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Seeking a “sponyo”: insights into motivations and risks around intergenerational transactional sex among adolescent boys and girls in Kenya

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Abstract

Purpose: Intergenerational transactional sex (ITS) occurs in Sub-Saharan Africa within the context of widespread poverty and limited employment opportunities. We examined how adolescents describe these relationships, why their peers engage in ITS, and what repercussions adolescents' shoulder as a result.

Methods: We conducted 14 focus group discussions with boys and girls (N=120) ages 15–19 in informal settlement communities in Kisumu, Kenya. We employed a Framework Approach to guide data analysis.

Results: Adolescents referred to a relatively well-off older partner in ITS relationships as a 'sponsor'. Poverty proved the main driver of ITS. Boys and girls noted family and peer pressure to have a 'better life' via sponsors who provided for three levels of need: urgent (food), critical (school fees), and material (clothes). Adolescents described multiple risks, including 'no power' to negotiate condom use. Repercussions included dropping out of school due to community stigma, 'abandonment' in the event of pregnancy, and unsafe abortions.

Conclusions: Adolescents face the difficult choice between the need for money to contribute to their families' income and the discomfort and health risks of a sponsor relationship. The pressure

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to have a sponsor was higher among out-of-school adolescents and adolescent mothers, due to heightened poverty and vulnerability. Structural interventions, such as eliminating school fees, could help reduce adolescents' perceived need to acquire sponsors. Our findings suggest a need to update guidelines for sexual and reproductive health counseling in schools and community settings, to openly discuss why ITS is so commonplace and engage in risk reduction conversations with adolescents.

Keywords

adolescents; transactional sex; intergenerational; Kenya; HIV

INTRODUCTION

In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), intergenerational transactional sex (ITS) relationships occur within the context of widespread poverty and limited employment opportunities. "Transactional sex" (TS) comes from a social scientific understanding of non-commercial relationships motivated by an implicit assumption or direct agreement of sexual activity for material gain or economic support.¹⁻³ Unlike commercial sex work where sex workers set monetary compensation terms that clients accept or negotiate, TS typically lacks formality and occurs within ongoing relationships.^{1,4} 'Intergenerational' describes an age gap of 15 or more years between partners.¹ ITS is characterized by deeply rooted social and cultural power imbalances that lead to elevated HIV risk through inability to negotiate condom use, maintaining multiple partners for maximum financial gain, threat of sexual and/or physical violence, and belief that more "responsible" older men are unlikely to have HIV.⁵⁻¹⁰

Poverty and gender inequity contribute to many girls in SSA engaging in ITS, yet few studies have explored boys' experiences.^{11,12} Research conducted in the Great Lake Region documented widespread ITS, despite being socially stigmatized for girls, with evidence linking the practice to increased HIV risk and prevalence.¹³⁻²¹ The Maneno Yetu ("Our Words") study conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) to understand the context of sexual and reproductive health for adolescents in Kisumu, Kenya. We present findings from a sub-analysis with the objectives of learning how adolescents describe ITS relationships, why their peers engage in ITS, and how they view the benefits and repercussions incurred in these relationships.

METHODS

Setting

We conducted FGDs in each of the four informal settlement communities in Kisumu, Kenya: Obunga, Manyatta, Bandani, and Nyalenda. Community members were primarily Luo and Luhya ethnicity. High poverty characterized the communities, with primary economic activities being fish trade, food market, *boda boda* (motorbike) transport, and other informal employment. Residents were highly mobile, migrating between urban settings and rural family lands for work, education, and family reasons.^{22,23} Lack of sanitation and clean water, overcrowding, and overburdened medical systems contributed to residents' general poor health.

Participants

Kenya-based research staff solicited participant referrals from community health volunteers (CHVs). We purposefully sampled participants based on age, sex and school attendance status. Adolescents ages 18–19 years self-consented. For adolescents ages 15–17 years, staff organized home visits to obtain parental consent. The Kenya-based team conducted FGDs at central community halls. Participants received a KSH 300 (\$3 USD) transport reimbursement. Confidentiality was agreed during informed consent and revisited at the start of FGD.

