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Milking the cow: Young women's construction of identity and risk in age-disparate transactional sexual relationships in Maputo, Mozambique

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Sexual relationships between young women and older men involving economic transactions have been offered as a likely explanation for gender differences in HIV prevalence in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. This study employed peer ethnography to explore young women's construction of social identity and risk within age-disparate transactional sexual relationships in Maputo, Mozambique. Peer ethnography, a rapid approach derived from the anthropological method and based upon training members of the target group to carry out in-depth qualitative interviews with their peers, was adopted in order to gather ethnographic data within a short timeframe to produce actionable results for the design of a communications intervention. The study highlights young women's perception of agency and power in these relationships. Through a strategy of extracting financial and material resources from men based on the power of their sexuality, young women construct a positive identity and esteem linked to perceptions of modernity and consumption and their ability to access consumer goods. Current behaviour change HIV prevention messages have little meaning in relation to young women's perceived goals, in a context in which structural conditions offer few opportunities and limited hope for a secure economic future.

Keywords: AIDS; age asymmetry; transactional sexual relationships; gender

Introduction

There is an increasing body of evidence which confirms gender disparities in levels of HIV infection in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Luke 2003, UNAIDS 2004). Age mixing in sexual relationships between older men and younger women has been offered as a likely explanation for these differences, with young women aged 15–24 years often having infection rates three to four times higher than their male peers (Görgen *et al.* 1993, Konde-Lule *et al.* 1997, Meekers and Calves 1997, Glynn *et al.* 2001, Laga *et al.* 2001, Gregson *et al.* 2002, Luke 2003, 2005, Hallman 2004, Longfield *et al.* 2004). Age-disparate relationships involving economic transactions are common in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Hunter 2002, Luke 2003, 2005, Dunkle *et al.* 2004). Transactional sexual relationships are also associated with

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unsafe sexual behaviour, low condom use, and increased risk of HIV infection (Dunkle *et al.* 2004, Luke 2005). Understanding the motivation of young women engaged in age-disparate transactional relationships is therefore important for understanding sexual behaviour and perceptions of disease risk, for the appropriate design of HIV/AIDS interventions (Dunkle *et al.* 2004).

Background

Recent studies highlight that age and economic asymmetries within sexual relationships are not simply the outcome of individual behaviour or the individual attributes of those involved. Rather, sexual behaviour is negotiated within a wider social, cultural and economic context reinforced by factors such as family and peer pressure, social and economic institutions, and gender-based inequality and power relations (Luke 2003, Karlyn 2006).

An emerging body of anthropological literature challenges the assumption that young women's engagement in transactional sex is primarily poverty driven. In social and economic contexts where young people have their basic needs met, sexual exchange for financial and material rewards may be more to do with consumption and lifestyle than directly linked to poverty (Hunter 2002, Leclerc-Madlala 2003, Cole 2004). Engagement in transactional sex is often motivated by pursuit of an idealized lifestyle created through the global media and liberalization of markets, with young women seeking older male partners in pursuit of consumer goods, such as fashionable clothes, make-up, jewellery and cell phones (Meekers and Calves 1997, Gage 1998, Kambou *et al.* 1998, Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001, Hunter 2002, Leclerc-Madlala 2003: 213, Cole 2004: 574, Dunkle *et al.* 2004, Parikah 2004). Young women often maximise the number of sexual partners as a means of increasing economic security with no intention of marrying their partners, seeing them as a means to further their economic and social goals (Gage and Bledsoe 1994, Meekers and Calves 1997, Gage 1998, Nyanzi *et al.* 2000, Machel 2001, Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001, Hallman 2004, Luke 2005).

