The aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of motivations for cross-generational relationships and how the perception of risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV affects condom use in Kenya. Eight focus-group discussions were conducted with women and 28 interviews were held with men in four Kenyan towns. Ethnograph 5.0 computer software was used for the analysis of data. Women’s primary incentive for engaging in such relationships is financial; men seek sexual gratification. Pressure from peers compels women to find older partners. Although some peers encourage such relationships, other groups, especially wives, same-aged boyfriends, and parents, disapprove of them. Couples are preoccupied by the threat of discovery. STI/HIV risk perception is low, and couples rarely use condoms. Material gain, sexual gratification, emotional factors, and recognition from peers override concern for STI/HIV risk. Women’s ability to negotiate condom use is compromised by age and economic disparities. Programmatic strategies include communicating information about such relationships’ STI/HIV risk, promoting consistent condom use, decreasing peer pressure to pursue such relationships, and improving women’s access to alternative sources of income.

Kim Longfield is Senior Researcher, Population Services International (PSI)/Asia, Wave Place – 18th Floor, 55 Wireless Road, Bangkok, 10330, Thailand. E-mail: klongfield@psiasia.org. Anne Glick is HIV/AIDS Technical Advisor, PSI, Kinshasa, Congo. At the time that this article was written, Margaret Waithaka was Research Manager, PSI/Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya. John Berman is Senior Director, AIDSMark, PSI, Washington, DC.
transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV in the region (Kelly 2001; Laga et al. 2001; Gregson et al. 2002; MacPhail et al. 2002).

In situations where economic conditions are difficult, young women engage in relationships with “sugar daddies,” older men who provide money or gifts in exchange for sex (UNICEF et al. 2002). Similar relationships have been documented between young men and older women; however, liaisons with “sugar mommies” do not appear to be as common (Barker and Rich 1992; Calvès et al. 1996). The literature provides no definitive definition of a sugar daddy or standard age difference between partners that constitutes sexual mixing. Several researchers, however, have used an age difference of ten or more years between older men and younger women to investigate the effects of age asymmetry in nonmarital partnerships on the risk of acquiring STIs and HIV (UNAIDS 2000; Laga et al. 2001; Gregson et al. 2002; Luke 2002 and 2003). A comprehensive literature review of quantitative studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa revealed that 12 percent to 25 percent of young women’s partners were ten years older or more (Luke and Kurz 2002). Likewise, a study conducted in Kenya found that among men older than 30 who reported having nonmarital partners, 25 percent had a partner at least ten years younger than themselves (Luke 2002). Luke and Kurz (2002) and the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (US Department of State 2004) term these relationships “cross-generational” to indicate a gap in age, in individual and social development, and in other opportunities between two partners.

Several factors within cross-generational relationships present increased risk of acquiring STIs/HIV. Risk perception of infection is generally low, and many men say they prefer young sexual partners because they consider young women to be free from HIV (Chinake et al. 2002; Summers et al. 2002). Young women appear more worried about becoming pregnant or about outsiders discovering their relationships with older men than they are about acquiring STIs/HIV (Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001). Condom use is inconsistent, and men are often unwilling to use condoms with younger partners (Sturdevant et al. 2001). Young women’s power to negotiate condom use is compromised by age disparities and economic dependence within such relationships (Mensch and Lloyd 1998; Rao Gupta 2000). Overall, men who engage in relationships with younger women are more likely to be infected with STIs or HIV compared with the women’s age-mate cohort, because they have experienced longer periods of sexual activity (Görgen et al. 1998; Kelly 2001; Laga et al. 2001). Cross-generational relationships also increase young men’s risk of acquiring an infection when their girlfriends maintain simultaneous relationships with older partners (Calvès et al. 1996; Gregson and Garnett 2002).

