The Sugar Daddy Syndrome:
African Campaigns Battle Ingrained Phenomenon

“The social norms in many developing countries that determine what is ‘tolerable’ for a man to do to a woman have also created an environment in which girls as young as 15 are encouraged to seek financial or material gain by entering empty sexual relationships with men a generation or more older than them. These ‘cross-generational’ relationships are common across the continent of Africa, and result in young women exchanging their bodies for modest financial support — such as lunch, a cell phone, plastic shoes or half a liter of fuel.”
— Ashley Judd, June 2005

In June 2005, PSI Board Member Ashley Judd spoke before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee on behalf of abused and vulnerable women and highlighted the devastating repercussions of a phenomenon called “cross-generational sex” — a non-marital, sexual relationship between partners with at least a ten year age difference. More commonly known as “sugar daddy” relationships, these are thought to be a major reason why HIV infection rates are up to six times higher for teen-aged girls than their male counterparts of the same age. PSI campaigns in Africa are fighting cross-generational sex in several ways: empowering young women to say no to dangerous sexual relationships, changing societal views of the practice and, in one case, offering young women economic alternatives to trading their bodies for material and financial gain.

Ms. Judd’s testimony drew needed attention to an issue that PSI has studied extensively. A comprehensive review of studies in sub-Saharan Africa revealed that 12% to 25% of young women’s sexual partners were at least ten years older.1 Social and community acceptance of this practice is a significant reason why more than one-third of teenaged girls in some regions of eastern and southern Africa are living with HIV. Changing social norms is necessary to reduce HIV infection among young women, and PSI attempts to do so through educational programs targeting young girls, older men and the community.

Identifying the Problem
In 2000, PSI studied the motivations of Kenyan women and men to engage in cross-generational relationships and their risk perceptions of sexually transmitted infections. Since that time, other studies have concluded that such relationships are common throughout Africa and contribute to the high HIV infection rates among young women.

Older men seek status and prestige among their peers by having one or more young girlfriends. Anecdotal evidence suggests that they are motivated by having regular access to sex and a belief that young girls are less expensive companions.

Financial gain was identified as the biggest incentive for women to engage in cross-generational relationships. Many girls are encouraged to seek out these sugar daddies by their peers, while the community overlooks and sometimes even approves of these relationships. Mothers have been known to encourage such relationships so that a daughter will be less of a burden on strained resources or will have more money to spend on the family.

In terms of risk, young girls often believe that older men are not infected, assuming that these men have been faithful to their wives and their younger partners. Likewise, many older men believe that the younger the girl is, the less likely she is to be HIV-positive, and view young girls as “innocent” and sexually inexperienced, calling them “clean” and “pure” when in reality, the younger the female, the more biologically vulnerable she is to HIV infection. Young girls are more likely to be recently infected and pass on the virus. In addition, men control the conditions of sexual intercourse, including contraceptive use. Studies show that greater age differences in partners indicate a significant increase in unsafe behaviors, including non-use of condoms and non-discussion of HIV.

PSI has started programs to address this phenomenon in Uganda, Cameroon and Kenya. These campaigns focus on reaching young women, their parents and older male partners. PSI recognizes the importance of positive role models for men and works to enlist men of stature, such as government officials and members of the clergy, to spread the message that taking advantage of girls is wrong and that cross-generational sex can lead to HIV infection. For example, Uganda’s Minister of Ethics and Integrity Tim Lwanga is featured in messages urging men to “stop preying on young girls.”

Empowering Young Women in Uganda

PSI launched Go Getters clubs for young university women in 2004, with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Through September 2005, the clubs worked with women in their first year of university and used peer education to impart life skills, raise awareness of HIV risk, cultivate confidence and encourage young women to look beyond short-term gratification and set long-term goals. Sixty peer educators were placed at three main universities in Kampala and trained 669 women. Key activities were presentations by female role models, career building activities and long-term goal setting. Providing job skills and employment opportunities gives tangible alternatives to cross-generational sex, so PSI/Uganda started working with the private sector to secure internships and other opportunities for the members. Fifteen organizations signed onto the program, including the Office of the First Lady, Coca-Cola and the country’s two leading newspapers. More than 40 girls found employment.

PSI/Uganda also collaborated with community and political leaders and faith-based organizations, while mass media campaigns worked to create stigma against cross-generational relationships.

Program managers recognize the need for these messages to be expanded to other urban areas and adapted for rural areas, with more emphasis on boys and men and the role they play in stopping cross-generational sex. PSI hopes to restart this promising program.

Helping Young Girls Say “No” in Cameroon

Through its 100% Jeune adolescent reproductive health campaign, PSI’s affiliate in Cameroon, the Association Camerounaise pour le Marketing Social (ACMS), encourages abstinence, fidelity, partner reduction and correct and consistent condom use among 15- to 24-year-old youth. Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), ACMS’s key partner in the campaign, works with girls that drop out of school due to pregnancy. The tackling of social norms that have made cross-generational sex a common practice was identified as a priority of the campaign. With funding from West Africa Ambassador’s Aid Fund, 100% Jeune and GTZ are implementing the campaign in collaboration with government ministries, church and youth groups, volunteer agencies, United Nations agencies and legal advisors. The key objectives are to break the silence, raise public awareness of the dangers involved and change societal views. In June 2005, Professor Fru Aguafor III, secretary general at the Ministry of Public Health, launched the “No to Sugar Daddies, No to AIDS” campaign. The first phase highlights the dangers of sugar daddy relationships and society’s complicity in this practice.

A television, radio and print campaign focuses on two themes. The first is the practice of cross-generational sex itself, how it is “winked at” and the danger of HIV transmission, with the message “Sugar Daddy + Young Girl = Danger.” The second theme addresses the role of the parents, with the message that “keeping quiet, letting go, is being an accomplice.”

The baseline research findings have proven to be a powerful tool in presenting the problem to youth and to business, religious and political leaders in seminars that hammer home the message that while poverty may be offered as an excuse for the girls, there is no excuse for the men involved. Following one such seminar, the Archbishop of Douala spoke out against cross-generational sex in his Sunday sermon. Faith-based organizations working through the National AIDS Committee have since adopted the theme “No to Sugar Daddies, No to AIDS” as their key message for the upcoming year in the fight against AIDS. Both the ad campaign and the seminars have been well covered by the local media, further provoking societal reflection on the phenomenon.

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- Bottom Line Health Impact
- Private Sector Speed and Efficiency
- Decentralization, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship
- Long-term Commitment to the People We Serve