

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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You might want these material things...

...but do you need HIV?

Say no to Sugar Daddies.

(Courtesy of PSI)

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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-

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

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

Luke, N. and Kurz, K. 2002. Cross-generational and transactional sexual relations in sub-Saharan Africa: Prevalence of Behaviour and Implications for Negotiating safer sexual practices. Washington: ICRW/PSI.

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You might want the phone, meals out and fancy clothes...

...but do you need HIV?

Girls! The gifts, the nights out and the cash can never be worth your lives and future. Older men are taking advantage of you and putting you at risk of HIV infection, in exchange for material things. This practice is called cross generational sex. Respect yourselves and Say NO to Sugar Daddies.

USAID
Office of the First Lady
Cross generational sex stops with you.

(Courtesy of PSI)

Logistic regression models were constructed to assess relationships between condom use at last sexual intercourse and various measures of age and economic asymmetry. Logistic regression is part of a category of statistical models that enable one to predict a discrete outcome.

The survey found that the average age difference between non-marital sexual partners was 5.5 years, and 47 per cent of men's female partners were adolescents. Fourteen per cent of partnerships involved an age difference of at least 10 years, and 23 per cent involved more than the mean amount of male-to-female material assistance.

Men who reported at least one partnership with both these characteristics were defined as sugar

daddies and made up five per cent of the sample; sugar daddy relationships accounted for four per cent of partnerships. Sugar daddy partnerships and the largest age and economic disparities we constructed were linked with less chances of using condoms.

The conclusion was that although sugar daddy relationships are not as pervasive as generally assumed, age and economic asymmetries in non-marital partnerships are relatively common. All such differences are associated with non-use of condoms. Therefore, increasing women's power within such sexual relationships could improve their ability to negotiate safer sexual behaviours, such as condom use. ■

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Facts about intergenerational sexual relationships

- Intergenerational partnerships include those in which the male partner is five years or older. The age difference increases the risk of HIV infection.
- Young women whose sexual partners are more than 10 years older than them are twice as likely to never use a condom, compared to those whose partners are at most five years older as shown by a study in Uganda of 15- to 19-year-old women.
- A big age-gap between partners often reduces the younger person's ability to negotiate safer sex.
- Young women aged 15 to 24 years have higher HIV infection rates than men their age; their increased vulnerability is partly blamed on sex with older men.
- HIV infection rates in older men are higher than in adolescent boys or young men.
- Unsafe behaviours and HIV infection are directly linked to age mixing or economic transaction.
- Self-selection of individuals is a factor in asymmetrical relationships. The need for love, affection, and affirmation has been emphasised in some studies as important but has often overlooked motivations for young women's involvement in intergenerational sex.
- Young women view themselves as active agents in the relationships and are able to define their social and sexual identity.
- Studies have revealed that age-disparate relationships are meaningful and perceived as beneficial at a number of levels, including social, physical, psychological, as well as economic and symbolic.
- A desire for 'clean partners', or young women perceived to be free of STI or HIV infection is a major reason for men choosing young women as partners.
- Research has established that in poor rural areas, lack of access to education, health services, employment and a weak economy often push women and girls into age-disparate sex with potential economic benefits.
- Money and gift transfers in sexual partnerships are part of traditional courting practices of young Malawian men and women and are the way through which love and commitment are socially communicated.
- Sexual activity is behaviour negotiated between partners within a wider socio-cultural and economic context.
- Pressure from parents to have a relationship with an older employed man is also a factor, both as a means for getting money and household necessities as well as to marry and bring bride-wealth into the family.
- For young women whose parents provide the necessities of life, relationships with older men are for acquiring a 'top up' that helps to boost their status in the eyes of peers.
- Botswana girls who were able to resist relationships with older partners had strong attributes and beliefs including a strong sense of self-worth, accepting their economic circumstances, and wanting to maintain some sense of power in decision-making.
- A key theme that emerges from the literature is that effective programming will need to respond to the context that influences sexual behaviour among adult men and adolescents.
- Promising practices have included a combination of micro-economic approaches linked with interpersonal and community activities that challenge socio-cultural norms that allow for age-disparate sex and empower girls and women to make healthier sexual decisions. ■