A widespread portrayal (notably within HIV/AIDS prevention programmes) of the adolescent girl involved in age-disparate sex has been of a passive victim, coerced into unsafe sexual practices as a result of imbalances in gender and power relations (Luke 2003). An alternative portrayal, highlighted in recent anthropological literature, is of young women as active social agents, recognizing their sexuality as a resource and using it to gain financial resources from older men in exchange for sexual services, often with multiple partners to maximise benefits. While young women are often powerless to negotiate safe sex in these relationships, they have a high degree of control over partnership formation, choosing the number and types of partners with whom they become involved (Nyanzi *et al.* 2000, Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001, Hunter 2002, Luke 2003). Leclerc-Madlala (2003: 228) argues that women's power and agency within the context of current economic and gender inequities need to be clearly understood for the design of effective HIV prevention programmes. This article presents the findings of a qualitative study among young women engaged in age-disparate transactional sex in Maputo Mozambique. The study builds upon the anthropological literature related to young women's agency in transactional sexual relationships, and looks at the implications for the design of

HIV/AIDS policy and for the implementation of HIV/AIDS prevention programmes.

Age-disparate transactional sex in Mozambique

Over the past 20 years, Mozambique has experienced a steady increase in HIV prevalence, with the current adult rate estimated at 16.1% (WHO/UNICEF/UNAIDS 2006). In Maputo, HIV prevalence in the 15–49 year age group has increased from 10% in 1998 to an estimated 20.7% in 2004, considerably higher than the national average (WHO/UNAIDS 2005). HIV infection is three-times higher among women aged 15–24 years than among men in the same age group in Mozambique: 10.7% versus 3.6% (WHO/UNICEF/UNAIDS 2006).

Few data exist on transactional and age-disparate sexual relationships in Mozambique (Karlyn and Mussá 2000, Bagnol and Chamo 2003). A study in northern Mozambique indicates that sex between adolescent girls and older men in exchange for material and financial benefits is relatively widespread and largely accepted by many parts of society, and that such relationships need to be understood in the context of gender power relations, expressed in terms of access to and control over resources, including women's control over their bodies and sexuality (Bagnol and Chamo 2003). Karlyn (2005) reports the practice of *saca-cena* (or 'one night stand') among youth in Maputo, a marginal activity bound by a set of implicit rules emphasizing anonymity, discretion, and condom use. Karlyn (2006) contrasts the *saca-cena* with another marginal local category 'the survivor' who is identified as an individual with no concern for his or her actions. Casual sex and non-use of condoms are typical elements of the survivor lifestyle, which consists of 'partying' and disrespect for authority. According to Karlyn (2006) a female survivor is perceived to be a young woman who is sexually 'available' but cannot be classed as a 'prostitute' as she does not expect payment in exchange for sex. The available literature indicates that how urban young women in Mozambique perceive and define their sexual relationships, including those involving economic transactions, is both fluid and rapidly changing. Nonetheless, there is a significant gap in the literature on the nature of age-disparate transactional relationships in Mozambique and how young women engaged in such relationships construct their social and sexual identity and perceive and negotiate risk.

Research methods

A primary focus of our study was to gain an insight into the worldview and construction of identity of young women engaged in transactional sexual relationships. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate to generate nuanced narrative data on how young women perceive their agency in these transactions. A number of studies have used narrative methodologies derived from the anthropological approach to gain insights into young women's agency in transactional relationships (Hunter 2002, Leclerc-Madlala 2003, Cole 2004). These studies are all based on in-depth fieldwork conducted over a timeframe ranging from five months to four years.

Our research was conducted within the context of the design of an HIV/AIDS prevention programme in collaboration with Population Services International

(PSI), Mozambique. As a piece of programme-related research we did not have the timeframe at our disposal to conduct a qualitative study using tried and tested anthropological methods. A review of the literature indicates that most programme-related studies on young people's sexuality and transactional sex rely on rapid qualitative methods, the most popular being the focus group. We decided against the focus group approach; although a useful tool for eliciting discourses on dominant social values, the method has a tendency to produce normative responses which do not facilitate an understanding of how and when actual behaviour differs from stated norms (Parker *et al*. 1991, Price and Hawkins 2002, Longfield *et al*. 2004).

We recognised the necessity in research into age-disparate sex of using a method which builds trust among participants in order to ensure that participants were free to talk about sensitive and often socially unacceptable issues (Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001). In-depth interviewing is a tried and tested method for producing qualitative data on sensitive issues. However, to enable a relationship of trust to be built up between the researcher and the researched requires a large investment in time (often with the researcher conducting participant observation) which is not feasible in the timeframe of programme-related research. To collect the nuanced data that can be gathered through a narrative research method, within the time necessary, we employed the peer ethnographic method. Peer ethnography is an innovative and low resource approach, derived from the anthropological method, wherein members of the target group are trained as peer researchers to carry out in-depth qualitative interviews among their peers over a relatively short time period (4–5 weeks), in order to collect peer group narratives on specific themes. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed discussion of the peer ethnography methodology, an in-depth discussion of the method can be found in Price and Hawkins (2002).

