

Girls' schooling and the perceived threat of adolescent sexual activity in rural Malawi

2012. 13 p.

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Periodical title:

Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care, Volume 14, Issue 1, 2012

Notes:

Restricted access

Description:

Despite its relative infrequency, pregnancy is perceived by parents in rural Malawi as a leading cause of school dropout among female students. This paper explores parents' beliefs about adolescent sexual activity and schoolgirl pregnancy and how these perceptions frame parents' aspirations and expectations about girls' schooling. In-depth interviews were collected in rural Malawi from 60 adults aged 25–50 who were the parent of at least one school-aged child. Four themes emerged from the data: how expectations about sexual activity frame parental expectations about schooling duration and dropout, the loss of parental control, the negative influence of classmates and schools as unsafe environments. These concerns frame how parents consider a daughter's schooling prospects and are active even for parents whose daughters are not sexually active or who are not yet old enough to have gone through puberty. Although all parents aspire for their children to attend secondary school, these perceptions of daughters' relative risk weaken parents' motivation to encourage daughters to remain in school.

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