



Technical Meeting on Young Women in HIV Hyper-endemic Countries of Southern Africa

Intergenerational/age-disparate sex Policy and Programme Action Brief

Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala

The Problem

Young women in southern Africa between the ages of 15 and 24 are on average three to six times more likely to be infected with HIV than their male cohorts (UNAIDS 2004). While biological factors may account for women's greater susceptibility to HIV, there is clear empirical evidence that age-mixing between young women and older men plays an important role in observed differences in this epidemiological pattern (Gregson et al., 2002). Studies indicate that relationships between young women and older men are common in the region as in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa and are associated with unsafe sexual behaviour and increased HIV risk (Glynn et al., 2001; Kelly et al., 2003; Longfield et al., 2004). These relationships are largely premised upon material gain, with studies revealing that the greater the economic asymmetries between partners and the greater the value of a gift, service, or money exchanged for sex, the less likely the practice of safer sex (Luke, 2003; Wojciki, 2005).

Studies indicate elevated HIV risks for young women in partnerships with men who are 5 or more years older, and hence the term age-disparate relationships has gained currency as a more useful term than intergenerational sex. In South Africa for example a very high HIV infection rate of 29.5% was found among girls 15-19 in sexual partnerships with an age disparity of 5 or more years (Shisana et al., 2005), and a recent study in Botswana by Langeni (2007) found that for every year's increase in the age difference between partners there was a 28% increase in the odds of having unprotected sex. Several factors have been identified within age-disparate relationships which increase risk of HIV. Older men often have infection rates higher than adolescent boys or young men, and age and economic disparity between partners has been shown to compromise young women's ability to negotiate safe sex. Risk perception in these relationships is often low. Men perceive young partners to be more likely to be free from STIs and HIV, while young women often view older men as less risk-taking, more stable, and hence 'safer' partners. In addition young women are often more concerned about the risk of becoming pregnant or of being 'found out' in their relationships with older men, than of STIs or HIV (Jones, 2006; Nkosana & Rosenthal, 2007).

While early studies identified poverty as the major factor prompting young women's involvement in sexual relationships with older men, research has increasingly demonstrated that this understanding is too simplistic. While many young women do find themselves in age-disparate relationships because of poverty or coercion, studies also reveal that many play active roles in seeking and exploiting relationships with older men and do not perceive themselves as victims (Silberschmidt & Rasch, 2000; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Nkosana, 2006). Young women may be

powerless as regards safer sex negotiations, but they often have a high degree of control over partnership formation and choosing the number and types of partners with whom they become involved. This often gives them a false sense of being in charge (Bagnol & Chamo 2004). Emerging evidence reveals that young women hold contradictory norms and values in relation to these relationships. While positive perceptions and attitudes towards age-disparate relationships have been reported, young women are often simultaneously aware of dangers that include dependency and the common occurrence of unsafe sex that can result in pregnancy, STIs and HIV (Wight et al, 2006; Karlyn, 2005). It is not uncommon for young women to judge intergenerational relationships to be not good, and reportedly wish the benefits derived could be derived through other means (Nkosana 2006).

Discussion

While economic gain emerges as the predominant motivation for young women's involvement with older men and they report that insisting on safer sex practices would jeopardise their economic goals in the relationship (Hallman, 2004; Poulin, 2006), young women perceive a range of potential benefits to be derived from age-disparate partnerships that include opportunities for finding love, companionship, a husband, sexual fulfillment, impressing peers, boosting self-esteem, finding employment, acquiring social status or simply having fun in ways that suggest a modern lifestyle (Machel, 2001; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). Against such considerable potential benefits any perceived risk of HIV is pushed aside in an effort to enhance and add meaning to life. Few studies have explored age-disparate relationships from the perspective of the men involved. The desire for entertainment, variety and relief from domestic and workplace stress as well as a desire for 'clean' partners have been reported as motivations (Weinrab, 2002; Kimuna & Djamba, 2005). Long-standing cultural allowances and pervasive myths in the region sometimes encourage intergenerational sex, such as the notions that an aging man is entitled to seek a young woman for sexual rejuvenation or to 'make his blood move again' (Nkosana, 2006), or that sex with a virgin can cure AIDS or other ailments (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002). Studies indicate that men often view these relationships as transactional and are not willing to use condoms when they have given their young partners a valuable gift or service. Men commonly blame young women for seducing them because they are after money, and Nkosana (2006) reports that Botswanan men see nothing wrong with using their socioeconomic power to entice young women into sex.