For our peer ethnographic study, we trained 20 young women between the ages of 16 and 25 years, and currently engaged in transactional sex, as peer researchers. The peer researchers were selected randomly through informal groups and networks known to PSI from a range of socio-economic groups and geographical locations within Maputo. Criteria for selection were that they were members of the target group and willing and available to be trained to conduct interviews with their friends. Consistent with the peer ethnographic method, peer researchers were trained through a short participatory workshop, during which they worked with the lead researchers to design interview prompts to conduct conversational interviews with trusted members of their peer group. All were educated to at least secondary school level and were able to record detailed notes of their interviews. Data collection was carried out over a five-week period, during which time each peer researcher interviewed three of their peers (members of their social network who shared the same lifestyle) with whom they have an established relationship of trust. Peer researchers were asked to use selective sampling. To ensure confidentiality and to enable interviewees to discuss sensitive issues, all interviews were carried out in the third person. For this reason, all interview data appear as third person narratives in which the interviewee talks about 'other young women like her'. As the peer researchers were recruited from different locations in Maputo, we were able to gain interview samples from within several different social groups and networks. The aim of the interviews was to elicit narrative accounts of the social behaviour of others known to the respondents, not accounts of the respondents' own behaviour or normative statements about how people ought to behave. A code of ethics for

conducting research was agreed with the peer researchers during the training, with the aim of collecting narratives that were already circulating within the peer group. At no point in the data collection were individual identities collected or disclosed (see Centre for Development Studies and Options Consultancy Services 2007, for the peer ethnography code of ethics). An important focus of the analysis was on highlighting contradiction and difference in the discourses of different people. The contradictions that run throughout the narratives provided important insights into differences between idealized behaviour and actual behaviour and how young women engaged in transactional sex perceive their social identity and negotiate risk.

Findings

Despite heterogeneity in social class, young women in the peer networks share a common identity predicated upon an idealised lifestyle and set of aspirations. Their social identity is that of successful, modern *urban* women. Their social status is expressed through a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption in which they frequent exclusive bars, restaurants, and nightclubs, wear modern clothes as seen on Brazilian soap operas, ride in expensive cars, and have access to the latest model of cell phone:

> She wants to be in fashion, dine at a restaurant and go to public places. She wants to study, have a good job and get well paid and have lots of money. In this country now it is the 'second Brazil', young people don't do much; they want to have nice things.

Identity is defined through ability to consume the trappings of modernity which, according to Cole (2004: 576), represents the essence of social power. Social identity is linked to shifting gender aspirations of young women to be able to live independently, have freedom to make their own choices, have the potential to generate a high level of income, and to be socially respected. Terms used in the narratives to construct these new gender identities include *curtidoras* (those who enjoy life), *guerreiras* (fighters), *espertas* (clever), *ambiciosas* (ambitious), and *mulheres de visão* (women with vision). The identities of *curtidoras* and *guerreiras* are similar to the category of 'survivors' as described by Karlyn (2006). The notion of a young woman as *curtidora,* someone who enjoys life and lives for the present, runs throughout the narratives and is central to how risk is perceived:

> They are 'curtidoras' – they enjoy themselves, they don't plan anything for the future.
>
> They are 'guerreiras'. To win in life you have to fight. They like freedom and independence. They see that they are young with a great willingness to succeed in life.
>
> They call themselves women with vision – they are clever.

