

Why young women in southern Africa are going for riskier older men

By: Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala



Young girls during a life skills session. (Picture courtesy of SAFAIDS)

In recent years, scientists have noted high rates of HIV infection among young women in southern Africa that are well above those of young men of similar age. The UNAIDS estimates that in parts of Botswana, infection rates among girls aged 15-19 years are up to nine times those of boys. In South Africa young women in the 15-24 age bracket, have an HIV infection rate about four times that of young men.

For the region as a whole, young women between 15 and 24 years are on average three to six times more likely than their male counterparts to be HIV infected¹.

What is the reason for this disproportion and why are young women in these countries so vulnerable to HIV? Having conducted ethnographic research on social and cultural aspects of HIV in the region over several years, the UNAIDS asked this writer to review and analyse studies that focused on the topic of age-mixing in sexual relationships between men and women in southern Africa².

Briefly, while biological factors associated with still-maturing vaginal walls are a factor

in young women's greater vulnerability to HIV infection, social factors also play a significant role. An earlier review of studies from across sub-Saharan Africa on what is called intergenerational or age-disparate sex indicated that relationships between young women and older male partners were common in many parts of the continent. The liaisons were associated with unsafe sexual behaviour, low condom use and increased risk of HIV infection³.

Older men often have HIV infection rates higher than adolescent boys or young men, and a large age-gap between partners is likely to reduce the younger person's ability to negotiate safer sex. One study estimated that for every

year's increase in the age difference between partners, chances of unprotected sex rose by 28 per cent.

Risk perception in these relationships tends to be low. Men often prefer young sexual partners, viewing them as more likely to be free from HIV. Young women similarly view older men as 'safe' partners because they appear to be less risk-taking, more stable and more responsible. Young women are more afraid of becoming pregnant or being 'found out' in their relationships with older men, than of STIs or HIV.

Studies on younger woman-older man relationships have tended to focus on what drives young women into such unions or on the difficulties they face in the relationships, with most studies emphasising poverty as the predominant factor motivating young women. They argue that during economic crisis, young women relate with older men in order to meet basic needs such as food, housing and clothing.

While this understanding is not incorrect, it is too simplistic and inadequate to explain why

young women — even the better-off ones — continue to be at greater risk.

Finance and romance

Research has shown 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 for potential economic gain. Money obtained is used to pay for education, buy food or clothes and luxuries such as soaps, body lotions, and snacks. Simple gifts such as a pencil or a packet of peanuts are sometimes enough to lure a girl into sex with an older person.

Parental pressure to relate with an older working man is also a factor — as a means of getting cash and household necessities and of marrying and fetching bride-wealth.

Girls and young women in rural areas are more directly subjected to traditions that guide relations between generations and between men and women. Young women are expected to be obedient, dutiful and respectful towards older men. While these cultural prescriptions may be stronger in rural areas, they have also been found to play an important role in undermining young urban women's ability to resist older men's advances and to negotiate safe sex.

In urban areas material gain was found to be a leading factor luring young women to have sex with older men. Entertainment and fun emerged as major bases for such unions,

with fun tied to glamour and enjoyment of material goods and lifestyle consistent with urban life.

For young women whose parents provide the necessities of life, relating with older men was not about meeting subsistence needs, but about acquiring a 'top up' that helps boost their status in the eyes of peers. As one 17-year-old in Gaborone, Botswana, involved with a 37-year-old man put it: "It's all about peer pressure, we compete with the type of cell phone we have, our hair styles, the type of vehicle our boyfriends drive, and the amount of money they give."

But it is not just money. Of special concern is the HIV risk in age-disparate partnerships. While young women associate ability to attract and exploit older partners with modern freedoms linked to gender equality, and while securing and maintaining relationships

with older, employed men is considered 'clever' and an important contribution to young women's self-perception as sexually-liberated, the strategy exposes them to HIV.

Young women seek to accumulate social, emotional, symbolic and financial capital and media imagery of glamorous and prosperous lives was found to be an important influence in shaping the aspirations of many contemporary young women, making relationships with older men a means of achieving their aspirations.

Young women throughout southern Africa are re-defining what it means to be a woman in societies where gender expectations were shifting. Aware of factors hindering their future goals such as lack of job opportunities, access to quality education, corruption, and low wages, they see affairs with older men as an easy and natural way to a better life.

Benefits outweigh risks

Women see many benefits in having older 'sugar daddy' boyfriends. Some aim for marriage, with older men seen as more serious and better potential marriage partners than same-age partners. Across southern Africa, girls are encouraged to seek older men as partners and husbands. Families caution against marrying a man of similar age as this is believed to increase the risk of marital instability.

“*For many young women, relationships with moneyed older men provide a readily available and socially-acceptable way of meeting a growing list of needs and wants*”

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Young Zimbabwean girls. (Picture courtesy of SAFAIDS)

Condom use among young Swazi in mixed-age relationships

By: Jonathan Evans, Wim Delva and Carel Pretorius



Swazi girls in a traditional ceremony. (Picture courtesy of SAFAIDS)

The Kingdom of Swaziland is home to 1.1 million people. Sixty-nine per cent of the population lives in poverty¹. Like many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Swaziland is crippled by a generalised HIV hyper-epidemic. More than 26 per cent of the 15 to 49-year-old population is infected with HIV².

