



## Sexual exploitation of adolescent girls in Uganda

The drivers, consequences and responses to the 'sugar daddy' phenomenon

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### Key messages

- Cross-generational sex and transactional sexual relations are a significant public concern in Uganda, affecting 11.8% of adolescent girls across the country
- A variety of under-recognised 'push' and 'pull' factors, including economic poverty and social norms issues, force adolescent girls into highly vulnerable relationships, often with much older men.
- A comprehensive solution to stop these exploitative relationships is not yet known as NGOs, governments and donors are struggling to work together to fully understand and respond to these challenges through integrated actions
- Stakeholder responsibilities and coordination for action on cross-generational and transactional relationships in Uganda are hampered by a lack of promising and best practice. This complex issue requires experimental interventions that look at combined economic strengthening and social norms approaches.
- It is recommended that policymakers and practitioners who are already working on the themes of 'early marriage' and HIV&AIDS expand operations to also address the issue of sexual exploitation of adolescent girls in Uganda.

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## Overview

The phenomenon of cross-generational sex – defined as sexual relationships between an adolescent and a partner who is older, usually by 10 or more years – can be linked to many immediate and life-long negative consequences for both girls and boys. These can include entering into transactional sexual relationships – one in which the exchange of commodities and obligations can be considered as payment – as well as increased exposure to major health risks and several foregone opportunities. In development studies and other disciplines, the study of these exploitative relationships has largely been neglected, or examined as a public health issue – most often with respect to HIV&AIDS (Luke and Kurz, 2002; Dupas, 2011). Systematic examinations of cross-generational sex as a child protection issue – in which the impacts of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation are highlighted – are negligible, and are desperately needed to help development practitioners understand the issue and find long-lasting solutions. Similarly, where issues such as abuse and neglect have been addressed, they have largely focused on the causes and consequences of child rights violations and the associated legislative environment, rather than on providing the additional attention that is needed to develop and test responses and interventions.

This study therefore seeks to understand the multiple and overlapping reasons behind cross-generational relationships in Uganda, as well as associated interventions, in order to promote more comprehensive responses to the issue. Through on-the-ground research we explore the consequences of adolescent experiences of these exploitative relationships, and analyse the extent to which policy and programming are currently failing this phenomenon. In particular, the research looks at the extent to which income poverty collates with discriminatory social norms (social pressures to perform or not perform a behaviour) in Uganda which contribute to this particular form of child protection violation.

The study is part of a two-year Oak Foundation-funded programme of work that explores the potential for greater linkages between child protection and anti-poverty work in low- and middle-income countries. It is one of three country case studies (the others being in Ethiopia and Vietnam) that looks at sexual violence and exploitation, physical violence, early marriage and inadequate care, and their relationship to income poverty in Uganda, Ethiopia and Vietnam.

## Country overview

Incidence of income poverty in Uganda has declined significantly between 1992/93 and 2005/06 (measured by the Uganda National Household Survey (UNHS) (CPRC Uganda, 2005). The percentage of households living below the poverty line declined from 56% to 31.1% over this period. In 2005/06, approximately 8.4 million Ugandans lived in conditions of poverty. UNHS 2009/10 data revealed the continuation of this trend, showing 24% of Ugandans living below the poverty line. This rate of change signifies Uganda's success in achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of cutting poverty by half before 2015.

By contrast, Uganda continues to face significant challenges on the remaining 10 (of 17) MDG targets – particularly with respect to health, education and environmental sustainability (Levine et al., 2012). There are also concerns that increases in income inequality will jeopardise some of the broader developmental gains, such as reductions in income poverty, and increase the vulnerability of the chronically poor (Ssewanyana and Kasirye, 2012). For children, improvements have been less promising: 51% (totalling 8 million) remain either critically or moderately vulnerable<sup>1</sup> (MGLSD, 2010). The Adolescent Girls' Vulnerability Index recently developed by UNICEF and the Population Council (Amin et al., 2013), indicates that adolescent girls are more socially and economically vulnerable (both at individual and at community levels) than boys.

