

Reframing and addressing cross-generational relationships in Malawi

Amy Weissman, Janine Cocker, Lisa Sherburne et al.



Intergenerational relationships between an older man (“Sugar Daddy”) and a girl are quite common in Malawi
Photo: Mick Yates

In 2002, the Malawi National AIDS Commission estimated that there were higher rates of HIV infections among young women than young men. The relationship between HIV prevalence and the practice of cross-generational sex in sub-Saharan Africa is well documented.¹ Through discussions with young women, Save the Children (SC) Malawi too identified cross-generational relationships as a critical mode of HIV transmission. A cross-generational relationship is defined as a non-marital sexual relationship between an adult and a young person, with an age difference of at least 10 years.

As the issue of cross-generational relationships was gaining momentum and being framed as a ‘problem’ by the international community, SC/Malawi raised a number of questions:

- Are these relationships inherently negative and/or what about them is negative?
- Is it the size of the age difference and/or the age of the individuals that is important?

SC realized that certain assumptions would guide a response. First, young people do not always have the power to use the behaviours they know are protective; therefore, a norm where protective practices are allowed must be created. Second, young people are the keepers of the issue definition and solution. Learning from them in each context will ensure effective responses. Third, public dialogue and peer pressure can create demand for change, and finally, although economic resources can come into play, there are other gains to consider. These questions and assumptions, among others, led SC to reframe the issue of cross-generational sex.

The Continuum of Volition

SC views the drivers of cross-generational relationships along a ‘Continuum of Volition’

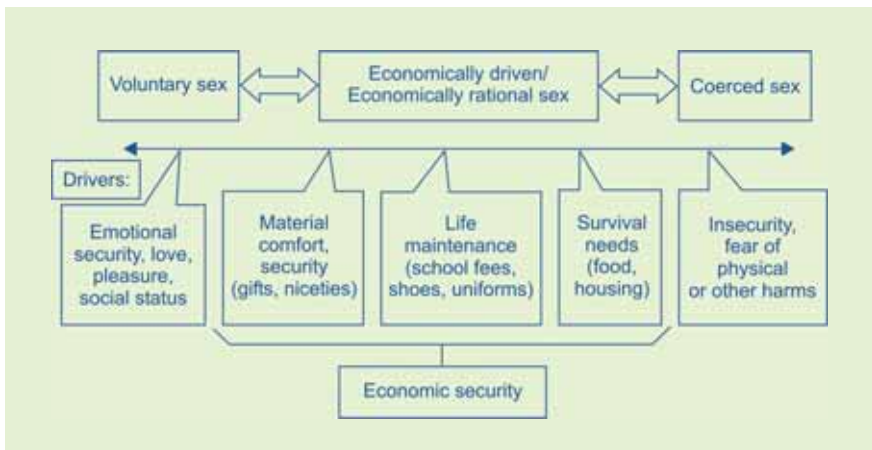
– from emotional security, financial security, survival security, to coercion. This suggests that not all young people may be vulnerable and/or passive. Some empowered youth choose to engage in relationships for ‘security gains’, whether they be emotional or economic. Moving further along the continuum is ‘economically rational sex’, which is neither strictly voluntary nor involuntary and ranges from sex for ‘desired things’ to survival. On the far right is coerced sex.

Various drivers require different responses. For instance, if a young person is voluntarily in a relationship, an appropriate response is to make that relationship safe. Alternatively, if a young person is forced into a relationship, an appropriate response is to ensure protection.

In 2003, SC/Malawi applied the continuum to develop programme responses, beginning with a series of eight focus group discussions with 10 to 12 young women between the ages of 14 and 17 and six groups of men, half from Lake Malawi’s shore and half from upland areas. Young women revealed that more than half of unmarried peers have cross-generational relationships. They believed that the primary reason is to receive cash or gifts for desired things, although some young women need these relationships for survival, while others engage in them for pleasure, due to peer pressure or force. All felt that the relationships are shameful and asked for alternatives and support. Participants validated the Continuum of Volition, created a programme planning tool and identified potential programmatic strategies during the focus group discussions.

Young women tested their ideas through Trials of Improved Practices (TIPs), a research tool developed by the Manoff Group to help programme planners select and pretest the actual practices that the programme will promote. The young women met individually with a youth researcher and

Programme planning tool		Driving motivation			
		Emotional security	Economically driven/ desired things	Economic and physical survival	Coercion (due to insecurity)
Programmatic options	Emotional support/praise for refusals	X	X		
	Training in alternative income generation	X	X	X	
	Life skills education	X	X		X
	Parental/elder support and communication	X	X		X
	Community protection and reporting system		X		X



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agreed on what they would try. The researcher returned after several weeks to explore young women's experiences and recommendations. Three programmatic options were selected:

- *Self-praise* (Table row 1): Fifteen young women tested the idea to praise themselves each time they refused a man by completing one of the smiley face drawings on a sheet of paper. After three weeks, all but one young woman reported that multiple older men had made advances to them and that they refused each proposal and praised themselves. They reported no problems and liked the tool. As one stated: *"Refusing older men is easy because now I know what to say and I have learned that I can do anything, even refuse these people."*
- *Training in business skills* (Table row 2): Fifteen young women participated in a two-day training on selecting a small

business, managing it and saving money, with a life-skills component on values clarification and goal-setting. Participants reported understanding most of the content, liking the training, and knowing what they would do to start their own business. One 17-year-old woman described her reaction: *"I have been given a light to illuminate a new path which would make things work for me in my life and avoid other things like unnecessary relationships."*

- *Community Auntie* (Table row 4): Fourteen young women tested the idea of seeking support from a 'Community Auntie'. The young women identified a woman in each community known for her kindness and interest in protecting young women. After three weeks, only the four youngest participants had visited the aunties. These young women reported each proposition to the aunties. One explained: *"Before, men's intimidation made me unable to refuse, but now the auntie gives me confidence to enable me to refuse the men."* The aunties provided counselling and confronted the men. The older girls did not feel comfortable visiting the aunties because they felt old enough to make their own decisions.

Lessons learned

- Taking into account differences in motivations of young women to become involved with older men helps to develop appropriate choice of interventions for young women with different needs.
- Exploring what aspects of cross-generational relationships are of concern and understanding the choices (or lack thereof) that young women have, may be a better approach than just fighting this type of relationships.
- Intensive community mobilization is needed to create sanctions and support male leaders to positively influence their peers.

Addressing cross-generational relationships

The Continuum of Volition assisted young women to respond to cross-generational relationships on their own terms. Some of SC's youth programmes in Malawi will implement the self-praise tool and the small business training with life skills, as well as

the community aunties component for younger women in two rural districts reaching more than 100,000 young women. One major challenge is the lack of community leader commitment (row 5 in the Table). Intensive community mobilization is therefore needed to create sanctions and support male leaders to positively influence their peers. Plans are underway to develop effective community mobilization activities.

Although the growing disparity in HIV infection rates between young women and men in sub-Saharan Africa is of great concern, SC hesitates to define cross-generational relationships, a key driver of this disparity, as a problem. Rather, SC proposes exploring what aspects are of concern and understanding the choices (or lack thereof) that young women have and, moreover, addressing inequality within the socio-economic context. ■

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1. N. Luke & K. Kurz, *Cross-generational and transactional sexual relations in sub-Saharan Africa: Prevalence of behaviour and implications for negotiating safer sexual practices*. ICRW, 2002 (48 p.); www.icrw.org/docs/CrossGenSex_Report_902.pdf