

Published: March 2014

## Relationships with Young Men and Age-Mates are Considered ‘Risky’ by Women in Cape Town

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Researchers have noted that young women in relationships with older men are typically at an elevated risk for acquisition of HIV in sub-Saharan Africa (1). The complex interaction between biological, socio-behavioural, and epidemiological factors is thought to explain this observation. Specifically, at SACEMA, our own research has centred on explorations of the age-mixing pattern — how the sexual network connects individuals from different age groups — in order to explain gender discrepancies in HIV acquisition. However, we believe that any analysis of an age-mixing pattern in a population warrants a more in-depth and nuanced investigation of how women make risk decisions in regards to their partner choice.

To date, most qualitative studies have tended to focus on why women are motivated to participate in these relationships (2-5), offering little insight into perceived risks of these relationships. To this end, we conducted in-depth interviews with 23 women recruited from three urban communities in Cape Town, South Africa. Thematic content analysis was used to explore women’s perceived risks of age-disparate and non-age-disparate relationships, the benefits of dating older men, and risk perceptions that influence decisions around beginning or ending a relationship.

Most women thought that dating an older man does not bring any adverse consequences, although a few thought that older men were less likely to use condoms and more likely to cheat on them (Box 1). Many women were less inclined to date same-age or younger men, because they were viewed as being disrespectful and abusive (Box 2). In the interviews women also discussed typical reasons for deciding to end relationships or seek new ones. The desire to avoid abuse and disrespect in their partnerships was a theme that surfaced in these discussions (Box3).

### Box 1: Perceived risks involved with dating an older man

*“From my experience, I don’t think there is any risks involved” (Age 23, Black).*

*“No. Like, there is no risk with being with an older man” (Age 47, Coloured).*

*“They can’t eat a sweet with the wrapper on” (Age 43, Black).*

*“This (young girl) is a toddler in front of him. She doesn’t know anything. As long as he’s giving her love, he can be involved with many other children that are younger than him, and this child can also die of infection” (Age 52, Black).*

### Box 2: Perceived risks of dating younger or same-age partners

*“The young ones, they like being abusive and then the older men, he’s not like that” (Age 32, Coloured)*

*“The younger guys...they’re disrespectful, they have no respect and they’re very abusive” (Age 26, Black)*

*“(If) you’re dating a younger guy, you will find that the reasons why most of these young guys are abusive is because...that’s the way of claiming respect from you. The older guys they’re much nicer, and they don’t really tend to be abusive” (Age 26, Black)*

### Box 3: Reasons cited for ending relationships

*“He is very caring and he would give me money, whereas my child’s father didn’t give me any money and he would just beat me up and just want to hurt the child” (Age 59, Coloured).*

*“I won’t normally just end a relationship, but, because my ex-boyfriend was abusive, I just had to end that relationship” (Age 26, Coloured).*

*“Maybe the person, like, drinks and then he becomes abusive. And secondly, like, if a person forcefully wants to have sex with you and you don’t want to” (Age 43, Black).*

This small qualitative study suggests that women may be choosing to engage in age-disparate relationships in part because the alternative — relationships with same-age or younger men — poses the more immediate and severe threat of intimate partner violence (IPV). This study signals a need for more awareness raising about the risks of age-disparate relationships and calls for more research on the association between IPV and age gaps between sexual partners. In addition, there is an urgent need to implement holistic approaches to relationship health, in order to curb IPV, improve gender equity and make non-age-disparate relationships more attractive.

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*relationships among women in Cape Town, South Africa. PLoS ONE. 2013; 8(11): e81748.*

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