The identity of the modern young woman as conspicuous consumer is predicated upon a shared economic strategy. This strategy is referred in all the narratives through the term 'to *sengue*' which means 'to extract money from older men through sex'. The term derives from the verb *sengar,* which appears to be a Portuguese adaptation of a local term meaning 'to milk the cow'. Other terms used in the narratives to describe the strategy of transactional sex are *chilar* (to extract money) and *escamar* (to de-scale the fish). The use of these linguistic constructions demonstrates that young women see themselves as active agents, employing a strategy which is both socially and economically empowering. The strategy reverses

the order of gender relations into one in which young women perceive themselves to be in control of gaining financial resources from men through the power of their sexuality. In the narratives young women are often presented as being the initiators of these relationships:

> When she goes '*sengueing*' she makes the first move with the man. She likes well-dressed men – they have money. She meets them in nightclubs, and asks for a dance or looks at him and does sexual movement – dancing for him to attract him.
>
> She likes to have money, she likes using men's money – she looks for men who have money in restaurants, bars, or she gets introduced to a man. She has friends who have contacts with powerful men with money.
>
> She has fans who give her money, she can just leave them, throw them away when she wants to, in the future she wants to go to college with their money.

All of the narratives are explicit that the primary motive for having a *sengue* is economic:

> For money – in this way they can sleep with men for money – even if they don't like the person – for money they can give sex in exchange.

A number of relationship categories are identified in the narratives, each type of relationship involving a distinct set of expectations. Not all types of relationships are necessarily entered into simultaneously, although the narratives indicate that multiple sexual partners are a norm. Non-transactional relationships are those with *namorados* (boyfriends) and *pitos* (sex partners). The *namorado* is usually a same-age boyfriend and is an open, public, and socially acceptable relationship, often defined as one in which there is an expectation of affection, love, and planning for the future. A *pito* is a relationship with a man with the sole objective of sexual pleasure for the young woman, and in which material exchange is not a significant part of the relationship. This definition of *pito* is used somewhat differently to that identified by Karlyn and Mussá (2000), who report young girls using the term to refer to an innocent male friend with whom a girl exchanges hugs and kisses. The difference is likely to be the result of the women in our study being from a slightly older age group than those in the Karlyn and Mussá (2000) study.

Transactional relationships include *amante* (lover), the *sengue*, and *prostituicão (*prostitution). Both *sengue* and *amante* are sometimes referred to as *patrocinadors* (sponsors). Neither of these transactional relationships are considered to be 'prostitution', which is referred to as an entirely different form of transaction as it takes place outside the context of a relationship and is a strategy only employed by women in order to meet basic survival needs.

Most young women meet their *sengue* at a hotel or *pensão* (guesthouse) during business hours. A woman may have more than one *sengue* at any one time; those who are considered clever are those who have several *sengue* concurrently. *Sengue* are often talked about in derogatory terms as a resource to tap into for as long as possible, with no expectation of affection or permanency in the relationship:

> Sometimes the *sengue* can like the *moça* [young woman]. But the *moça* doesn't like him, she is only in it for the money. With the *sengue* she doesn't take anything seriously it is just to *sengar* – get money out of him.

The relationship with the *sengue* becomes problematic only when he tries to cross the boundary from a relationship based on exchange to one in which there are emotional expectations:

> Sometimes a *sengue* wants to take a relationship seriously and live with us. Then there is a big problem.
>
> The *sengue* most of the time they have their wives – and sometimes they lose their mind and say they want to live with the *moça* – then a great confusion starts.
>
> Good relations with the *sengue* are when each plays their role well – nobody goes to the other side – so they don't interfere in each other's lives. If the *sengue* says he wants to live with her or she goes after him at his home, then it is complicated and there is a lot of confusion.

The *amante* or lover is an ambiguous relationship category, situated somewhere between that of a *sengue* and that of a husband. An *amante* is usually a married man (who may have been a *sengue*) and who supports the young woman like a second wife, usually renting a flat or a house for her, paying the bills, and providing her with a monthly allowance:

> The *amante* gives the girl a home like a wife, when he has an argument with his wife he goes and lives with her. The *amante* sees the *moça* as an instrument of pleasure.
>
> He is the one who pays for everything. In exchange he wants love and for her to make him feel good. The *amante* wants to meet her in a home. *Sengue* just want to use hotels.