## Cross-generational and transactional sexual relationships

There are distinctions between transactional sex and cross-generational sex. Cross-generational sex does not always take place for a cash or in-kind remuneration; although in many cases it can be transactional. In rural areas of Uganda, for instance, it may not be an open form of transactional sex, but may be seen by many girls as a way of getting into a more formal relationship (including marriage, colloquially known as a 'sugar daddy' relationship) with a man who will support their basic needs, although often this does not materialise in the medium to longer-term. In

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<sup>1</sup> Vulnerability here is defined according to the following criteria: children living on their own or in institutional care; children with poor psychosocial status; children in need with inadequate access to food, clothing, shelter and other basic needs including education; orphaned children; chronically ill children; children whose parents cannot be traced or who have been abandoned by parents or caregivers; illiterate children; and children with disability.

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urban areas, by contrast, cross-generational relationships may be focused on more temporary and immediate material gains, although they might not be formalised with a commercial cash transaction (see Hawkins et al., 2009).

Community perspectives on transactional sex vary considerably. On the one hand, transactional sex between adolescents and significantly older adults is very common in numerous social contexts in sub-Saharan Africa, and is not necessarily considered abusive or exploitative. However, it may attract some moral censure from adults, and at least some adolescents argue that it is inherently exploitative because the adolescents in those relationships are unable to fully comprehend the potential consequences and risks involved (UNICEF/Save the Children, 2007). Luke and Kurz (2002) show that while transactional relationships are consensual, they may lead to rape or to physical violence if girls are seen to not keep their side of the bargain (by withholding sex after expensive gifts have been provided, for example). Furthermore, girls have very little power to negotiate condom use in these relationships, putting them at significant risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Data on the prevalence of cross-generational relationships in sub-Saharan Africa shows that between 12-25% of girls' most recent sexual partners have been at least 10 years older than them (Gregson et al., 2002; Kelly et al., 2001; Laga et al., 2001). In terms of the transactional elements of such relationships, the data shows that 5% of girls in Cameroon had received gifts or support from boyfriends or men they are having sex with, up to 66% and 80% in Malawi and Tanzania respectively (Luke and Kurz, 2002).

In Uganda, the phenomenon of cross-generational sex, particularly for transactional purposes, is widespread enough that colloquial terms such as 'sugar daddies' and '*mulyabuto*' (men who eat the girls) are commonplace. The Adolescent Girls Vulnerability Index Report (2013) presents a national average of 12.7% for sexually active girls (aged 15 to 19) who have had cross-generational sex. Other academic literature is comparable: 11.8% (Kelly et al., 2008) and 8.5% in rural Uganda – 90% of whom stated that their previous three relationships involved economic support/transactional components (Konde-Lule et al., 1997).

## Study sample and methodology

A backdrop was provided by a review of the interventions taking place at the national level in Uganda by the government. In 2013, key informant interviews took place with core stakeholders in the Ugandan government, NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs) to confirm and contrast findings between a variety of stakeholders. Research was conducted with girls who had experienced cross-generational sexual relationships – including those who had: become pregnant; married as a result of becoming pregnant; and had not married following pregnancy but instead become single mothers. The study explored the information they had prior to engaging in these relationships, their family, community and school dynamics and whether they received any type of support to reduce their dependency on these relationships as a form of survival. Focus groups included conversations with over 200 adult men and women, as well as adolescent boys and girls. Case studies with adolescents, both girls and boys but particularly girls (ages 10-14; 15-18) used in-depth interview, life history interview techniques, and small group discussions facilitated with participatory methods. Boys were included not only because their perspectives on the issues concerning cross-generational relationships were likely to be different, but also because the minority of boys were also reportedly engaging in cross-generational relationships known as 'sugar mummies'.