This study explores the dynamics of cross-generational relationships in Kenya. It describes women’s and men’s motivations for entering into such relationships, including the various personal, financial, and social rewards associated with such relationships. It also examines couples’ perception of risk of acquiring STIs/HIV and evaluates how low levels of risk perception affect sexual decisionmaking, particularly with regard to condom use. Based on the study’s findings, the authors recommend programmatic strategies for reducing young women’s risk of acquiring STIs/HIV, specifically that which accompanies cross-generational relationships.

Methods

Data were collected in June 2000 as part of a behavior-change communication strategy for young women in Kenya that addresses cross-generational relationships and their association with the risk of acquiring STIs and HIV/AIDS. Staff from Population Services International (PSI) in Kenya together with students from local universities collected the study data. A total of eight focus-group discussions were conducted with sexually active women aged 15–19 who were both in and out of school. Street mobilizers recruited participants and assessed their eligibility with a screening tool. Two focus-group discussions were held in each of four locations, representing both urban and rural locales: Nairobi (urban), Mombasa (urban), Kisumu (rural), and Meru (rural). Female moderators conducted the discussions in the lingua franca, and a note-taker and recruiter were present at each discussion.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 28 men aged 30 and older in the same four regions. Researchers decided to conduct interviews rather than discussion groups with the men in order to maintain their confidentiality and increase the likelihood of capturing men who participate in cross-generational relationships. Male interviewers screened and recruited participants at venues that the discussion-group participants identified as popular among men seeking younger female partners. Interviews were conducted in the lingua franca. Different discussion guides were used for discussions and interviews; however, both guides covered the same study themes. Discussions ranged across motivations for entering into cross-generational relationships, the perceived risks of doing so, relationship dynamics, and circumstances under which older men and younger women meet. All discussions and interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed into English. The authors completed data an-
analysis with the Ethnograph 5.0 software program to highlight common and divergent themes in study transcripts. As with all research, this study faced some limitations that must be taken into account when analyzing data and drawing conclusions from results. Recruiters may not have screened the men adequately for participation, and the locales in which they were recruited may not have been the most appropriate for data collection. As a result, the men who participated may have been ill prepared to discuss cross-generational relationships. Different methodologies were used to obtain information from female and male participants, which may have produced data that are not fully comparable. Transcriptions were sometimes incomplete or varied in quality, and interviewers might have benefited from additional training. Because the discussions were used to obtain data from young women, information about participants’ personal experiences is limited: The findings captured by this study reflect social norms rather than individual behaviors. Finally, as for any study reliant upon self-reported data, the potential exists for information bias, especially in underreporting stigmatized or risky behaviors.

Results

Participants’ comments reveal that cross-generational relationships are relatively common and that young women actively seek partners who are willing to spend money on them. Relationships are usually short-lived, and the men who pursue younger women do not appear to fit a sugar-daddy stereotype.

Prevalence of Cross-generational Relationships

Discussion-group participants stated that relationships between younger women and older men are common in their localities. Although none admitted to being involved in such relationships, most were quick to point out that they have friends or know other young women who engage in cross-generational sex. The majority of men interviewed reported that they had had a relationship outside of marriage at some point. Most denied ever having relationships with teenagers but admitted that they had been involved with women in their early twenties. Only one participant said that he was having an affair with a teenaged girl at the time of the interview. Some male participants thought that cross-generational relationships are especially common in urban areas.

Urban areas offer a very favorable environment for such affairs to flourish. In rural areas, these affairs are short-lived because the community soon discovers them. (Male consultant, Nairobi, aged 46)

Both male and female participants explained that, consistent with cultural norms, men are expected to initiate encounters with partners. Several female participants described methods young women use to meet older men, however. One strategy is to ask a man for a lift in his car and hope to be seduced. Other women described more direct methods for pursuing partners.