We conducted 14 FGDs with 120 participants, each with 8–10 participants. FGDs were held with groups of girls ages 15–17 (2), girls ages 18–19 (2), boys ages 15–17 (3), boys ages 18–19 (3), adolescent mothers (1), out-of-school boys (2), and out-of-school girls (1). Table 1 presents participants' demographic characteristics.

Data Collection

FGDs were conducted February–April 2019, primarily in Dholuo and Kiswahili. Each FGD lasted approximately 90 minutes and had a facilitator and notetaker sex and ethnicity matched with participants. The Kenyan research team received training on FGD facilitation and data analysis from US-based social scientists (SZH and CA) through intensive in-person qualitative research workshops and weekly meetings. FGD facilitation was tailored to build iteratively on emergent themes.

The Kenyan and US-based research teams collaboratively designed the discussion guide to explore adolescent relationships and sexual and reproductive health. The Kenyan research team designed three vignettes to reflect common experiences of Kenyan adolescents, specifically sex in return for good grades, school fees or other monetary gains. The vignettes included questions to generate conversation around sensitive material, asking whether the stories reflected participants' experiences and/or that of their peers.

Ethics

The study received approval from the University of California, San Francisco and Kenya Medical Research Institute institutional review boards.

Data Analysis

A Framework Approach guided data analysis due to its structured and phased approach, making it well suited for multi-country team analysis.²⁴ FGDs were recorded and transcribed verbatim, then translated into English. The Kenya and US-based teams conducted co-analysis during all phases. We used Dedoose to organize and code data. Each transcript was double-blind coded and inconsistencies resolved under the supervision of the lead author. During data immersion, team members read and re-read transcripts and noted follow-up probes for subsequent FGDs. We next developed a codebook using a combination of deductive codes (i.e., transactional sex) and inductive codes derived from findings (e.g., community attitudes and perceptions). We revised the codebook as needed to improve intercoder reliability.

ITS and specifically ‘sponsor’ relationships emerged as a strategy for adolescents to alleviate the impacts of poverty. The vernacular term ‘sponsor’, which adolescents used more commonly than ‘sugar daddy’ or ‘sugar mummy’, seemed to shift the tone of ITS from previous research to center adolescent volition. Our analysis homed in on understanding how ‘sponsor relationships’ became so commonplace, why adolescents engaged in these relationships, and how they benefited or incurred repercussions as a result. We analyzed code reports on ‘transactional sex and sponsors’, community norms and perceptions, gender violence, and pregnancy and tabled data around key emerging themes such as risks and benefits of ITS. As a final stage, we drafted memos that expanded on tabled textual excerpts and examined the interrelationships between community norms, parental influence, and adolescent engagement in sponsor relationships. We examined different patterns by age, gender, and school status.

RESULTS

Our main themes examined poverty as a driver of sponsor relationships and repercussions that adolescents shouldered as a result. Within those main themes, we broke down ‘poverty’ into three levels of need and described ways that family and peers pressured adolescents into engaging in sponsor relationships. Sub-themes around negative consequences resulting from sponsor relationships centered on sexual health and social exclusion. We further highlighted the perceived greater need for sponsors among mothers and out-of-school adolescents.

Overview of ‘sponsor’ relationships

A ‘sponsor’ relationship is generally between a relatively well-off older man/woman and an adolescent girl/boy. Of note, the participants only described heterosexual relationships, which may be due to the criminalization of homosexuality in Kenya, high levels of homophobia, and resulting stigma to discuss the topic in group setting. Adolescents recounted an ease in meeting sponsors, with adults generally initiating a conversation that could lead to a relationship. Girls in particular described sponsors directly pursuing them, approaching them in public or through groups on social media, designed specifically to connect sponsors to adolescents. Peer influence could normalize sponsor relationships, making them seem appealing and less intimidating.