The two target research sites (in Uganda's Kampala and Kamuli districts) were selected on the basis of three core criteria. Firstly, sites should be in districts with high levels of poverty as per 2005/06 income poverty data. Secondly, at least one of the sites should be remote (difficult to access and at a significant distance from the closest market, school or health centre), in either the Eastern or the Western region. Lastly, sites should be chosen based on the presence of NGO or bilateral agency staff from associated interventions who might help facilitate the research and provide additional programme insights.

The findings of this study are not representative of adolescent girls in Uganda as a whole, but contribute to the general understanding of girls' intergenerational sexual experiences, community perceptions and support mechanisms. They provide new ways of looking at the contributing factors and solutions to the phenomenon in urban and rural settings.

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## Research findings

Evidence from fieldwork in both Kampala and Kamuli districts indicates that cross-generational sexual relationships are common among adolescents, particularly girls, and that most of these have a transactional element, more so in Kampala. In both Kamuli and Kampala, incidences of cross-generational sex between boys and older women were less frequently reported, although it was widely acknowledged that they existed. For instance, law enforcement key informants in Kawempe, Kampala, spoke about increasing numbers of cases of old women ‘sugar mummies’ enticing teenage boys into relationships for the express purpose of sexual gratification and exploitation.

In both the rural and urban settings, the reasons behind cross-generational sex were similar, and included economic hardships characterised by acute income and subsistence poverty; discriminatory social norms; a high-risk physical environment; peer pressure; and inadequate care environments at home, characterised by parental abuse and neglect, among other aspects. These factors can be unpacked with respect to three broad categories: economic, social norms, and structural/systemic drivers.

*‘I was enrolled in a day school. My parents are extremely poor and I would stay at school without lunch. Yet by the roadside there were many people vending delicious pancakes and other snacks. Oh how I longed for those pancakes! There was this bicycle repairer nearby who seemed to be aware of my problem. He started buying for me pancakes, on top of giving me petty cash. Life suddenly became good. I was in love and didn’t see the need to continue schooling. I dropped out, got pregnant, and tried to settle down with him as his wife. I couldn’t believe it when he chased me away saying he was not ready for marriage!’*

Source: FGD, adolescent females, Kamuli

## Economic drivers

Evidence from our on-the-ground research confirmed that economic challenges, manifested in acute income and subsistence poverty and ill-being (*embera mbi*), across rural and urban families in Kamuli and Kampala, were critical in pushing adolescent girls and boys into exploitative relationships.

Economic challenges in Kamuli are typified by low agricultural income and agricultural subsistence poverty, characterised by an inability to meet basic needs such as food, clothes, decent shelter, health care and school fees for children. Largely based on subsistence agriculture, poverty in Kamuli is attributed to chronic cash shortfalls resulting from meagre household incomes, poor agricultural yields and large families comprising numerous dependent young children. In the high-density slums of Kawempe, Kampala, where the economy is more cash-based and where family size is comparatively smaller, poverty is seen as leading to fewer and riskier livelihood choices. In the urban case, entrenched poverty and hardship are attributed mainly to limited employment opportunities in both the formal and the informal sectors.

One notable difference between intergenerational relationships with older men in rural Kamuli and those in urban Kawempe is that, in the former, notably more of the girls expect to enter a stable marriage with the hope of a better economic future. These girls don’t expect a purely transactional, short-term relationship. The quote below from a girl who went to Kamuli to live with her aunt illustrates this.