The *amante* has expectations of the relationship, often trying to control the young woman as he would his wife. If the *amante* finds out about other partners he may stop supporting her 'closing the tap' on the flow of resources:

> Bad relationships are with the *amante* because they promise to leave their wives, but they never do, they never keep their promises. The big problem is that they are married – and they behave like they own the *moça*, and she can become uncontrollable.
>
> There was a man, he was well-off in life. He met a *moça*. He rented a house for her and bought her a car and a cell phone and gave her all the conditions to live. In addition to personal expenses he paid her bills. As time went on she got pregnant to another man so he left her and stopped paying the bills. He turned off the tap – so she had to sell the car.

Some narratives refer to *sengueing* as a survival strategy. In this context, surviving does not refer to meeting basic needs, but to maintaining a social identity, linked to freedom, independence, access to material goods, and aspirations to achieve success and power. This finding is consistent with Leclerc-Madlala's (2003) idea of a continuum of needs, where acquisition of a consumer want may be defined by the young woman involved as a need:

> They can *sengue* around to fulfil their needs – these days they like to *sengue* with guys from Nigeria, who sell clothes from Brazil. They are not so vulnerable that they need a lot of money – with money from the *sengue* they can dress up and go out.

Lack of viable employment opportunities is perceived by young women as a major motivation for adopting *sengue* as an economic strategy to achieve their aspirations. The amount of money that a young woman can gain from a *sengue* is significantly more than the amount that could be gained through available employment. Once a

young woman has achieved a certain lifestyle through her *sengue*, it would be impossible to maintain it through most types of employment that are available to her:

> She would like to work – people proposed to her that she could work in a kiosk or in the market – or as a domestic servant. She did not do that because she was already involved, she used to come out of really good cars – so she wouldn't like people to see her in a job like that.

Some of the narratives also refer to parents encouraging daughters to seek *sengue* and using traditional measures such as visiting the *curandeira* (traditional healer) to secure a relationship with a wealthy man. The *curandeira* is called upon to assist the young woman through the balance of power in gender relations:

> Some parents want their daughters to go with rich men. Some take them to the *curandeira* – they call it 'a bath of luck' – or 'putting the boyfriend in the bottle', especially when he is rich.
>
> Sometimes they take them to the *curandeira*, that way they try to turn men into slaves – if she wants money she asks the *curandeira* to 'put him in the bottle'.

Other narratives refer to daughters being introduced to older, wealthy men through their father's colleagues and friends:

> Parents do not accept a boyfriend unless he is rich – they want a daughter to get involved with a man who has money. If they have a boyfriend who is at school, parents say 'why are you doing this?' Fathers say 'if you want a cell phone I cannot give it to you' – so they call their colleagues and introduce them to their daughters.

The greatest perceived risk in the strategy is that the young woman may be 'found out' and hence lose her social and economic status. Discovery by the wife of the *sengue* or *amante* can both destroy a young woman's reputation and take away her source of economic support:

> There is always risk in relationships – they can suffer blackmail – or the man can say 'if you leave me I can make a scandal' – or if his wife finds out – because most of them are married and his wife can make a scandal.

Narratives are contradictory in relation to how risk of contracting HIV and other STIs is conceptualized. Young women have been exposed to many health education and HIV prevention messages promoting abstinence, faithfulness, and condom use. These messages are repeated back in the narratives as an idealized behaviour in which the couple makes a joint, responsible decision regarding condom use:

> To prevent STIs and pregnancy they must use a condom, they must avoid having more than one partner.
>
> In all relationships a condom must be used, to prevent STIs and unwanted pregnancy. Both of them decide about using a condom because to wear a condom is good for both of them.

Idealized statements regarding condom use are, however, contradicted in narratives which describe actual sexual behaviour and experience of condom negotiation in terms of material rewards outweighing HIV risk:

> To prevent STIs she can use a condom, or she can stay a virgin. She knows the right way to take care of herself so as not to get infected. They ignore the information – the information exists – they see, hear and read it – they just ignore it.

Despite references to the importance of only having one partner, abstinence is not perceived as a viable or socially acceptable option. While faithfulness may be an idealized behaviour, it does not resonate with the reality of the economic strategy. Condom use is low in most relationships, although it tends to be higher in *pito* relationships as these are not defined as transactional, and both parties are open with each other about having multiple partners, making condom use more easily negotiated.