If the man dresses well, then she knows he’s got money. . . . So she says to herself, “This one, I’ll pursue until we meet.” The girl will ensure that she talks to him and starts a relationship. (Female, Nairobi, aged 15–19)

As mentioned above, the male study participants in cross-generational relationships did not fit the traditional sugar-daddy stereotype; they were not all married, wealthy, and aged 35–50, nor did they work at white-collar jobs. Women in the discussion groups listed police officers, matatu touts (assistants to minibus drivers), truck drivers, doctors, clerks, bankers, airport workers, and business executives as potential partners. Others noted that ordinary men in their neighborhoods or men whose wives live elsewhere could be partners. The majority of female participants said that older partners come in many varieties, but the most important criterion is that they have some money to spend on their partners.

When asked about traits men seek in young female partners, male participants also recognized the role money plays in cross-generational relationships and described as desirable partners women who were likely to need money to pay for school fees or to supplement their incomes. Many said that men prefer young women in college or in their final year of secondary school. If employed, young women usually work in low-paying jobs as maids, receptionists, secretaries, or telephone operators. Several male participants added that men prefer young women who appear innocent, who are well mannered, and who can keep relationships secret. They also described commonly preferred physical attributes including light skin, a nice figure, firm breasts, large buttocks, and large hips.

Relationship Dynamics

Participants explained how an older man’s gift giving is usually accompanied by the expectation that the young recipient will have sex with him. The period of time between initiating contact with partners and engaging in sex may range from a day to three months. Female participants stated that some young women feel obliged to sleep with men who provide them with gifts and money.
For around three months, he doesn’t demand anything. He keeps giving you things. Therefore, when he asks you to return the favor, you end up with a guilty conscience and you give him sex in return because you can’t return the money. (Female, Nairobi, aged 15–19)

When asked about the duration of cross-generational relationships, participants said that they could last for as little as a month or for as long as a lifetime. Nevertheless, most agreed that these types of relationships generally do not last long. Some participants explained that although cross-generational relationships may contain an emotional component, many are experimental affairs in which the man is pursuing a number of young women.

These things only go on for months [at a time]. You know—it’s to satisfy a kind of curiosity. After you’ve gone with her twice, three times at most, you want to dispose of her fast. You don’t keep these girls for long. After all, you’re married. (Male administrator, Nairobi, aged 36)

Several discussion and interview participants explained that these relationships often end when the man’s wife or the young women’s parents discover them. Women noted other reasons for the termination of cross-generational relationships, including men’s failure to honor their financial obligations or their too-frequent demands for sex.

Sometimes he can be dumped if he’s too demanding... if he always wants sex, like Mondays when you’re in class. (Female, Meru, aged 15–19)

Motivations for Engaging in Cross-generational Relationships

Both female and male participants recognized that primary motivations for engaging in cross-generational relationships are different for women and men, but that each partner stands to benefit. For young women, the main incentive is financial gain, whereas for men it is sexual gratification. Both women and men face peer pressure to enter into such relationships, and both seek emotional support from their partners.

Money and Gifts

Female participants explained that most young women pursue older partners who can provide them with money and gifts that are unavailable from partners of their own age. The amount of money a young woman expects could be as little as KShs 20 (US $0.25) or as much as KShs 5,000 (US $63). Because young men of their own age are usually still at school and have difficulty obtaining money themselves, many young women have concurrent relationships with older and same-age partners.

With a young man, it depends on his ability. If he can give you money, fine, but most of them usually don’t have money. So you’re forced to look for someone who has the ability to give you what you want. (Female, Mombasa, aged 15–19)

Most discussion-group participants remarked that young women use money from older partners to obtain essential items for themselves or for their families. They may engage in cross-generational relationships in order to secure funds to cover education-related expenses that parents cannot pay, such as school uniforms, fees, and books. Some said that young women often tell their families that they have taken a “casual” job to make ends meet. Participants said that even if their family members do not believe this explanation, most would not question the young women but would remain silent and continue to benefit from their assistance. Although most participants said that adults disapprove of cross-generational relationships, several believed that parents encourage such relationships by not actively discouraging their daughters from dating older men and by accepting without questions gifts that assist the family in times of need.