*‘At first my aunt was receptive and really treated me well. However, she later started forcing me to contribute to buying food and other necessities when I had no job. She would even leave without food and verbally abuse me so that I would buy sugar and other things. My aunt used to send me to buy things, to look for money. Then I met that man – a boda boda [motorcycle taxi] rider who promised to marry me. The man first lied me that he was not married but when I became pregnant I discovered that he had a wife and children. All the same I stayed with him for nine months. Before I got pregnant he used to buy me food from hotels, gave me some money, bought me shoes and promised a good life for me. When I became pregnant, he started changing. He abandoned me at the hour of need. When my father knew, he said that I should never go back to him and that even if I died he would not care. I wrote him a letter apologising but he tore it up before reading it.’*

Source: Case study, 17-year-old female, Kamuli

By contrast, in the cosmopolitan urban settlements of Kawempe, cross-generational relationships more often take the form of short-term relationships. Consequently, it can be crudely hypothesised that the

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urban social milieu promotes a marginally more ‘risk-aware’ (although still choice-constrained) environment. Rural environments however – and the conditions within them – serve to perpetuate cross-generational relationships as a longer-term coping strategy with respect to economic shocks and stresses.

## Social norms drivers

Culture and traditional practices emerged as significant drivers causing and perpetuating sexual relationships between young girls and older men. In rural Kamuli, in contrast to urban Kampala, common cultural practices influence dominant thinking and the functioning of society. For instance, the determination of girls’ sexual maturity, age of sexual debut and marriage is largely based on bodily and physiological changes, which are characterised by the onset of puberty and not age per se.

*‘In this community a girl is seen as mature when she grows breasts and starts menstruating. For a boy once he breaks his voice or grows a beard, he is a man.’*

Source: FGD, adolescent females, Kamuli

The research in rural Kamuli also illuminated the existence of a dynamic sub-culture of norms, attitudes, practices, metaphors, euphemisms and proverbs, which implicitly legitimates, promotes and accommodates cross-generational sexual relationships. For instance, the term ‘*Omwana omuwala kasukali, kawomera*’ can be translated as ‘A girl child is sweet and tasty.’ This example equates a young girl’s value to the bride wealth she would potentially fetch for her parents. From this perspective, a girl’s marriage value diminishes the longer she stays at her childhood home. These dominant social norms both condone and promote early marriage among adolescent girls, particularly as the term ‘marriage’ is often used interchangeably for ongoing relationships in Kamuli. The fact that there is certain stigma attached to adolescent girls living out of wedlock and ostensibly being seen to be sexually active (and thereby undermining bride price), also promotes an informal and flexible use of marriage terminology – such as the ‘mini-marriages’ – at household and community level.

Consequently, cross-generational relationships are more socially normalised in rural Kamuli, as adolescent girls are seen as sexually mature and active individuals, engaged in ‘mini-marriages’, despite the legal age of consent being 18. Cross-generational sex is not perceived as a child protection violation but as a normal, socially acceptable phenomenon, which does not attract punitive social sanctions for either the girls or their families.

Findings from informal settlements in Kampala found that the engagement of adolescent girls in cross-generational and transactional relationships tended to be less driven by income poverty, and more by issues driven by exclusion and inequality. According to many of the adolescent girls and boys interviewed, transactional sex is driven by new ‘needs’ or aspirational elements in order to achieve higher social status. These were seen to be the result of living in an urban environment with increased external influences, peer pressure and expectations of access to material goods such as mobile phones, cosmetics, fashionable clothing and the ability to afford services like hair styling in salons, among others.

*‘I got [the older man] through peer pressure [...] You look at your friend with beautiful attire, and you too want it. Then when you ask how they got it they will tell you that you get a man to provide. Later I wanted to have another man to get more things and I ended up in the sex trade.’*

Source: Case study, 18 year old female, Kampala

Additional social ‘push’ and ‘pull’ drivers also serve to complicate the rewards of cross-generational and transactional relationships in Uganda. ‘Pull’ factors include the desire to provide financially to their household – either through transferring any income or assets gained, or by leaving the home in order to reduce the care burden. Both girls and boys also emphasised the existence of myths regarding sexual virility and intimacy of older partners as ‘pull factors’. A considerable ‘push’ factor that was noted was the combination of family instability, sexual abuse and neglect – all of which are child protection issues.

