providing humanitarian assistance and protection and a person benefitting from such

humanitarian assistance and protection that involves improper use of rank or position". An often-quoted principle in humanitarian relief is the principle of doing no harm. Transactional sex does harm.

#### **4.6 Transactional sex in a context of gang violence**

The number of gangs and the territory controlled by gangs in Haiti has increased since 2019. A context of natural disasters, systemic poverty, political instability, insecurity, inflation, food insecurity, and increasing unemployment provides the conditions for transactional sex, prostitution, and sexual violence to flourish. Gangs use individual and collective rape and other forms of sexual violence as methods of punishment, submission, or to instil fear in people, with the goal of increasing their area of influence (Clark, 2006). Those suspected or accused of siding with a rivalling gang become victims of rape. Mothers are raped in front of their children, wives in front of their husbands. Girls and women leaving the neighbourhood to go about their business in a neighbourhood controlled by a rivalling gang become victims of rape. The act or threat of rape is also a way to demand ransom for girls and women who have been kidnapped (BINUH & OHCHR, 2022).

At the same time, women and girls may actually be encouraged by their families to engage in transactional sex with gang members, in exchange for food, water, other material support, or protection. These and other violations of human rights go unpunished, as perpetrators profit from impunity and hide behind their power of weapons that are often stronger than those used by the police. Usually, women and girls 'selected' by gang members for sexual services have little choice but to accept, with the threat of other types of violence and reprisal to themselves or their family members. Gang members also manipulate parents for sexual relationships with their daughters. The justice system is not effective and insecurity abounds. The police are unable to address sexual violence, due to a lack of resources as well as limited gender sensitivity. Courthouses have also been the target of attacks by gangs (BINUH & OHCHR, 2022).

#### **4.7 Consequences of transactional sex**

The consequences of transactional sex are many, severe and harmful, for those directly involved and for society at large. Not only are there impacts on physical and mental health and education, but in the long run this also affects the socio-economic development of persons, communities, and countries (Plan, 2014).

Those engaged in transactional sex are exposed to diseases, for which there might be no treatment, or the person might not be able to afford treatment. They will be traumatised for the rest of their lives. They can get HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmittable diseases as well as unplanned pregnancies. Moreover, women can resort to self-medication or unsafe abortions, or consume harmful substances (Oyeoku et al., 2022).

School performance of victims suffers under transactional sex. They lose their interest in their studies,

find it difficult to concentrate, do not come to class, have difficulties eating or sleeping, suffer from stress, depression, or suicidal thoughts. Victims also drop out of school (Devers et al., 2012; Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et Européennes, 2012).

Getting grades based on sexual services rather than school performance negatively affects students' self-esteem, motivation, and self-confidence (IBIS et al., 2014). It also has an impact on the reputation and legacy of a school. When sex rather than skills helps students pass a grade or get a degree, there will eventually be doctors and engineers with a certificate but without capacities.

A moral and socio-economic decline are the result. Efforts are not rewarded, but sexual favours are. Those who have capacities and competencies but do not accept to engage in transactional sex will not get a job. Someone who does not have the capacities but does accept to engage in sex, will get a job.

#### **4.8 Justice and ethics**

An important question is how society considers transactional sex and how it is sanctioned. Is it a legal matter or a matter of ethics?

Some argue this is more a matter of ethics and morale, especially when both parties involved are aged over 18. Age is a determining factor in maturity and consent. The law clearly states that sexual relationships with minors are illegal. When both parties are legal adults, the matter becomes an issue of ethics, due to power imbalance.

There are various laws and conventions that directly or indirectly protect women and girls against transactional sex (Devers et al., 2012; Plan Canada, 2012). These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), and Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which were all ratified by the Government of Haiti. According to the 1987 Constitution, once treaties or conventions have been ratified by the Government of Haiti, they are an integral part of national legislation and repeal any contradictory laws. Haiti also included protective measures in its 1987 Constitution. The 1982 decree relative to the Emancipation of Women in Haiti eliminated all forms of discrimination and gave equal rights to women and men.

Currently, there is no law in Haiti that addresses transactional sex specifically. The proposed revision of the criminal code (2020) covers sexual aggression. Several types of violence suffered by women cannot be prosecuted because the current penal code does not criminalise these acts, including sexual and moral harassment. A Draft Law on the Prevention, Sanction, and Elimination of Violence Against Women has been in progress for a number of years. In 2017, the Government of Haiti adopted the national plan 2017-2027 of fighting against violence aimed at women (ASFC et al., 2019; Haïti Libre, 2023; MADRE et al., 2012).