Poverty as a Driver of Sponsor Relationships

Pressing Poverty: Family Pressure for Basic Goods—Poverty proved the main driver for adolescents to engage in sponsor relationships. Kisumu informal settlements have limited educational and economic opportunities, lending heightened appeal to the monetary compensation and gifts that sponsors offered adolescents. Adolescents described varying degrees of need and desired support from sponsors, with out-of-school adolescents and adolescent mothers emphasizing the role of sponsors in paying for food and school fees, while in-school adolescents desired clothes and material goods. Food was the most critical need, followed by school fees, then clothing or other items.

In the most impoverished households, both girls and boys noted a combination of family pressure and a sense of duty to contribute income might lead them to engage a sponsor.

Participants noted that in Luo culture, the first-born child has a responsibility to help their parents, adding another layer of pressure to obtain food or money for groceries.

Maybe your parents have begged food from the community until the community is tired of them. You can refuse but what next?...There are only two things, either you steal or sacrifice and have sex with a sponsor so that your family can have a better life. It will not be written on your back! After all your siblings will be happy and you will study and achieve what you want in life... You will have to because you are the firstborn in your family. – **Girl, age 19, out-of-school, Manyatta**

Especially in families that lacked resources for basic necessities, adolescents described that parents will take the money without asking any questions. They might ask where you got it and “scold you,” but out of “desperation” the parents take the money regardless.

For boys... (laughter) young boys go for these sugar mummies because they have no money and back at home, his family is poor so he will decide to accept the sugar mummy so that he can get some money and take to his parents. – **Boy, age 18, out-of-school, Nyalenda**

While most participants characterized family pressure to find a sponsor as implicit, in some cases the pressure on daughters was explicit. One participant shared that a mother in her community prepared her daughter for a sponsor by taking her to the health clinic to obtain birth control. This story resonated with other girls who noted that parents who encouraged or forced their children into sponsor relationships acted in the context of limited options.

Some [parents] will agree because the man has money. They will not mind spoiling your life so long as they can get the basic needs. That is a situation whereby you will find a parent taking you for family planning once you have told them that so as to prevent pregnancy and those things. And then they will push you, ‘You can just go because I have protected you from pregnancy. Go and bring me money.’ – **Girl, age 19, out-of-school, Manyatta**

For adolescents living with extended family, the need to raise money to cover unmet basic needs was more pronounced. Several participants noted cases of orphaned adolescents who resorted to sponsor relationships for food, and for girls, menstrual hygiene products. A young mother noted below how her friend encouraged her to get a ‘boyfriend’ who could help pay for these basic needs.

I know of myself, not anyone (giggles). After my parents died, I stayed with my brother but it was not easy staying with him. I was still a student. So there is this one time I had my periods but I did not have sanitary towels. I went to my brother and asked him to buy for me sanitary towels but he was harsh same to his wife, so I went to my friend and asked her what I should do. She told me to get a boyfriend who can be buying for me sanitary towels. – **Girl, age 19, mother, Nyalenda**

Both boys and girls described the difficult choice between the need for money to contribute to their families’ income and the sacrifice involved in having sex with an adult to obtain

money. Adolescents talked about a tension - or “50–50 situation” - where you want to “support your mother,” yet a relationship with a sponsor carries many potential risks.

A young boy will accept [the risks] so that he can get money and take to his parents so that his siblings can eat. He doesn't do it because he likes but because of the circumstances back at home. – **Boy, age 18, out-of-school, Nyalenda**

While community and social norms discourage peer-to-peer dating as a distraction from studies, families frequently supported or turned a blind eye to sponsor relationships if they were the only way to get money for food. Tension between an urgent need for financial resources and risk of stigma complicated the adolescents' decision-making around sponsor relationships, as described above. Participants attested to family pressure to engage with a sponsor for both boys and girls, although it was more explicit or heightened for girls.