Highest prevalence rates are among 25 to 29-year-old women and the 35-39 age group in men, at 49 and 45 per cent respectively (SDHS, 2007). Although HIV prevalence is roughly the same among the sexes, when aggregated across age categories, the risk of infection is significantly higher among young women, with 22.6 per cent of the 15 to 24-year-olds infected, compared to the 5.8 per cent of men infected in the same age category³.

These differences cannot be explained by anatomical and hormonal factors that make young women particularly vulnerable to HIV infection. While biological factors may put women at greater risk of HIV, there is evidence that age-mixing between young women and older men plays an important role in spreading HIV throughout the population.

Studies in recent years have shown that in sub-Saharan African countries with generalised HIV epidemic, girls in sexual relationships with men five or more years older than themselves are at increased risk of HIV infection.

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Some who wish to avoid marriage still aim for economic independence with older men seen as a means to achieve this goal. With the men's help, they can further their education, secure better jobs, build capital, or gain social mobility.

Some young women claim that older men are better at and more interested in satisfying them sexually. Their need for love, affection, and affirmation has been stressed in some studies as important but it often overlooked the young women's motives for going with older men. As a young woman attending one of the region's tertiary institutions put it: "Older men are nicer than the young ones. They listen, they are patient and tender. You can see they appreciate you more. Sometimes girls fall in love with them, but it's no use because they're already married."

There is prestige in dating a man who is a well-known or respected public figure. To be seen riding in an expensive automobile, or dressed in trendy clothing, or with a top-of-the-range cell phone are viewed as status-enhancing by young women in the region.

From this social benefit comes a personal benefit, the boosting of self-esteem and self-confidence that some studies have reported as especially important for young women. Their ability to improve young women's status, including social mobility, has earned older men tags such as 'sponsors' 'investors' or 'ministers'. The concept of the 'Three C Girls' (young women who sexually exploit men for cash, cars and cell phones) is well known across the entire southern Africa region.

Notions of manhood

Studies tell us that notions of manhood in the region are closely tied to a man's ability to attract and maintain sexual partners. The need for entertainment, variety and relief from domestic and workplace stress are considered as some of the drivers of men's sexual involvement with younger women. A desire for 'clean partners' perceived to be free of STI or HIV infection is reportedly a major reason for men going for young women. Myths that HIV can be cured through sex with a virgin or that an older man can be sexually revived by sleeping with a younger

woman are common in the region. In some communities an ageing man is entitled to a young woman to 'make his blood move again', and often his ageing wife has to find the young woman to 'service' her husband.

Conclusion

As regional economies expand, so too are people's aspirations and expectations. Young women have new needs and desires consistent with the ideals of a modern lifestyle, gender equality and relationships that mimic globalised images of glamour and romance.

For many young women, relationships with moneyed older men provide a readily available and socially-acceptable way of meeting a growing list of needs and wants, from bread and school fees, to designer handbags and access to elite social circles. Such aspirations in societies where the rich-poor gap is widening and women have limited means to financial independence, coupled with cultural allowances for mixed-age relationships and the intertwining of sexual and economic power, drive

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the spread of HIV, making young women exceptionally vulnerable.

There is an urgent need to increase the risk perception of young women and older men regarding these relationships. Older peers who have successfully resisted mixed-age affairs could play a key role in encouraging, mentoring and supporting young women to resist sex with older men.

“Young women need to have a vision of a disease-free future through their own efforts, with the necessary education and skills”

Young women need to have a vision of a disease-free future through their own efforts, with the necessary education and skills without which they cannot be expected to forgo the many potential benefits of mixed-age sex. To successfully address intergenerational sex, a two-pronged effort will be required: one focusing on encouraging and educating women and the other focusing on changing male norms.

In southern Africa, responsibility for most sex-related issues, like reproduction and contraception falls squarely on women. And yet addressing intergenerational sex should demand of adult men to stop engaging in

potentially-exploitative relationships and to recognise that liaisons with young women are an abuse of power and status.

This is a challenge where polygamy is practised and mixed-age sex is institutionalised, yet if we ever hope to collapse the bridge that carries HIV infection from one generation to the next, the conversation needs to start somewhere. It must start now! ■

Lessons learned

- Young women are expected to be obedient, dutiful, and respectful towards older men. This plays a role in undermining young women's ability to resist older men's advances and to negotiate safe sex.
- Young women seek to accumulate social, emotional, symbolic and financial capital.
- Their need for love, affection, and affirmation has been stressed in some studies as important but it often overlooked the young women's motives for going with older men.
- There is an urgent need to increase the risk perception of young women and older men regarding these relationships.

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**The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of USAID or any of its affiliates.*

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Would you let this man be with your teenage daughter?

So why are you with his?

No man would wish harm on his daughter or niece or little sister, but more and more Ugandan men are taking advantage of vulnerable young girls. You probably know some of them and you let them get away with it. You may have even done it yourself. This practice is called cross generational sex and it puts hundreds of young lives at risk of HIV infection and should be stopped.

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Cross generational sex stops with you