Victims of transactional sex do not usually go to the police, meaning that the prevalence of transactional sex

has little statistical evidence. There are several reasons for this. Some women and girls are not aware of their rights. Others run into the inefficiency of the judicial system, or the non-existence of a support mechanism, or stigmatisation of victims (Devers et al., 2020; Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et Européennes, 2012). Even when files do get to the courthouse, perpetrators often go unpunished. The justice system fails the population. Impunity, corruption, and retaliation discourage victims to report abuse (ANAPFEH et al., 2014; ASFC et al., 2019 ; Jagannath, 2011; MADRE et al., 2012).

There is a special unit within the Central Directorate of Judicial Police (DCPJ), called the Unit to Combat Sexual Crimes (UCLS). The Brigade for the Protection of Minors (BPM) and the Anti-Kidnapping Cell (CCE) are also mandated to receive complaints of sexual violence. BPM works in collaboration with the office of child protection in Haiti, which is part of the Institute of Social Wellbeing and Research (IBESR). They are in charge of providing children with juridical, medical, and psychosocial support. In practice, though, the police lack interpersonal skills or training on how to speak to victims of sexual violence (without blaming them). Furthermore, they lack logistic resources, as well as other resources to help them investigate sexual violence cases. Stigmatisation and risks of reprisal discourage women and girls from reporting sexual violence. The anonymity of victims is not guaranteed, putting them at further risk (BINUH & OHCHR, 2022; MADRE et al., 2012).

Transactional sex is not treated as part of the curriculum or as part of a plan by the Ministry of Education. Complaint mechanisms at schools are non-existent, unclear, confusing, intimidating, difficult to access, or complicated, discouraging victims to speak out or ask for support. Schools might also not take complaints seriously. In order to file a complaint, students need to be informed of the process, their rights, and support and protection available. Not many students have the courage to denounce. They might be afraid of possible consequences (Louis, 2021; Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et Européennes, 2012).

The reason why the UN considers misconduct part of sexual exploitation and abuse, is that the underlying power dynamics are so great that the notion of consent is less meaningful. That same reasoning applies to transactional sex when there is a big power differential. It remains an interesting question if it is consent or a meaningful choice, if the person only has some other worse alternative, such as borrowing money or selling every possession they have.

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 Awareness raising at all levels of society**

Addressing transactional sex first requires an understanding of the phenomenon. Transactional sex in Haiti might be known implicitly but is not discussed or treated explicitly. Many people are not aware of transactional sex or do not know what it is. It furthermore

has social and cultural connotations. A first step to get this topic out in the open is therefore to talk about it, so that people know what it is, acknowledge that it exists, and that it is an issue that needs to be addressed. That is why awareness raising and reflection are important at all levels of society. In recent years, awareness raising about rape and harassment has begun. Society should also talk about transactional sex. This can be addressed in literature, theatre, music, movies, media, debates, radio spots, brochures, conferences, etc. Messages should be adapted to target groups, including special messages for children and youth. Awareness raising is needed at all levels, including the religious sector, education, businesses, and the humanitarian aid sector (Chatterji et al., 2004; Stoebenau et al., 2016).

Community members should understand that no children under 18 can give consent to have sex with an adult, neither girls nor boys. Another important point is to recognise power imbalances which can give an adult little choice other than consenting to sexual relationships. Peacekeepers and humanitarian workers should be trained and aware of the inherent power-imbalance (Bartels et al., 2021; Fraulin et al., 2021; Westendorf, 2021).

### **5.2 Put into place a safe procedure to file complaints**

Students need to know they have the right to file a complaint when a teacher approaches them for transactional sex. They also need to know where they can go to file a complaint and be ensured that they will receive assistance, that the school does not accept such behaviour from teachers, and legal follow-up will be undertaken (GASECHS & IDEH, 2015).

Suggestion boxes can be installed in strategic and accessible locations, and community meetings organised, to inform people about their right to file a complaint. They need to understand that aid is not a favour, and what the right procedure is to provide aid, which people get based on their situation of vulnerability. However, due to a high rate of illiteracy, fear of retaliation, (the perception of) unsafe complaint procedures, or dependence on aid and lack of alternatives, even with the right procedures in place, people might be reluctant to use them.

### **5.3 Training**

Organisations should continue to train staff on protection against sexual exploitation and abuse, with a system of surveillance. Seminars should be held for teachers and students. Students need to know that transactional sex exists and that it can be harmful. Teachers need to be aware and supervised, not to attack anyone, but to protect everyone. It has to be made very clear that these practices are not normal. A decent recruitment procedure should be in place for teachers. Hiring of female teachers might also help reduce sexual violence.