Age-disparate sexual relationships as a strategy gain viability and meaning for young women within the context of existing structural conditions and prevailing gender and power relations in southern Africa. Such relationships are nested within a common system of sociosexual networking that includes the normative elements of multiple and concurrent partnerships and the semiotics of sex-money transfers. While poorer women are more vulnerable to the coercion and material enticements of older men, many young women, whether rich or poor, rural or urban, living in a context where culture assigns an ethical obligation for men to reciprocate a woman's 'giving' of sex with a gift symbolic of love or appreciation, are mindful of how relationships with older men can be advantageous (Swidler & Watkins, 2007). Most economies in the region are expanding along with young women's expectations of a modern lifestyle, gender equality and relationships that simulate globalised images of prosperity and romance. Relationships with older men provide a readily available and to a large degree socially tolerated way to meet a growing list of needs and wants ranging from bread and school fees to designer handbags and glamorous outings. Growing aspirations in societies where the gap between rich and poor is widening and women perceive few options for obtaining financial independence, coupled with cultural allowances for age-disparate relationships and sexual exchange, make young women exceptionally vulnerable to HIV infection.

Policy and action recommendations

- 1. Rapidly and greatly increase programmes that work directly with men to challenge the socio-cultural norms that allow for and sanction engagement in age-disparate sex.**

Across the region cultural constructions of masculinity are problematic for those men and women who wish to practice less-risky sexual behaviours. Male peer pressure for multiple partnering is often intense and demonstrating an ability to attract young partners helps to confirm manhood and raise social status among peers. There is a need to cultivate positive peer norms and new cultural markers of manhood among boys and men as well as a need for local champions of HIV prevention who are members of communities most at risk. Adult, heterosexual African male role models who mirror desired behaviours and represent a new masculinity that protects self and others from HIV need to be identified, encouraged, mentored, and supported to be maximally visible and vocal. HIV prevention programming that engages directly with men at various levels to critically interrogate and challenge constructions of masculinity need to be brought to a mass scale as a vital step towards creating a social environment that supports rather than undermines safer sex messages. The onus should be on adult men to stop engaging in potentially exploitative relationships and to recognise that age-disparate relationships represent an abuse of power and status. These efforts should form part of a broader programme to raise awareness of HIV risks in multiple concurrent partnering and encourage sexual partner limitation.

2. Rapidly and greatly increase programmes aimed at empowering young women and raising risk-perception regarding involvement in age-disparate relationships.

Financial dependence on men remains a key factor in women's vulnerability to HIV generally, and economic stress makes young women's susceptibility to involvement in intergenerational relationships. Ensuring access to education remains as a major route out of women's ongoing poverty and dependency, and programmes aimed at keeping girls in school and economically empowering young women must be linked and expanded. Peers who have successfully resisted involvement in these relationships should be identified and supported to be local-level peer educators who assist with raising young women's awareness of risks in age-disparate relationships. Young women need to visualise the possibility of a future that is achievable through their own efforts and to contemplate relationships in which men are not expected to provide economically.

3. Work with cultural idioms and socio-moral frames that distinguish between normative relationships and prostitution.

While it may be acceptable for a young unmarried woman to have a number of pre-marital relationships through which she might accumulate various forms of capital, prostitution is considered socially unacceptable. Studies reveal that relationships where there are wide age disparities are widely viewed as essentially and primarily transactional and are often covert. When given a public face such relationships are often labeled as prostitution. Challenging the covert nature of intergenerational sex may be one way to stimulate social sanctioning against this practice.

4. Intensify engagement of the faith-based and traditional leadership sectors.

Throughout southern Africa the response of the faith based sector to HIV prevention has been limited in comparison to their response to AIDS treatment and care. Traditional leaders have yet to be effectively engaged and could play important roles in influencing changes in men's attitudes and behaviours, especially in rural areas. As moral authorities these two sectors are well placed to speak out against age-disparate relationships.

5. Compel the media to become real partners in HIV prevention.

Studies indicate that young women's expectations and motivations for seeking older men as sexual partners are highly influenced by media images and messages. Because media and advertising play powerful roles in shaping the aspirations, expectations and consumer behaviours of youth, ways need to be found for making this sector a more accountable role player in the creation of the type of environment required for sustainable, long-term protection against HIV/AIDS. Thus far the power and influence of these important role-players has been underutilized in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Media should be compelled to promote consideration for sexual safety and the sexual rights of others, and should not be allowed to proceed with business as usual in hyper-affected HIV/AIDS countries.

6. Ensure that supportive legislation that protects against the sexual exploitation of girls is in place and strengthen efforts to enforce those laws.

While in most countries in the region it is a crime to engage in sex with a girl below the age of 16, the law is often applied selectively or ineffectively. Where a girl is underage men need to be prosecuted and prosecutions need to be made public and visible.

7. Community driven, multi-sectoral responses to the social drivers of HIV need to be developed, supported and intensified.

Changes in local norms and values associated with age-disparate sexual relationships are required to ensure effective responses to this practice. Social networks can play an important role in sanctioning against age-disparate sex by fostering local ownership of responses that are relevant and meaningful. Initiatives intended to discourage age-disparate sexual relationships should be integrated into responses that address poverty and the lack of opportunity experienced by young women.