It is in relation to condom use and sexual negotiation that young women's construction of the balance of gender and power in transactional relationships is overtly challenged. While relationships with *sengue* and *amante* are perceived by young women to be the most risky as regards HIV, young women have no power to negotiate condom use in these relationships. Many narratives reflect young women's recognition of the unequivocal balance of power: if the *sengue* refuses to use a condom she cannot negotiate. To refuse sex with a *sengue* runs counter to the explicit economic goal of the relationship:

> They use a condom in all relationships – and also not in all relationships. She decides about using the condom – and when he refuses she accepts without a condom.

> She uses a condom in all relationships – she decides – but when her *amante* refuses she accepts it because he pays for the house.

> These days the men they do not like to use condoms, so they go up to a certain point and then stop. If the man does not want to talk about condoms, she does not, because he says he trusts her. With a *sengue* they never use a condom, because he does not want to use it and he is the one who is paying.

> They are scared of AIDS, but what will they do – they want the money – they want to *sengue* – the *sengue* does not want to use a condom – and they want a *sengue* with a 4 by 4, if he doesn't want to use a condom, she does not use one.

There are many contradictions in narratives talking about AIDS. Among the many stories about people who have died of AIDS, some refer to a perception of changing social attitudes and to a decrease in stigmatization of people living with HIV and AIDS:

> AIDS is killing in the cities. She has friends that have this illness. In the beginning people didn't relate to people with AIDS – they were scared – it is different now – people are aware it is happening now.

Nonetheless the response to health education efforts is to dismiss AIDS as a myth, a Western construct intended to stop behaviour that is seen as socially unacceptable or immoral. AIDS is also dismissed through a fatalism based on the inevitability of death, and the importance of living for the present and gaining as much as possible from the moment. This fatalism is closely linked to the *curtidora* identity, through which social protection is constructed to cope with powerlessness and vulnerability in facing the risk of AIDS, which undermines the self-esteem developed through a strategy that places them at high risk:

> AIDS is increasing everyday. Some say that it doesn't exist and that it comes from the international system of decreasing lovers. Others say it is an invention of the condom factories – so that they can sell more. The owner of the condom factory used to be left with boxes of condoms – because nobody bought them.
>
> AIDS doesn't exist, it is there to eliminate sex and unfaithfulness – most don't use a condom – they let everything happen – they live for the present, the future they will see.
>
> AIDS does not exist – it is just to make you scared – to finish with abortion and unwanted pregnancies. But if it does exist tough luck! In the end all of us will die one way or the other we will die – so let everyone enjoy life while we are alive – so most do not use the condom.

Discussion: identity, gender, and power in age-disparate transactional sexual relations

The young women in this study perceive themselves as active agents in transactional relationships, making rational choices and assessments about the relative risks and benefits involved. Young women's goals and aspirations are contextualized within changing social and economic conditions, mediated by gender ideologies and relations of power and control within which sexual choices are made. For many young women, aspirations of financial security, freedom, and independence are linked to shifting gender expectations and identities through which young women are seeking to forge a new role for themselves in society. Prevailing structural conditions are seen to militate against the achievement of these aspirations through socially acceptable means such as education, professional employment, and marriage. Young women identify the factors constraining future goals as lack of employment opportunities and access to education, corruption, low wages in employment sectors in which women predominate (e.g. service industry, markets, receptionist, and secretarial work) and poor communication between parents and children.

Gender norms of sexuality also support a dominant role for men, in which it is considered legitimate for men to experiment sexually and in which women assume a passive role. These gender stereotypes present an image of women, and particularly girls, as sexual objects and commodities. As one young woman in our study put it:

> Most women do not have a good life – men think women are merchandise – they have many girlfriends and they keep it from their wife.

It is within the context of these structural conditions and perceptions of prevailing gender and power relations that the strategy of age-disparate transactional sex gains both viability and meaning for young women. Through entering into such relationships, young women are able to gain access to the resources necessary to achieve social status, using the means that is most within their control: the power of their sexuality. It is the young woman who is perceived to be in control through having the power to exploit a man's wealth under the guise of a relationship. Young women have no emotional attachment to or emotional expectations of their *sengue*. It is the *sengue* who sometimes becomes confused as to his role in the relationship and wishes to turn it into that of an *amante* (lover), a highly problematic relationship as the man tries to shift the balance of power and 'control the woman like a wife'.

