

Gender Equality and “Sugar Daddies”

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Cross-Generational Sex in the Time of HIV

Introduction

In East and Southern Africa, ministries of education and others working with adolescents and young women have had curricula and materials addressing the “sugar daddy” phenomenon for many years. Ministries of education concerns initially focused on girls dropping out from school because of unwanted pregnancies. There was a perception that school girls were involved in sexual relationships with older (often married) men who inveigled them into sexual relations by providing small presents and favors such as car rides, and money for school books¹. Girls involved with a sugar daddy risked sexually transmitted infections, and the consequences of unwanted pregnancy including complications or death from unsafe abortion. In this time of HIV and AIDS, feminization of the HIV epidemic, with young women 15-24 years in sub Saharan Africa three times² more likely to be infected with HIV than young men of the same age, four times more likely in Zambia³ and an astounding five times more likely in Zimbabwe⁴, has renewed public health interest in cross-generational sex.

Definition of cross-generational sex

In general, cross-generational sex refers to relationships between older men and younger women; although less commonly cross-generation relationships include older women and younger men. In many cultures, it is the norm for women to marry older men and this can be many years older for junior wives in polygamous marriages. Yet the UNAIDS General Population Survey and the Demographic and Health Survey AIDS module⁵ enquire about age-mixing in sexual relationships defined as women aged 15-19 who report sex in the last 12 months with a man ten years or more older than themselves and *to whom they are not married or cohabiting*. However, published papers^{6,7} provide comparative data on higher HIV prevalence in young women who have had sex with a man five years older than themselves compared with sexually active young women whose partner was less than five years older — as well as on the considerably higher HIV prevalence in those whose partner is ten years older than themselves.

In sub-Saharan Africa, a young woman’s risk of becoming infected with HIV increases with the age difference between her and her sexual partner. A difference of only five years significantly increases her risk.

Sexual risk behaviors and cross-generational sex

Gender, age and economic differences may increase risky sexual behavior and reduce a young woman’s ability to negotiate safer sexual behaviors. Girls and young women are often unable to negotiate condom use in cross-generational sexual relations^{8,9,10,11}. Girls who become pregnant or present with induced abortions have much older partners on average¹². This trend is also true in the United States where teens who have partners who are six or more years older are *nearly four times more likely to become pregnant* than teens who date someone within two years of their own age. The majority of teenagers in the USA infected with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections are infected by adult

males, and teens with older partners report using condoms 20% less than teens with peer-aged partners¹³.

Coercion, exploitation and consent in cross-generational sex

Although some young girls may participate voluntarily in cross-generational sex others are forced. Several authors describe a continuum of behaviors from those where the young woman voluntarily participates through to older males using coercion, violence and threats^{14, 15}.

However, young women are arguably vulnerable to exploitation in many cross-generational relationships given the structural and institutional issues such as lack of choice facing those living in poverty, the need to pay school fees, and purchase uniforms and school books. Young women may not fully realize the risk of unwanted pregnancy and dangers of unsafe abortion or sexually transmitted infections. As a result of gender inequity in education, girls and young women are still disadvantaged with respect to understanding key issues about HIV transmission and AIDS. Approximately half of 15-24 year young women in sub-Saharan Africa are unaware that a healthy looking person can be infected with HIV¹⁶. As well as their having less knowledge of how HIV is transmitted and how they might protect themselves from HIV infection than males of the same age¹⁷, biological such as the increased vulnerability of young women to sexually transmitted infections and HIV¹⁸, make sexual relations more risky for females than males. Social factors also increase young women's vulnerability in cross generational relationships. Gender constructs that encourage female passivity and are permissive to male gender-based violence¹⁹ increase the imbalance of power in sexual partnerships between young females and older males. The relationship between young people, coercive sex and gender-based violence is extensively documented^{20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27}. Gender-based violence and sexual coercion by male teachers and older male students is documented in schools and colleges in southern Africa^{28, 29, 30}.

Transactional sex and cross-generational relations

In sub-Saharan Africa, there is a widespread transactional component to sexual relations for adolescent girls who are not engaged in trafficking and prostitution³¹. Motivation for accepting gifts of material goods and money is complex including needing money for survival, desire for material possessions, and perception of social status conferred³². Some authors argue that as the favors may be relatively small and non-essential—for example use of a cell 'phone—and that the young women who accept the favors are not always the poorest in society, indicate that young women who engaged in cross-generational sex exercise agency over their actions³³ to obtain money and gifts from older men. Some researchers consider this an extension of the “commercialization” of sexual relations between marital partners whereby the exchange of gifts and cash between individual partners has replaced the traditional bride price [lobola] payments between families³⁴. By accepting gifts and favors,

In some contexts in sub-Saharan Africa, large proportions of girls have engaged in transactional sex—accepting gifts and favors from their sexual partner as a measure of their “worth”. However, the transactional nature of the relationship further reduces a younger woman’s ability to negotiate safe sex and use of condoms with the partner.

a young woman tacitly accepts she will have sex and yet the transactional nature of the relationship increases the power imbalance and reduces the likelihood of using condoms.

Interventions that address risky cross-generational sex

The issues of individual choice and decision making, and the behavioral dynamics of young women and men involved in cross-generational sexual relations, have been explored as ways to design appropriate prevention interventions in some adolescent sexual and reproductive health programs^{35, 36}. There are methodologies, such as Stepping Stones, that enable communities to address relationship issues and reproductive health consequences of behaviors. Using this methodology, people in communities work together in self-identified peer groups [of young women, older women, young men and older men] to explore the causes and consequences of their behaviors and to resolve how they can work together for change. In the longer term, programs that aim to change social norms around the acceptability of cross-generational sex need to broaden their focus and address norms on gender socializing children and gender equality, as well as the behaviors of young women and older men.

About MIDEGO

MIDEGO works with partners to build capacity for developing youth and gender sensitive policies and designing programs and services that address young people and their reproductive health needs from a gender sensitive perspective. MIDEGO staff are skilled in use of empowerment approaches and methodologies that enable young women to acknowledge and understand their risk behaviors, and to support each other to reduce their risk behaviors. These methodologies and approaches also work with men and the wider community towards societal changes that encourage healthy relationships and behaviors, and may even lead to community sanctions against those older men who prey upon young women. MIDEGO facilitates collaborative strategic planning and design processes, for partner organizations who work with young people as partners in the assessment, planning, design and management of young people's services and programs. MIDEGO trains program managers and implementers in gender equality and youth empowerment and coaches them in applying this in their work.

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