Female participants explained that although some young women have legitimate financial needs and seek assistance from older partners, most want to impress their peers and enjoy luxuries such as trendy clothing, hairstyles, jewelry, cosmetics, and toiletries, or outings to expensive restaurants that they cannot otherwise afford or that their parents refuse to or cannot provide. Some participants noted that special food treats such as French fries, cookies, ice cream, or chicken are sometimes enough to entice young women into encounters with older men. A few said that some young women exploit their partners by misrepresenting their financial need because they wish to receive additional funds for luxury items or pocket money.

Some girls are tough. [Their partners] can give them money to pay school fees, but instead they pocket it for their own personal use. (Female, Nairobi, aged 15–19)

Several women in the groups pointed out that older men use their financial security to bribe young women with money and luxury items and lure them into sexual relationships. Male participants echoed this argument and explained that men’s economic power allows them to cultivate relationships with young women. They also noted that without money, older men would be unable to attract such partners.
Money and influence make older men capitalize on power to take advantage of younger women. (Male consultant, Nairobi, aged 46)

In interviews, several men argued that older men recognize young women’s financial vulnerability and intentionally pursue them because they are less expensive to maintain than partners of their own age and because they make fewer financial demands than older women would. Some noted that young women are satisfied with simple gifts, such as dinner in a restaurant or a new lipstick, whereas older women may expect money for rent or other expensive items.

Sexual Gratification

While all participants agreed that young women pursue older partners for financial and material gain, male participants stated that sexual gratification is men’s primary and sometimes only motivation for pursuing cross-generational relationships. They explained that most men believe that sex and happiness are synonymous. They also feel that younger women are able to satisfy a man’s needs better than older partners, such as wives, can.

“If you’re married and moving around [having sex] with a woman who’s 15 or ten years younger than you are, what is your expectation? You won’t get married to her. She’s just there to satisfy you sexually. (Male consultant, Nairobi, aged 44)

Most male participants noted physical characteristics specific to young women that men find attractive and that they believe are uncommon in older women. Some said that young women are considered hot-blooded and fresh, and that their bodies are young and firm. They also described them as having “firm breasts” and “tender bodies” that are “nice to touch.” Some participants explained that men perceive cross-generational relationships as conquests. By engaging in sex with younger partners, older men assure themselves that they are still desirable and can enjoy sex as they did when they were younger.

It’s for the thrill and also to conquer. You know, it’s nice to conquer and assure yourself that you can still do what you used to do when you were a young man. (Male lawyer, Nairobi, aged 38)

Social Motivations

All female discussion-group participants mentioned peer pressure as a significant motivating factor for engaging in cross-generational relationships. They noted that young women who have older partners brag to their friends about their partners’ generosity with money, gifts, and outings. As a result, women can feel excluded from social circles and pursue older partners in order to “fit in.” Several described how young women serve as brokers for cross-generational relationships and help to find older partners for their friends. Men sometimes instigate such arrangements and network with younger women to find partners. Women may ask friends to solicit older partners, knowing the potential benefits of such relationships.

If it’s a friend who trusts you and she has a problem similar to yours, maybe a lack of money because her parents are poor, now she’ll try and get into a relationship like yours. (Female, Kisu-mu, aged 15–19)

Several women explained how older men pressure young women to participate in sexual relationships. They noted that although a young woman may not be interested initially, she may be pressured until she concedes. Some participants described instances in which extended family members pressure young relatives by organizing encounters with older men without explaining the arrangement to the young women. Family members, even in-laws, may expect to benefit financially, either through the man’s gifts to the young woman or through direct payments he makes to the family without her consent or knowledge.

