

Dangerous Liaisons

People in Cross-Generational Relationships Underestimate Risk

KEY WORDS: HIV/AIDS; sexual behavior; youth; Africa; cross-generational sex; social marketing

A PSI study of Kenyan women's and men's motivations for entering into cross-generational relationships¹ and their risk perceptions of such relationships has found that most participants underestimate the risk of sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.

HIV/AIDS disproportionately affects young African women as compared to older men. Studies have found that HIV infection in women 15-24 is significantly higher than for men in the same age group. Researchers believe that both young women's physiological susceptibility and sexual relationships with older partners contribute to their increased risk of infection.

Cross-generational relationships are reportedly quite common. A comprehensive literature review of quantitative studies in sub-Saharan Africa revealed that 12% to

among men over the age of 30 who reported non-marital partners, 25% had a partner at least 10 years younger.

Data were collected in June 2000 as part of a behavior change communication strategy for young women in Kenya that addressed cross-generational relationships and their risk for STIs and HIV/AIDS. Eight focus groups were conducted with women aged 15-19 and 28 in-depth interviews were carried out with men aged 30 years and older in Nairobi, Mombassa, Kisumu and Meru. Participants discussed motivations for entering into cross-generational relationships, perceived risks and relationship dynamics.

Motivations for Cross-Generational Relationships

For young women: Participants identified financial gain as the biggest incentive to have relationships with older men. Young women actively seek partners who are willing to spend money on them and often initiate relationships with older men. Peer pressure to "fit in" and family pressure to obtain financial support can compel women to engage in these relationships. Women also mentioned emotional motivations.

For older men: Although sexual gratification is the major incentive for pursuing younger partners, these men do not appear to fit a "sugar daddy" stereotype



This scene from a television spot produced by PSI in Kenya was part of a mass media campaign discouraging cross-generational relationships.

25% of young women's partners were 10 or more years older. A study in Kenya found that

among men over the age of 30 who reported non-marital partners, 25% had a partner at least 10 years younger.

¹ Several studies have defined a cross-generational relationship as a sexual relationship between a man and a woman with at least a 10-year difference in age.

PSI

Research Brief

Population Services International
1120 19th St., NW
Suite 600
Washington, DC 20036 USA
Phone: (202) 785-0072
Email: info@psi.org
www.psi.org

PSI/Europe
Douglas House 1st Floor
16-18 Douglas Street
London SW1P 4PB, UK
Phone: +44 (0)20-7834-3400
Email: info@psieurope.org.uk

but come from a variety of social and professional backgrounds. They seek partners who are polite, need money and have certain physical attributes. Men listed emotional motivations for engaging in cross-generational relationships, such as regaining a sense of youth, escaping household pressures and relieving stress. They also identified greater status among their peers for such relationships as a powerful social reward.

Perceived Risks of Cross-Generational Relationships

For young women: Most agreed that the risk of discovery and subsequent violence from partners' wives is the biggest risk, followed by violence from disapproving parents and same-age boyfriends. They mentioned pregnancy and emotional abandonment by older men, same-age boyfriends and family members as additional risks. Women assessed the risk of STIs and HIV as the lowest of all, assuming that the men are not promiscuous and remain faithful to younger partners and their wives.

For older men: The biggest risk was the discovery of the affair by their wives and the subsequent disintegration of the family. Other risks included financial costs, pregnancy and the moral decline of young women. Again, the risk of STIs and HIV were given the lowest priority. Some men still perceive young women to be less risky partners than older women because they are innocent and sexually inexperienced.

Condom Use

Both female and male participants in this study agreed that condom use is low in these relationships due to scant perception of the risk of STIs and HIV. Comments touched on general obstacles to condom use, such as females' embarrassment in buying and carrying condoms and also males' and females' doubts about the effectiveness of condoms. Females said that many young women are embarrassed to buy condoms, and shopkeepers sometimes berate them for being promiscuous.

Participants attributed low levels of condom use to couples' misconception that cross-generational partners are not risky. Some noted that even if condoms are used at the beginning of relationships, they are often abandoned after some time, usually after a few sexual encounters.

Several participants explained that even if young women recognize the risk of cross-generational partners, they

are often unable to negotiate condom use with their older, more dominant partners who often insist on not wearing them. Some females explained that older men sometimes accuse younger partners of not trusting them and threaten to abandon the relationship if they insist on using condoms. Rather than lose the benefits of these relationships, most women give in to the demands of their older partners.

Most participants, both male and female, said that men dislike condoms and believe they reduce sexual pleasure. Even if men recognized the risks associated with these relationships, they believe, the men often refuse condoms in order to maintain the perceived pleasure.

Programmatic Opportunities

The findings from this PSI study suggest several opportunities for addressing the problems posed by cross-generational relationships.

Short-term strategies include developing behavior change communication programs that educate women and men about the risk of STIs and HIV in cross-generational relationships. Campaigns could encourage condom use and safer sexual practices within cross-generational relationships and teach young women condom negotiation skills with all partners. Programs could use positive role models to encourage young women to seek safer alternatives to cross-generational relationships, discuss problems among peers, and increase their sense of self-worth. Role models for men could discourage them from pursuing younger partners and suggest more appropriate methods for earning social rewards among peers.

Long-term strategies include improving young women's access to educational and career opportunities to decrease their need for entering into these relationships. Another is working with communities to determine the best approach for changing social norms and the acceptability of cross-generational relationships.

A full copy of Working Paper No. 52 entitled "Cross-Generational Relationships in Kenya: Couples' Motivations, Risk Perception for STIs/HIV and Condom Use" can be ordered from PSI by mail or through the PSI web site at www.psi.org. Click on "Resources," then "PSI Research," then type in the title of the Working Paper.