

# Exchange

ON HIV AND AIDS, SEXUALITY AND GENDER



## Prioritising HIV prevention in programmes for young women & girls

By: Sara Page-Mtongwiza

Twenty-five years ago, UNAIDS estimated that approximately half a million women and half a million men were living with HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. The number of women living with HIV relative to men has increased every year since 1985. A significant increase has been among young women aged 15 to 24, who are now reported to be three to five times more likely to be infected with HIV than young men of the same age.



Youth read SRH IEC material (Picture courtesy of SAFAIDS)

In 2003, the United Nations Secretary-General's Task Force on Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS in southern Africa identified three factors that contribute to the greater vulnerability of the sub-region's women and girls to HIV infection, including 1) a culture of silence surrounding sexuality; 2) exploitative transactional (TS) and intergenerational sex (IGS) and 3) violence against women within relationships.

While age-disparate sexual partners, transactional sex and even multiple concurrent partnerships (MCP) occur in many global cultures and communities, the disproportionate prevalence and incidence of HIV among young women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa, compared with their male age mates, is a significant concern.

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### Intergenerational sexual relationships and HIV

Intergenerational and age-disparate sexual relationships expose adolescents and young adults to partners who are likely to be HIV positive because of their age and longer sexual history. Namibia in southern Africa is illustrative. In the country that has been associated with higher levels of sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), and greater likelihood of having multiple partners, seven per cent of single women and 26 per cent of married ones in the 15 to 24-year age bracket have a partner 10 or more years older.

The danger is that intergenerational relationships introduce the virus into the younger cohort, where it quickly spreads due to rapid partner turnover and common concurrent partnerships (especially among young men). This is not to say that the Namibian scenario replicates in other contexts.

Studies have shown that age-disparate relationships have benefits, real or perceived, at the social, physical, psychological, as well as economic and symbolic levels. Amid growing economic inequalities and cultural expectations of men as givers and women as recipients of compensation for sex, relationships with older men are a common and readily available means of young women gaining materially, affirming self-worth, achieving social goals, and increasing longer-term life chances. The liaisons also add value and enjoyment to the young women's lives. The commonest form of intergenerational sex, with the widest age gap and lowest condom use, occurs within marriages and steady partnerships. Such "conventional" sex may be pivotal in sustaining a generalised epidemic across generations and presents the toughest challenge to prevention.

In Botswana, J. Nkosana and D. Rosenthal did in-depth interviews with 25 schoolgirls in Gaborone to identify factors that help girls resist sugar daddy type relationships. They included a desire to maintain some power in decision-making, personal ambition, a sense of self-worth, acceptance of their economic situation, their knowledge of sexual risks and beliefs about virginity.

Emerging sociocultural sub-themes included desire and respect for marriage, beliefs that older people should be regarded as parents, social morals, especially about family breakdown, and the experiences of close relatives. These protective factors can be translated into programmes to empower girls to resist intergenerational sexual relationships in Botswana and beyond.

A more comprehensive policy on women and girls with better integration of communities in assessing and addressing issues is needed. Also recommended is expansion of campaigns and programmes on the role of men as protectors and supporters of women.

Lastly, as Dr Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala argues elsewhere in this edition, in tackling this complex issue, the onus of responsibility should rest squarely with the adult men. They should avoid potentially exploitative relationships and recognise that sex with young women is abuse of power and status besides posing the risk of HIV infections. ■

A growing pool of research outlines why young girls and older men engage in IGS and TS, and also highlights the implications of increased risk and vulnerability for HIV, unwanted pregnancies, and violence. Yet, there remains a gap in terms of understanding which programmes and strategic approaches can be implemented to directly reduce HIV incidence among young women and girls.

### What do we know about IGS?

The UNAIDS general population survey and the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) AIDS modules define intergenerational sex as a non-marital sexual relationship with a partner who is 10 or more years older. Most often, this refers to younger women with older men. This does not negate the fact that sometimes younger men are also having relationships with much older women. It is a question of scale. According to the Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) in Namibia, Swaziland and Zambia, most women have relationships with men who are five to 10 years older.

*Not all young women are coerced into sex with older men at the same time some older men perceived sex with young women to be more risky than with older women*

A review of more than 45 studies of intergenerational sex in sub-Saharan Africa found that such relationships are often marked by an exchange of money or goods. It is believed that girls choosing to engage in IGS do so for economic or material gain. In very poor communities where unemployment is rife, families may condone relationships with older men, also known as sugar-daddies, as they are seen to bring some level of financial security for the young women and their families. But while an exchange of material goods often accompanies these relationships, young girls choose to engage with older men for various reasons including love, praise and social advancement.

### Why do young women go for older men?

To understand why young women engage with older men, Luke and Kurz (2002) developed a conceptual framework which postulated that young women in sub-Saharan Africa were engaging in such risky relationships because 1) the sex can be exchanged for cash and material things, 2) older men prefer young adolescent partners who are perceived to be free from HIV, and 3) the decline of traditional societal structures.

However, not all young women are coerced into sex with older men. It was found that some choose to engage older men because it also brings emotional security, love, and pleasure, as well as boosting their self-esteem, social status and material wealth. Younger women have also expressed a preference for older men, stating that men of their own age are less mature and more violent.