After making the connection, your sister-in-law will tell you where you’ll meet the old man. She’ll take you there and go back home. . . . She tells you she’ll be back later, but she doesn’t come back. Whatever this man tells you to do, you do. If he tells you to go to bed with him, you have no choice because you don’t even know your way home. (Female, Nairobi, aged 15–19)

As with young women, men’s peers reward them for taking part in cross-generational relationships: Most male participants felt that men’s status among their peers is elevated when they are seen with younger, attractive women. Some argued that older men use their money to live vicariously through younger partners. By selecting the right type of partner, they can experience youth, beauty, and intellectual stimulation. They mentioned that some men select women based on their levels of education in order to enhance their own status among peers.

If you’re seen with a young girl, your friends say, “This guy, you know, he has such a good babe.” It’s for identification. It’s for status. (Male supervisor, Mombasa, aged 38)

Several men also noted a cultural tolerance for cross-generational relationships. They pointed out that tradition permits older men to use their finances for pursuing younger women if they so choose.

Volume 35 Number 2 June 2004 129
They get into this type of relationship because they want social status and recognition because society approves of that kind of behavior. (Male consultant, Nairobi, aged 46)

**Emotional Motivations**

Parents’ level of involvement in their daughters’ lives may be related to the young women’s participation in cross-generational relationships. Although some young women who date older partners have strict parents or guardians pressuring them to leave home, others have guardians who are uninvolved in their lives, leaving them to do what they please. Some discussion-group participants stated that young women who are orphans or who live in households that do not provide them with adequate emotional support are more likely than other young women to seek older partners. They explained that daughters of parents who are neglectful may feel that they have no alternative but to find partners who can provide the emotional support they need.

The girls want to be “spoiled” [pampered] by these men. You want him to treat you like a baby—pay constant attention to you. (Female, Mombasa, aged 15–19)

Some female participants believed that young women become involved with older partners to find mentors who can help them work through problems and provide advice about life. They often turn to older men for help in solving problems, making them important, trusted confidants. They explained that many young women prefer older partners because they are perceived to be more mature than young men, that because they have wives, older men know how to take care of women and make them feel important and needed.

Some of the men interviewed for the study suggested that men who married young are likely to pursue cross-generational relationships because they feel cheated out of sexual experiences they should have had when they were younger. In their opinion, engaging in sex with young partners can compensate for lost opportunities. They remarked that men want to go out and have fun the way they did when they were young, but their wives prefer to stay at home. As a result, they may look for younger partners who are willing to go to clubs or to go out dancing.

A few men suggested that some older men are dissatisfied with their marriages because their wives do not dote on them as they did before the responsibilities of family life became paramount. Some explained that men look for partners who will sympathize with their frustrations. One participant joked about how men refer to their younger partners as “ISPs” (independent sex providers) or “stress managers.” A few pointed out that younger women can help men through midlife crises or difficult marriages. Men also appear to enjoy being the older, more experienced partner in a relationship because young women often revere and admire them. Such a dominant position, they said, can provide a man with a much-desired ego boost.

[Men] also need to show their experience in handling women, and that experience can only be shown to some of these younger [women] . . . for men, the ego dominates. (Male lawyer, Nairobi, aged 38)

**Risks Associated with Cross-generational Relationships**

Despite the advantages young women and older men associate with cross-generational relationships, participants of both sexes admitted that such partnerships carry substantial risks. The majority of participants agreed that the risk of discovery is the most significant risk. Other risks mentioned include pregnancy, emotional abandonment, and financial costs. Of all the risks mentioned, acquiring a sexually transmitted infection or HIV was given the lowest priority.

**Discovery of Relationships**

The discussion-group participants spoke about women’s preoccupation with being discovered in cross-generational relationships. They explained that even though some peer groups encourage such relationships, many people, especially wives, parents, and same-aged boyfriends usually disapprove of them. Young women often lie about their outings and the source of pocket money and gifts. Couples in such relationships generally have sex in discreet locations, such as hotels and guesthouses, or in cars and “green lodges” (bushes). Some reported that young women sometimes skip school to meet their partners, and a few said that young women tell their parents that they are attending funerals when they have, in fact, arranged to meet older partners.