In order to cope with the prevalence of transactional sex in the education system, studies propose to promote responsible sexual behaviour (Ige & Solanke, 2021), to provide reproductive health care services through social workers, and to engage social work services at schools

(Ene et al., 2020). The taboo of talking about sexuality and violence as well as the absence of sexual education should be tackled (Devers et al., 2012; Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et Européennes, 2012; MSF, 2017).

#### **5.4 Establish and implement a code of conduct**

School administrations should develop a code of conduct to determine how to deal with cases of either teachers approaching students, or students approaching teachers. They should define when something is considered transactional sex and how the school/university will treat such a case if it happens. School committees should also be involved. Similar codes of conduct are required in other sectors.

#### **5.5 Implement sanctions**

In addition to having a code of conduct, there should be clear sanctions for engaging in transactional sex. These sanctions should be identified in advance, and included in codes of conduct, principles, or articles, to avoid the sanctions to appear as reckoning. Sanctions can include asking the perpetrator to write a letter of excuse or giving him a letter of blame, termination of employment, and suspension of their license. When a school ends the contract of a teacher, the school administration should report the teacher with the departmental office, to prevent the teacher from going to another school.

In addition, a collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Justice can ensure sanctions at a higher level. Written procedures should identify sanctions, including the possibility of involvement of the justice system. This can be included in the national curriculum of the Ministry of Education, instead of each school having to establish its own procedures. Such an approach clarifies roles and responsibilities and ensures that the correct procedures are followed with the parties concerned.

#### **5.6 Organise activities for youth and provide a safe learning environment**

Creating extra-curricular activities at schools, such as sports, theatre, and music, can offer a positive distraction. Ironically, schools are supposed to be a safe environment and prepare boys and girls for an independent future, avoiding teenage pregnancy and marriage, while reality shows that violence starting at schools and teachers abusing their position of power through transactional sex actually worsens conditions. Schools should offer a safe and protective environment of zero tolerance, in which complaints can be made confidentially without fear of reprisal. Preventative measures should be combined with measures supporting victims of transactional sex (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et Européennes, 2012).

Children's clubs can be an important means to allow children to speak and share about challenges they encounter, but also gain skills on how to defend themselves and increase their understanding about gender-based violence. This can help children to learn about their rights, while also raising awareness of

teachers and parents. Children's clubs can use songs, theatre, or other arts as means to help children gain confidence and learn about otherwise sensitive topics (Plan, 2014).

Building self-esteem of young women and girls can help them learn to say no, while similar self-esteem building of men and boys can help them respect women without requiring sex. Both sexes can learn to make healthy life decisions (Chatterji et al., 2004).

Within schools, students should be encouraged to strive for excellent results. As long as students are not interested in learning, transactional sex might offer them a free pass to finish school. Encouraging a true interest in learning is therefore essential. One way to do so is to offer scholarships for the highest scoring students to pursue their studies.

#### **5.7 Offer alternatives to gain financial independence**

Another important measure to take is to act on the level of vulnerability of those involved in transactional sex, to build resilience and gain autonomy. The majority are women. Many have not reached far in school. They need vocational training and activities to generate revenue to help them get out of the situation they are in. Sufficient public schools should be available, to prevent the need to pay high costs in private schools.

The women engaging in transactional sex in the post-earthquake situation in Haiti clearly stated that they would not be involved in transactional sex if they had a job. (UNHCR, 2011) Job creation is therefore one important measure to be taken: providing alternative income generating activities and reducing unemployment. This should be combined with training and access to microfinance (Luetke, 2020; Hutchinson et al., 2016). Weiser et al. (2007) write about the impact of microcredit programmes for women, to reduce their dependence on men and increase educational and economic opportunities. Food security programmes and food production initiatives also provide women with alternatives.

#### **5.8 Provide mental health support**

Victims of sexual violence suffer from depression, trauma, and suicidal thoughts. The stigma related to sexual violence affects their prospects of marriage and is a source of depression and anxiety. Counselling and treatment are not only needed for victims, but also for perpetrators, to assist them to rehabilitate and reduce the chance of repeated offence (D'Adesky and PotoFanm+Fi, 2012; Bookey, 2011). There is still a stigma related to seeing a psychologist, aside from the very limited availability of these services.

#### **5.9 Establish a legal framework and provide access to justice**

To protect women and girls around the world, laws need to exist and more importantly, be adhered to. This includes having institutions in place, such as police who are trained to deal with reports of abuse without blaming the victim, and a justice system that holds perpetrators

accountable rather than letting them go unpunished (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et Européennes, 2012).