School fees and building towards a better future—Second only to the need for food, a desire to build a better future for themselves and their families via education or employment drove adolescents to engage in sponsor relationships. Among out-of-school participants and adolescent mothers, school fees were the most commonly discussed compensation, after groceries. Paying school fees for themselves or siblings came up as an urgent reason to engage with a sponsor. In highlighting the importance of school fees, adolescents emphasized completing secondary school as a goal to lead to future opportunity and a way out from sponsor relationships.

Some parents will agree with this because they are very poor and this person has offered to pay school fees...if I was a mother and I didn't have money, I will just allow my daughter to go and get school fees...due to poverty. – **Girl, age 19, out-of-school, Manyatta**

In an environment where employment is scarce, adolescents, particularly boys, compared securing a sponsor to having a “job.” Boys noted you would have to dedicate yourself to pleasing the sponsor, since ‘*it is your good work that will keep you there. Hard work pays.*’ Some out-of-school boys even spoke in hopeful terms about the potential of a time-limited sponsor relationship allowing them to save for their future or start their own business.

I would open an account, so she will be giving me money and I save because I know that this one also has a lifespan, there will be a time that I will leave, and I cannot leave if I haven't saved some money that can help me in the future. Therefore, for my goals, I can even draw a calendar that if it reaches a given date I should be having this kind of money...so even if I leave I can start a business. – **Boy, age 17, out-of-school, Bandani**

Notably, the appeal of sponsors to pay for school fees or to help secure employment was discussed more frequently with out-of-school compared to in-school adolescents.

Clothes and other material goods—In-school adolescents described a more materialistic drive for sponsor relationships. Perhaps due to lesser need for food and educational fees, in-school girls noted a desire for fashionable clothes, perfume, or the latest hairstyles as a reason to engage with sponsors. Girls noted that with access to the latest

music videos, many of their peers seek sponsors so that they can dress like “Beyonce” and “Rihanna.”

There are so many things they can give you not only money, something like a phone, the latest phone like Oppo, iPhones. They know that at this age we want the best and if we can't get it then there is no relationship. There are some men who can even afford to give you a car, whether you have gone to a driving school or not. Apart from cars, there are very expensive jewelry and expensive shoes. – **Girl, age 18, Bandani**

In-school boys fantasized about sponsors gifting expensive things, ranging from cell phones to shoes or even cars. Both in-school boys and girls indicated gifting playing a key role in romantic courtship with their peers, with a few boys noting this could lead to seeking ‘sugar mummies’ in order to afford to date a girl their age.

There is this situation, you know you are a man and then you feel that there are certain things that a man needs to do. Yes, you have a good girlfriend and she is willing to do for you everything but for you to avoid embarrassment and to be recognized you look for a ‘sponsee’ to at least to give you money so that the girl can see that she is dating a ‘bull’. The ‘sponsee’ is pouring for you and you want to use this money to take this girl out because she has been taking you to other places. You need to show her that ‘babe ‘I can also do this and that “so that she doesn't look down on you. – **Boy, age 19, Manyatta**

Boys talked about how their female peers seek “money” and “nice things” by dating whoever could buy them the most expensive gifts. Discussion in the in-school girl groups attested to this, particularly 17 and 18-year-old girls joking about how “girls love nice things” and will select a male partner based on what he can provide.

‘You have no power to say anything’: Repercussions of engaging in a sponsor relationship

While sponsor relationships held the promise of access to urgently needed money participants discussed serious risks and consequences that could result from these relationships. Girls seemed to shoulder the largest risks, while boys worried about the “sugar mummy” getting “too clingy,” attaching beyond the expected confines of the sponsor relationship. One participant noted “adverse outcomes” occurred when boys tried to leave the relationship, while girls described being “abandoned” by older men.

Sexual Health Risks—Girls and boys described an inherent power imbalance in their relationships with older adults that contributed to sexual health risks. Sponsors, due to their age and comparative wealth, determined condom use. Boys noted it was “tricky” to insist on condoms, even knowing that sex without condoms carried STI risk.