Nonetheless, young women tacitly recognize the ambiguous and tenuous nature of a social identity predicated on a strategy of transactional sex. The strategy must remain clandestine. With discovery, a young woman runs the risk of her reputation

being ruined. She can be labelled a *puta* (whore) and lose access to her economic resources and social status. There is no room within this balance of power for young women to express a sense of vulnerability or risk. To do so would be to make explicit the central contradiction: that in order to achieve their aspirations, the strategy places them in relationships in which they are economically dependent upon men and with no power to negotiate. It is in relation to negotiation of safer sex that the true balance of gender power is made explicit.

Young women have high levels of knowledge regarding HIV and AIDS, and high awareness of the risks associated with multi-partners and unprotected sex. While narratives express an idealized behaviour that condoms should be used with all partners, the balance of economic power in transactional relationships means that women will accept sex without a condom. Risk-taking is rationalized through narratives which indicate that AIDS is controlling sexual freedoms and that the cost of losing immediate social and economic gain is greater than the longer-term risk of dying. Prevention messages appear to have little meaning within the context of young women's goals in transactional relationships.

Implications for interventions

In order for behaviour change interventions to have meaning they need to start from an understanding of how those engaged in risky behaviour perceive their sexual relationships, and conceptualise the choices they make and strategies they use. The findings from this study provide a number of opportunities for interventions. Challenging the covert nature of age-disparate transactional sex may be one of the key approaches to stimulating behaviour change. Transactional sex remains a largely hidden practice which is not talked about openly, and when given a public face becomes labelled as 'prostitution'.

One of the main constraints to developing effective programmatic responses has been a lack of gender analysis in relation to HIV transmission which has resulted in most efforts being directed towards women, reinforcing existing gender stereotypes. Interventions have often taken the approach of assuming that young women engaged in transactional sex perceive themselves to be passive victims of coerced relationships and have focused on advising young women to avoid such relationships. Communications approaches have been based on an assumption that young women are reduced to engaging in transactional sex due to low esteem, risking HIV infection in order to access luxury goods. Prevention messages have largely overlooked young women's agency in transactional sexual encounters and the structural forces driving these relationships.

Our research indicates that for communications strategies to be effective the above assumptions need to be challenged. The study has shown that these young women perceive themselves as empowered entrepreneurs, with significant self-esteem attached to this social identity. They also appear to have a high degree of control over partnership formation and the extent to which they are able to choose the number and type of partners. A programmatic approach is required that challenges the existing gender and power relations upon which age-disparate transactional sex is predicated. While young women construe such relationships in terms of exploiting the economic power of men, this is by no means a one-way exploitation. The balance of power in these relationships is based upon men using their economic power to

obtain sexual gratification from younger women whom they perceive to be 'safe', and whom they subsequently place at risk of HIV infection.

Our peer ethnographic research has provided an entry point and a platform upon which to engage with young women directly involved in transactional sex and indicates a number of potential intervention points through a two-pronged approach to behaviour change interventions. First, interventions need to challenge the social norms which support and sanction men's behaviour in age-disparate relationships by overtly addressing the issue as a major driver in the HIV/AIDS epidemic and targeting men and parents' collusion in the strategy. Second, interventions need to focus on increasing risk perception among young women and engendering peer support to deal with the risks inherent in the lifestyle. Peer support can be enlisted through working directly with young women engaged in transactional sex to support uptake of STI and VCT (voluntary HIV counselling and testing) referral services as well as to increase their awareness of and access to ARVs (anti-retrovirals). These activities could also be strengthened through both in-school and out-of-school interventions which support young women who are not engaged in this economic strategy to strengthen the perception that there are other options for achieving social status and economic security.

While the solution to reducing risky behaviour ultimately lies with the young women themselves, the structural conditions of gender relations which legitimize men's power and constrain negotiation of safer sex practices by women need to be challenged through approaches which directly address men and masculine norms of sexual behaviour.

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