When a wife becomes jealous of her husband’s emotional involvement with a young partner or feels threatened by the family’s lowered financial resources when her husband gives money to his partner, she may become violent toward the young woman. Several female participants told stories of wives’ stalking, threatening, and attacking their husbands’ young partners. Such attacks may involve beatings, knifings, poisonings, or scalding with hot water.

Some [wives] can beat you up. You meet somewhere and she tells you, “You’re the one who...
stole my husband. Today I’ve got you.” So you start fighting on the streets. (Female, Nairobi, aged 15–19)

Young women also fear violence from boyfriends and disapproving parents as well as emotional abandonment if their relationships with older men are discovered. Female participants said that both partners in such relationships may become victims of attack from these individuals. Young women may jeopardize relationships with their family members who disapprove of older partners. When their boyfriends find out about their older partners, the boyfriends usually terminate their relationships with the young women.

When the wife discovers [an affair], the man silences her by issuing threats, such as telling the wife that he’s taking the [young] lady as a co-wife. (Male accountant, Meru, aged 34)

Men are most fearful of their wives’ discovering their affairs. Wives may leave and take the children, dissolving the family unit. When asked how a man might mitigate risks associated with the discovery of a cross-generational relationship, many male participants recommended that he end the affair and return to his family responsibilities. Others suggested that the man pay more attention to his family while better hiding his extramarital relationships. A couple of participants said that a man can threaten his wife with the possibility of taking a younger partner as a second wife if his wife makes his having an extramarital relationship too difficult.

Several discussion-group participants thought that men who acknowledge responsibility for such pregnancies commonly pay for abortions. Some male participants agreed, but noted that paying for an abortion is the extent of many men’s assistance. The women participants pointed out that when young women are left to resolve pregnancies alone, they may undergo unsafe abortions or become suicidal rather than face their families and communities.

When a girl becomes pregnant and the man denies responsibility, she’s left wondering what to do . . . so she decides it’s better to have an abortion. That’s why some girls die in the process of getting an abortion. (Female, Nairobi, aged 15–19)

Pregnancy

The majority of female participants spoke about the risk of pregnancy associated with cross-generational relationships. They noted that when young unmarried women become pregnant in Kenya, they can be expelled from school and kicked out of their parents’ homes, and they may jeopardize their marital prospects with same-aged partners. Some female participants believed that, despite young women’s hopes for financial support from older partners, many men deny their responsibility for extramarital pregnancies. Many male participants agreed and said that the burden of pregnancy rests primarily on women because men usually have children with their wives and are unwilling to support their children born of other relationships.

Several discussion-group participants thought that men who acknowledge responsibility for such pregnancies commonly pay for abortions. Some male participants agreed, but noted that paying for an abortion is the extent of many men’s assistance. The women participants pointed out that when young women are left to resolve pregnancies alone, they may undergo unsafe abortions or become suicidal rather than face their families and communities.

When a girl becomes pregnant and the man denies responsibility, she’s left wondering what to do . . . so she decides it’s better to have an abortion. That’s why some girls die in the process of getting an abortion. (Female, Nairobi, aged 15–19)

Some female participants described methods young women use to mitigate the risk of pregnancy, including oral contraceptives and Norplant®. Others mentioned that some women avoid sex with older partners during their fertile periods; the number of young women who understand the correct method for determining the days when they are most likely to conceive is unclear, however. Several male participants reported that some men try to avoid the risk of pregnancy by seeking moderately educated women who understand contraceptive methods. These men believe that educated women are less likely than uneducated women to entrap men with unexpected pregnancies.

Abandonment

Female participants described young women’s fear of being abandoned by older partners. They explained that women sometimes grow emotionally or financially dependent upon older partners and suffer severe hardship when such relationships end. Several participants were scornful about men’s emotional commitment to cross-generational relationships, however, and said that older men “dump” their young partners once their own sexual needs are satisfied.