References

- Bagnol, B. & Chamo, E. (2004). Intergenerational relationships in Mozambique: what is driving young women and older men? *Sexual Health Exchange*, 3: 10-11.
- Dunkle, K.L., Jewkes, R., Brown, H., Gray, G., McIntyre, J., & Harlow, S. (2004) Transactional sex among women in Soweto, South Africa: Prevalence, risk factors and associations with HIV infection. *Social Science & Medicine*, 59(8): 1581-1592.
- Glynn, J.R, Carael, M., Auvert, B., Kahindo, M., Chege J., Musonda, R., Kaona, F., & Buve, A. (2001). Why do young women have a much higher prevalence of HIV than young men? A study in Kisumu, Kenya, and Ndola, Zambia. *AIDS*, 15 (Supplement 4): 51-60.
- Gregson, S., Nyamukapa, C. A., Garnett, G. P., Manson, P. R., Zhuwau, T., Carael, M., et al. (2002). Sexual mixing patterns and sex-differentials in teenage exposure to HIV infection in rural Zimbabwe. *Lancet*, 359:1896-1903.
- Hallman, K. (2004). Socioeconomic disadvantage and unsafe sexual behaviors among young women and men in South Africa. *Working Paper No. 190*, Policy Research Division, Population Council.
- Jones, L. (2006). Sexual decision-making by urban youth in AIDS-afflicted Swaziland. *African Journal of AIDS Research*, 5(2): 145-157.
- Kambou, S., Shah, M. & Nkhama, G. (1998). For a pencil: sex and adolescence in peri-urban Lusaka. In I. Guijt & M. Shah (Eds.). *The myth of community: gender issues in participatory development* (pp. 110-120). London: Immediate Technology Publications.
- Karlyn, A. (2005). Intimacy revealed: sexual experimentation and the construction of risk among young people in Mozambique. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 7(3): 279-292.
- Kelly, R., Gray, R., Sewankambo, N., Serwadda, D., Wabwire-Mangen, F., Lutalo, T. & Wawer, M. (2003). Age differences in sexual partners and risk of HIV-1 infection in rural Uganda. *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*, 32(4): 441-451.
- Kimuna, S. & Djamba, Y. (2005). Wealth and extramarital sex among men in Zambia. *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 31(2): 83-89.

- Langeni, T. (2007). Contextual factors associated with treatment-seeking and higher-risk sexual behaviour in Botswana among men with symptoms of sexually transmitted infections. *African Journal of AIDS Research* 6(3): 261-269.
- Leclerc-Madlala, S. (2002). On the virgin cleansing myth: gendered bodies, AIDS and ethnomedicine. *African Journal of AIDS Research*, 1: 87-95.
- Leclerc-Madlala, S. (2003). Transactional sex and the pursuit of modernity. *Social Dynamics*, 29(2): 213-233.
- Longfield, K., Glick, A., Waithaka, & Berman, J. (2004) Relationships between older men and younger women: Implications for STIs/HIV in Kenya. *Studies in Fam.Planning*, 35(2): 125-134.
- Luke, N. (2003). Age and economic asymmetries in the sexual relationships of adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa. *Studies in Family Planning*, 34(2): 67-86.
- Machel, J. (2001). Unsafe sexual behaviour among schoolgirls in Mozambique: a matter of gender and class. *Reproductive Health Matters* 9(17): 82-90.
- Nkosana, J. (2006). Intergenerational relationships in urban Botswana. *Unpublished PhD thesis*, Department of Public Health, University of Melbourne.
- Nkosana, J. & Rosenthal, D. (2007). The dynamics of intergenerational sexual relationships: the experience of schoolgirls in Botswana. *Sexual Health*, 4(3): 181-187.
- Poulin, M. (2007). Sex, money, and premarital partnerships in southern Malawi. *Social Science & Medicine*, 65: 2383-2393.
- Shisana, O., Rehle, T., Simbayi, L.C., Parker, W., Zuma, K., Bhana, A. et. al (2005). South African national HIV prevalence, HIV incidence, behaviour and communication survey. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Silberschmidt, M., & Rasch, V. (2000) Adolescent girls, illegal abortion and 'sugar daddies' in Dar es Salaam: Vulnerable victims and active social agents. *Social Science and Medicine* 52: 1815-1826.
- Swidler, A. & Watkins, S. (2006). Ties of dependence: AIDS and transactional sex in rural Malawi. *Studies in Family Planning* 38(3): 147-162.
- UNAIDS (2004). Task Force Report on Women and Girls in Southern Africa. Geneva: UNAIDS.
- Weinreb, A. (2002). Lateral and vertical intergenerational exchange in rural Malawi. *Journal of Cross-cultural Gerontology*, 17(2): 101-138.
- Wight, D., Plummer, M. L., Mshana, G., Wanoyi, J., Shigongoc, Z. S., & Ross, D. A. (2006). Contradictory sexual norms and expectations for young people in rural Northern Tanzania. *Social Science & Medicine*, 62(4): 987-997.
- Wojciki, JM. (2005). Socioeconomic status as a risk factor for HIV infection in women in East, Central and Southern Africa: a systematic review. *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 37:1-36.