### Why men engage with younger women

Relating with a younger woman is seen by men as a way of affirming their self-worth, a show of generosity and social validation of their manhood. Sexual gratification has long been identified as a key reason why older men engage with younger women.

Some men enter such unions to express love and appreciation, but the age disparity frequently means that they wield power and authority in the relationship. Some older men perceived sex with young women to be more risky than with older women — because they were believed to be more sexually active and

strategy for reducing the risk and vulnerability of young women to HIV.

Unfortunately there are few studies and impact evaluations on programmes and thus there is little guidance on how to structure interventions to reduce HIV incidence among young women and girls.

An impact evaluation of the Stepping Stones Programme (created by Wellbourn, 1995) that aims to improve sexual health through building stronger more gender-equitable relationships with better communications, has proved effective in reducing HIV infection. The programme uses community participatory learning approaches (including drama and role-play) to address a wide variety of sexual health issues. It is the first HIV prevention behavioural intervention in Africa that has been subjected to rigorous evaluation.

The evaluation reported that, two years after the baseline assessment, women in the programme had 15 per cent fewer new HIV infections than those in a control arm and 31 per cent fewer HSV2 infections. It also provided some proof



Young people discuss health issues. (Picture courtesy of SAFAIDS)

less likely to insist on using a condom. This is in contrast with other studies which found that men perceived younger women to be less likely to be HIV positive, and therefore less risky.

### Turning off the tap of new HIV infections among young women and girls

Intergenerational sex has been associated with increased risk of HIV infection because higher HIV prevalence rates have been reported among couples where there is an age gap of five years or more. It has also been argued that age, gender inequalities and economic disparity associated with these relationships have a negative influence on the likelihood of safer sexual practices — such as the ability to negotiate condom use. To date, the strategies recommended for addressing age-disparate sex and HIV prevention among young women and girls include 1) mobilising and empowering young women through advocacy and life skills approaches; and 2) developing complementary advocacy, social marketing and edutainment strategies for behaviour change among the general public. The importance of working with and engaging men has also been raised as a key

of changing men's sexual risk-taking behaviour and reducing violence. However, more research is needed to understand specifically the themes associated with intergenerational and transactional sex.

A strategic model called the 'Continuum of Volition' has been developed by Save the Children, and aims to serve as an analytical tool for understanding why young girls engage with older men, and as a guide to developing appropriate HIV prevention programmes. Working in Mangochi District in Malawi, Save the Children tested the model through an adolescent health project. The model was tested by implementing a number of practices thought to counter the girls' engagement with older men. These included peer-to-peer motivation, counselling/engagement by family member (Auntie), community protection and training in alternative income-generation.

The programme was unique because it involved the young girls in testing the intervention, and therefore created an opportunity for exploring the girls' rationale and specific needs when opting for older men. However, the conclusions



# Risky sex in urban Kenya: The bitter side of 'sugar daddy' affairs

By: Nancy Luke

**"Sugar daddy" relationships are marked by large age and economic disparities between partners and are believed to be a major factor in the spread of HIV in sub-Saharan Africa.**

In order to determine how common such relations are, and whether or not they are linked to unsafe sexual behaviour, more information is needed about sugar daddy partnerships on age in particular and on economic differences in general.

To this end, a survey was carried out in Kisumu, Kenya, in 2001. The study sample comprised 1,052 men aged 21–45. Data on these men and their 1,614 recent non-marital partnerships were analysed to calculate the prevalence of sugar daddies and sugar daddy relationships, as well as a range of age and economic disparities within such partnerships.

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of the research, while acknowledging the gender inequalities as essential components of HIV prevention programmes, questioned whether IGS was indeed a key driver of the HIV epidemic.

The link between engaging in intergenerational sex and HIV infection is not direct or linear. While it is clear that gender inequality needs to be addressed for HIV prevention, age-

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disparate sex does not directly explain the disproportionate rates of HIV infection among young women and girls (ages 15-24 years).

IGS and TS relationships occur throughout the world, yet they have been defined as problematic in sub-Saharan Africa, principally because of the HIV incidence rates among young girls. In the aggressive drive to identify the key drivers of the HIV epidemic, and prioritise prevention strategies which have impact on incidence, a question has been raised about whether reducing IGS would have a direct impact on HIV incidence rates among young girls.

Results from a study using mathematical modelling of the heterosexual spread of HIV to predict the population-level impact of reducing cross-generational sex and delaying sexual debut argues that at population level, programmes to reduce mixed-age sex may do

little to limit the spread of HIV without wider-ranging behavioural changes throughout the sexual network.

Individuals may benefit from delaying their sexual debut or by avoiding sex with high risk, older partners, but it is unlikely to make a real impact unless backed with programmes that also aim to reduce sexual networks .

It is clear that issues surrounding HIV prevention, social and individual behaviour change are complex. However as the sense of urgency to address HIV prevention boils over in southern Africa, there is a need for much more research on programmes and interventions that will reduce HIV incidence in young women and girls. The burden carried by this age group is severe and has implications for the future, and limited funding requires that organisations implement programmes guided by proof of what works. ■

## Reference

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