In some instances, young women adopt a strategy of multipartnering with older partners and same-aged boyfriends. Discussion-group participants explained that such young women maintain relationships with boyfriends in case older partners abandon them.

You think you’re the only one who loves this [older] man, but you forget that he can give presents and a good time to someone else. So, even if you have an old boyfriend, you must have a young boyfriend, too. (Female, Meru, aged 15–19)

Financial Constraints

Many men spoke in their interviews of the monetary costs associated with cross-generational relationships. Some explained that young partners may demand more money than their partners initially expected, causing men to finance such extra expenditures by cutting their household budgets. Such measures affect the amount of money available for their children’s education, health care, and food, and for household goods.
Relationships are expensive. They take away from the man’s family, making the spouse suffer. (Male primary-school teacher, Kisumu, aged 30)

Some male participants also reported that having insufficient funds to support both their young partners and their families can be humiliating, resulting in heavy social pressure for them to demonstrate their ability to provide for multiple partners. Moreover, this sort of financial stress may aggravate a man’s relationship with his wife and increase the likelihood of divorce or separation.

**STIs and HIV**

Most of the study participants believed that couples give little consideration to their risk of acquiring STIs/HIV. Young women and older men perceive their partners in cross-generational relationships to be at low risk for transmitting infection. Young women believe older men to be less risky than their own age-mates because such men are married and do not “move around” (have multiple sexual partners) often. Few young women make the connection between the increased risk of contracting STIs/HIV and their older partners’ infidelity. Some female participants also noted that many young women do not understand their older partners’ sexual histories and inaccurately assess the risk that accompanies such relationships.

Several male participants stated that despite knowing about STIs and HIV, some men believe that young women pose less risk for infection than do older women. Men sometimes argue that young women are a low-risk group because they are “innocent,” sexually inexperienced, or have had few sexual partners.

They believe they’re the first person to have sexual activities with these ladies. . . . [They believe] they’re very tender [sexually inexperienced], and that they can’t transmit diseases. (Male matatu tout, Nairobi, aged 35)

Other factors, including emotions, finances, and sexual desire, can obscure partners’ perception of risk of acquiring STIs/HIV. According to female participants, young women’s emotional attachment to older partners can interfere with this perception. Also, women may rank other needs above the risk of STIs and HIV infection, for example, their financial need or their desire to be accepted among their peers. For men, an additional obstacle to perceiving personal risk for STIs/HIV is denial. Some male participants said that men are so anxious to have sex with young partners that they deny or do not consider their risk of infection.

Fatalism is another factor impeding couples’ perception of risk. Several female participants stated that some young women deny that they are at risk for infection or they maintain a fatalistic attitude, arguing that there is nothing they can do to prevent infection with STIs/HIV. Likewise, many male participants thought that some men resign themselves to becoming infected, believing that they have already led a full life and it is natural to die when you are older, even if you die from AIDS.

There are men who’ve made it in life. They’ve made a shilling, and what they want is to spend [their money] and relieve some stress. . . . So even if they die now, it doesn’t matter because they’ve had the better part of their lives. (Male journalist, Nairobi, aged 40)

**Condom Use**

Most of the study participants agreed that condom use remains low in cross-generational relationships. They attributed low levels of use to couples’ misperception that cross-generational partners are at low risk for STIs and HIV infection. Some participants noted that even if a couple uses condoms at the beginning of their relationship, they often abandoned use after a time, usually after a few sexual encounters.

Several participants of both sexes explained that even if young women recognize the risk of infection while participating in cross-generational relationships, they are often unable to negotiate condom use with their older partners because men are reluctant to wear condoms, dislike them, and believe that they reduce sexual pleasure. Men often employ their dominant position in relationships by refusing to use condoms, sometimes accusing younger partners of not trusting them. A man may threaten to break off the relationship if his partner insists on using a condom. Rather than lose the financial and social rewards they depend on in such relationships, most women acquiesce and forgo use.