A legal framework is required so that people know what will happen if they engage in transactional sex, and where a victim can go to file a complaint. Women should have their fair day in court and the financial means for legal representation. The judicial system should have the capacity to adequately respond to sexual violence. The issue of systemic sexism within the justice system should be alleviated through training related to gender issues (Bookey, 2011; Concannon, 2003; Mwapu et al., 2016).

#### **5.10 Involvement of Ministry of Education, government, and organisations**

Truly addressing transactional sex requires a government that helps to reduce systemic poverty and desperation. There also need to be organisations dedicated to providing free legal representation, help victims, and change the broader context.

The Office of the School Districts (BDS) and Municipal Councils of Education (CME) are an important potential way of addressing transactional sex in the education sector. The Ministry of Education should elaborate a procedure to treat cases of transactional sex, identify what measures need be taken, where people can file a complaint, and what role the departmental office plays. Schools need to know how to handle such situations, where to go when there are suspicions.

Bajaj (2009) highlights the role of the Ministry of Education to sanction teachers engaging in transactional sex with students. At the same time, education policies should be improved to dissuade teachers from abusing their powers. Enough budget needs to be available for education, including for the abolishment of school fees for secondary education. Atwood et al. (2011) discuss policies to make education free and compulsory, which would remove the need for girls to engage in transactional sex to afford books and uniforms. Education inspectors should ensure application of codes of conduct and follow-up with complaints and sanctions.

#### **5.11 Moral values**

Social and cultural norms can contribute, knowingly or not, to the continuity of transactional sex. Social and gender norms play a role in opening or closing certain employment opportunities for men and women (Mwapu et al., 2016). Equal pay for equal work should be common practice. Since these are usually long-standing traditions embedded in a country's heritage, changing them is extremely challenging. It requires time and patience to try to change behaviour. For the long term, though, this is essential (Kassa et al., 2018).

Sexual violence has strong social ties, as Haiti has a long history of gender discrimination combined with economic and political inequality. Violence against women is a way by which men can exert their power over women. Politicians, priests, or teachers have such a position of authority that they can continue their acts of

sexual violence without punishment (Bookey, 2011; IDETTE, 2024).

## **6. CONCLUSION**

All respondents expressed an interest in the topic of transactional sex. All of them knew personal stories and examples of this phenomenon. And all agreed that it is an important topic to address, especially because it is increasing in scope. More awareness about the topic is needed. Right now, the taboo or limited extent to which it is discussed increases the risk of more people falling victim. Discussing the topic openly is a first step in reducing the phenomenon.

Those offering sexual services mostly engage in transactional sex as a coping mechanism, given a lack of alternatives to pay for basic necessities. Those requiring sexual services may be fired for engaging in paid sex (although this does not happen frequently), but are not prosecuted through the justice system. Lack of housing, food insecurity, natural disasters, epidemics, and an increase in gang activity are key engines of sexual violence.

Investigating the issue of transactional sex in Haiti came out of a desire to address a topic that affects many but is discussed little. In 2012, d'Adesky and PotoFanm+Fi predicted a likely increase in sexual violence, given the socio-economic climate, political instability, displacement, and rising violent crime. Since then, political instability and food insecurity have worsened, while gang activities have increased. As of January 2025, over a million people are internally displaced. Reestablishing security in gang-controlled areas should therefore be a priority. Especially women's livelihoods are affected, because many of them are merchants who travel to buy and sell products. As insecurity has made travel too dangerous and risky, many merchants are no longer able to continue their activities. Sexual violence, including transactional sex, therefore now merits more attention than ever (BAI et al., 2022).

## **7. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Transactional sex happens often, but there are no numbers available. It is easier to find documents related to African countries than Haiti. There is no lack of stories and rumours. The reality is that this phenomenon is very common, very real, and very frequent. However, none of the respondents could mention any organisations currently working on the topic of transactional sex, not even women's organisations.

Further research is recommended to try to find data about the prevalence of transactional sex in Haiti. While this research focused on the education sector, respondents pointed out that it exists at all levels of society. Further research is therefore also needed in other sectors, such as the work environment, humanitarian aid, disaster or

conflict situations, churches, and especially the current context of insecurity and gang violence.

This research has focused mainly on men as perpetrators and women as victims. However, men can also be victims and women perpetrators. More research can provide additional insight into these dynamics.

The research at hand has shed some light on factors pushing women/victims to engage in transactional sex.

Better understanding of the motives of men/perpetrators to demand sexual services will be important in order to target awareness raising appropriately (d'Adesky, 2012). The legal framework has been mentioned in this research but not studied in detail. Further research into possibilities of addressing transactional sex under the law is therefore recommended.

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