This is now what leads to HIV/AIDS. On this you have no power to say anything because she is the one who feeds you and gives you everything, whatever she says is final. If she says that you are not using condoms, you will have to do as she says. If she tells you that she is HIV negative, you will believe her because of money. – **Boy, age 18, out-of-school, Nyalenda**

You are dating a sponsor; how will you negotiate for condom use because he is above you? It is usually a problem when you are dating a person much older than you by age. You know when you are dating someone who is almost forty and you are only nineteen it is normally difficult to negotiate for condom use during sex. –

Girl, age 19, out-of-school, Manyatta

In the case of unintended pregnancy, adolescents noted that sponsors will typically abandon the relationship. This perspective came up across FGDs with out-of-school adolescents and mothers.

It is easy for him to lie to you. If he says that he lives in Milimani [the wealthy neighborhood in Kisumu] you will just believe him because he is so rich and maybe he doesn't even stay in Kisumu but in Nairobi. Once he has impregnated you and gone, where will you get him? You will not get him anywhere. – **Girl, age 19, out-of-school, Manyatta**

In the above quote, the participant touched on the reality that while the sponsor might know a lot about the adolescent, the girl or boy might know nothing about the adult sponsor. The youth, with little power to question the sponsor, had no recourse to demand support in the case of pregnancy. Across FGDs, adolescents noted that pregnant girls are left on their own to either raise their children without support or seek unsafe abortions.

Stigma and school drop-out—Participants described significant stigma for girls with sponsors, with somewhat lower impact on boys. Most boys seemed to admire their peers who were getting “experience” with older women, however, a few from the Nyalenda noted that you would have to ask yourself, “*what dating this person will look like to your family*” and would need to be careful to “*not disclose information to anyone as it doesn't make a good picture of society.*” In FGDs with girls, discussions were always tempered with the reality of social stigma and risk of ostracization when people in the community find out about the sponsor. Social and cultural norms in Kisumu look down on sex outside of marriage, particularly for girls. Thus, adolescents are in a difficult situation, where the sponsor offers opportunity out of poverty, with the risk of stigma and shame, as summarized below.

If the community sees something that is against what is supposed to be done, they will call you many names such as prostitute, you are selling your body for money, things like that. They will be put a barrier between them and you. You will feel that you are alone. There is none who will understand you. – **Girl, age 19, out-of-school, Manyatta**

Despite school fees and education as main motivators to engage in sponsor relationships, particularly for out-of-school youth and adolescent mothers, many girls described classmates who dropped out of school as a result of these relationship. Shame and social stigma contributed to the drop-out risk. Adolescents described that their peers with sponsors were often rejected by their families and peers, making it uncomfortable to attend school and creating social exclusion.

DISCUSSION

Our study provided insights from adolescents in Kisumu, Kenya on poverty as a driver of ‘sponsor’ relationships, and the consequences that adolescents incurred resulting from these relationships. Our findings build on a body of literature exploring the context of ITS by highlighting the perspectives of out-of-school adolescents, adolescent mothers, and adolescent boys, drawing on the same language they used to describe these relationships in our analysis.^{2,6,13,14,25–29} Additionally, we added nuance to the different types of gifting and economic compensation in ‘sponsor’ relationships by identifying three levels of need: critical need for food, a less critical but still urgent need for school fees, and comparatively less urgent need for material goods like clothes and phones.²

The inclusion of both boy and girl study participants allowed for a closer look at gendered differences in sponsor experiences, uniquely documenting that sponsor relationships are widespread among adolescent boys in addition to girls. Despite this similarity, girls faced greater peer and family pressure to have a sponsor, with some mothers preparing their daughters to have sponsors by accompanying them to obtain birth control. Similar to previous studies, we documented a “period poverty” that created inequity between girls who could afford menstrual hygiene supplies and those who missed school or were forced to find other ways to buy these basic necessities, again increasing the urgency for girls to obtain the economic support of a sponsor.^{30–33} Boys in contrast, looked at sponsors as a type of employment and described more subtle family pressure for sponsors. Some spoke lightly of their peers engaging a sponsor to have the resources to buy gifts for their age-mate girlfriends. At the same time, adolescents emphasized the inherent sexual risks involved in ITS, particularly for HIV and with pregnancy-related risk specific to girls, which parallels risks documented in other studies.^{5,20,21,27,29,34–36}