The man sometimes doesn’t want to use condoms . . . and if you don’t want him to send you away, you go without a condom. (Female, Mombasa, aged 15–19)

**Conclusions**

The participants in this study reported that young women’s primary incentive for becoming sexually involved with older partners is financial and material gain, whereas men commonly seek younger partners for sexual gratification. Similar to the findings reported by Luke (2002), this research shows that Kenyan men who pursue younger women do not fit a sugar-daddy stereotype; rather, they...
come from a variety of social and professional backgrounds. It also demonstrates that young women do not perceive themselves as victims of older men but actively seek older partners who can provide them with luxuries and financial support. Although some peer groups encourage cross-generational relationships, couples go to great lengths to ensure that wives, same-aged boyfriends, and disapproving parents do not discover their involvements.

As other studies have done, this research identified as emotional motivations for young women’s participation in cross-generational relationships the desire to find a surrogate parent, a mature partner, a supportive mentor, and emotional fulfillment (Meekers and Calvès 1997). It revealed, however, that men, too, have emotional motivations for pursuing younger partners, such as regaining a sense of their youth, escaping household pressures, and relieving stress. Increased status among peers is also a powerful social reward for participating in cross-generational relationships, and men make use of the existing cultural tolerance to justify their pursuit of young women.

Cross-generational couples are preoccupied with generalized risks such as fear of discovery, of pregnancy, of emotional abandonment, and of economic hardship rather than of their personal risk of acquiring STIs and HIV. In general, young women perceive older men to be low-risk partners because they believe older men are not promiscuous and remain faithful to younger partners and wives. Men believe that young partners are at low risk of having STIs/HIV because they lack sexual experience and have had few sexual partners. Even when young women acknowledge the risk older partners pose for transmitting STIs/HIV, they have difficulty negotiating condom use, especially when partners assert their dominant position in such relationships and refuse to use condoms. Older men cite such reasons for resisting condom use as decreased pleasure and a general dislike for the method. When young women maintain multiple relationships with older partners and boyfriends of their same age, young men’s risk for infection is increased.

The findings from this study suggest several opportunities for interventions targeting young women and older men in sexual relationships. Additional research on multipartnering and methods for improving couples’ risk perception for STIs/HIV could provide information necessary for program design. Immediate programmatic options include disseminating basic messages about the increased risk of STIs/HIV associated with cross-generational relationships. Campaigns should be mounted to encourage condom use and safer sexual practices within cross-generational relationships and to teach young women skills for negotiating condom use with all types of partners. Programs could also use positive role models to encourage young women to seek safer alternatives to cross-generational relationships, to discuss problems among peers, and to increase young women’s sense of self-worth (PSI/Kenya 2000). Role models for men could discourage them from pursuing younger partners and enticing them with money and gifts for sexual relationships. Role models could also suggest more appropriate methods for earning social rewards among peers than cultivating relationships with young partners. Potential long-term interventions could include improving young women’s access to educational and career opportunities and offering them sources of income independent of men. Programs should also work with communities to determine the best approach for changing social norms and decreasing the acceptability of cross-generational relationships.

References


Acknowledgments

Funding for this study was provided by United States Agency for International Development through the AIDSMark Project and PSI/Kenya. Staff from PSI/Kenya and students from local universities collected the study data. The authors thank the communities of Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, and Meru for their cooperation and participation in the study. The authors are indebted to Nancy Luke, Kathleen Kurz, and Josh Barrett for their help with the literature review and to Steven Chapman, Dominique Meekers, Sohail Agha, Andrea Plautz, Megan Klein, Robert Kelly, and Dhaval Patel for their useful comments. The authors are also grateful to Karen Eddleman and Rebecca Cramer for editing.