A Bang for Your Buck

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Remember that scene in *Pretty Woman* when Julia Roberts's character, prostitute Vivian Ward, says to Richard Gere's sex solicitor Edward Lewis: "I got red, I got green, I got yellow, I'm out of purple, but I do have one Gold Circle coin left. The condom of champions.... Nothin' is gettin' through this sucker"? Well, life isn't like the movies. And, pretty or not, women don't demand condom use as adeptly as vivacious Vivian. In fact, teenage women are less likely to use condoms if their primary source of spending money comes from their boyfriends.

That's what researchers from Johns Hopkins School of Medicine found in an HIV prevention study of 715 African-American adolescent girls in Atlanta. Specifically, if their cash came from a steady boy toy—as opposed to a parent or job—the ladies were 50 percent more likely not to use condoms. So, in a way, these Southern belles were trading unsafe sex for a buck.

Across the Atlantic in sub-Saharan Africa, World Bank researchers may have found the bargaining chip all women need to negotiate safer sex. When researchers provided small, regular cash payments to young females and their families in Malawi, the girls were less than half as likely to contract HIV than those not being paid.

In the film, Edward sweeps Vivian off her feet and they live happily ever after. Their love story is the exception, not the rule, but even in real life, providing women with economic empowerment helps them make better sexual decisions—which is certainly a fairy-tale ending.

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