Our research identified the vernacular term ‘sponsor’ and framing that adolescents use to claim power in relationships that are inherently unequal and inequitable. Adolescents described poverty as the main driver for their participation in sponsor relationships, while delineating their limited ability to negotiate condom use. The term ‘sponsor’ desexualizes the role of the older person. In contrast to ‘sugar daddy’ and ‘sugar mummy,’ which are rooted in sex work slang for clients, ‘sponsor’ takes the relationship from a sexual to a more business or educational context.^{4,37–40} Similar to a mentor, the term implies an investment in the success of the person being sponsored, repurposing a term used frequently by global charities. Food insecurity and the prohibitive costs of school fees and uniforms contributed to the unnecessary risks that adolescents undertook in sponsor relationships. We found that mothers and out-of-school adolescents were more likely to describe an urgent need for sponsors, which perhaps is not surprising given that the in-school adolescents may be relatively better off than those who had to leave school due to lack of money for fees, need to support their families, or raise children.

In line with previous research, our FGD data identified sexual health risks for adolescents with older sponsors, due in large part to the inability to negotiate condom use and lack of safe and legal services to terminate unintended pregnancy.⁴¹ While both boys and girls knew that sex without condoms incurred sexual health risks, adolescent girls shouldered

the greater burden due to risk of unintended pregnancy, illegality of abortion in Kenya, and greater stigma for engaging in sex outside of marriage. Even if the goal was to finish school and gain opportunity for a better future, many out-of-school girls noted high drop out among their peers with sponsors due to stigma and shame.

We acknowledge several limitations in our study design. Given the group setting, personal experiences with sponsors were not shared and taboo behaviors such as homosexuality were not discussed. The group setting, however, did allow us to observe the ways that adolescents talk about subjects amongst themselves, enabling us to pick up on group norms. We did not organize a FGD for adolescent fathers, which could have complemented the findings from the mothers and added insights into relationships between adolescent parenthood and the need for economic support from a sponsor. Our sampling approach relied on CHV referrals, therefore we may have missed the experiences of the most marginalized and vulnerable adolescents most likely to seek sponsors. Through our purposeful sampling approach, however, we were able to include the perspectives of adolescent boys and compare insights from peer groups in-school and out-of-school.

Our findings speak to the need for government and non-profit sectors to address structural inequities and poverty that create conditions for widespread ITS.^{1,4} While efforts have been made in this direction, with sexual health programming such as DREAMS providing comprehensive education and services for girls in community settings via public/private partnerships, more can be done to create non-stigmatizing spaces for adolescents to seek birth control.^{42–44} Potential interventions include updating guidelines for sexual and reproductive health counseling in schools, to openly and non-judgmentally discuss why ITS is so commonplace and engage in risk reduction conversations with adolescents.⁴⁵ More research with the ‘sponsors’ is needed to identify salient strategies and messaging that could help deter ITS from the sponsor perspective.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This study with adolescent boys and girls from Kisumu, Kenya, provides insights into the structural inequities and poverty that motivate their peers to engage in ITS relationships with older men and women in order to gain material benefits despite the inherent risks and potential stigmatization.

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Table 1:

Demographic characteristics of focus group discussion participants (N=120)

Characteristics	Total	Sex	
		Male	Female
All Participants	120	52	68
Age			
15–17	54	23	31
18–19	66	29	37
Community			
Bandani	17	8	9
Manyatta	33	17	16
Nyalenda	32	16	16
Obunga	38	27	11
Education Status			
Attending school	62	23	39
Out-of-school	58	29	29
Employment Status			
Currently working	11	7	4
Currently not working	109	45	64
Relationship Status			
Single	104	41	63
Committed relationship	12	8	4
Married	2	1	1
Separated	1	1	0