*‘There are situations where the children are in the hands of stepmothers. There are situations where the girls are badly beaten and even chased away from home at night and unfortunately the only people who can accommodate them are the older men since they have houses or can afford to rent lodges – which their male peers cannot.’*

Source: Small group discussion, in-school adolescent males, Kampala

## Immediate structural and systemic factors

A lack of access to quality community resources such as water sources and essential services (health care, education and sanitation) creates a high-risk environment for these relationships. Child protection and other welfare facilities, such as health centres and schools, can combine to complicate and deepen the various risks and vulnerabilities faced by girls and boys.

In Kamuli, the physical distance to facilities, particularly wells, bore-holes, mills and schools, means adolescent girls are exposed to sexual abuse from men on their way. When distances are particularly long, places are difficult to access or loads are difficult to carry, girls may be compelled to seek the assistance of older men, with the promise of reciprocation via sexual favours. *Boda-boda* (motorcycle taxi) drivers, for instance, were frequently referenced in this regard, often negotiating sex in exchange for a girls’ transport to school. In addition, girls in rural Kamuli and urban Kampala spoke at length about being at risk of sexual exploitation by teachers at school – with limited recourse to school accountability mechanisms.

## Consequences and responses

Across both research sites, some of the consequences, lived and perceived, included heightened vulnerability to infection STDs (including HIV&AIDs); increased vulnerability to unwanted and risky early pregnancies; unsafe abortions and the associated higher risk of maternal morbidity; injury or trauma of the reproductive system when young and physiologically immature; and increased likelihood of being engaged in trafficking or the sex trade.

Respondents noted that, despite their high prevalence and normalisation in both Kamuli and Kampala,

cross-generational sex rarely offers tangible and sustainable benefits for the adolescents involved. Girls who are abandoned while pregnant, or soon after child birth, do not only drop out of school with limited options for re-entry, but also suffer considerable psychological trauma associated with the pain of rejection, not only from their partners, but sometimes from their natal families. Consequently, adolescents – mostly girls – enter into a negative spiral of income poverty, vulnerability and social stigma at a critical juncture in their life. This affects not only their immediate prospects, but also their capability to re-orient themselves to longer-term challenges and opportunities.

In terms of responses regarding access to justice, it is often noted that Uganda has a comprehensive and far-reaching legislative framework with respect to child rights and the protection of children (Kasiyre, 2012). However, the existence of this legislation has not had a significant impact on reducing child protection violations, nor has it significantly improved rates of prosecution in child abuse cases focusing on the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people (see Kalibala and Elson, 2010; MGLSD, 2010; 2011).

In terms of how the legislative framework is applied across Uganda, there is a concern that the country does not have a clear, comprehensive, harmonised child protection system or a national child protection policy to guide those who are working on child protection issues towards a common goal, with an actionable agenda, funding and monitoring system.

Consequently, most of the current interventions to respond to girls wellbeing are responsive (rather than preventative), lacking in coordination, and with limited sharing of lessons amongst the key stakeholders. Matters are made worse by the inability of key government child agencies such as the National Council for Children (NCC) and MoGLSD in terms of coordinating and regulating the activities of different actors due to resourcing and skills constraints. Moreover, given the limited funding available for government child-related activities or interventions, national CSOs and international NGOs are absorbing the majority share of implementation, which has its own implications regarding additional coordination and the non-integration of interventions.

In non-governmental terms, a number of organisations have been providing services and support in both Kampala and Kamuli. In Kampala, the number of community-based organisations and international agencies far outweigh those in rural Kamuli. In both

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sites however, responses to simultaneously and explicitly address the drivers of cross-generational and transactional relationships are highly limited and constrained. Responses – where available – tend to prioritise: singular interventions, such as either the provision of credit, transfers, vocational training and start-up capital to vulnerable girls; social sensitisation approaches in schools; or maintaining community-based child protection systems.

At a community level, informal arbitration measures (such as out-of-court settlements) are preferred in incidences where violations are reported to the authorities. Respondents suggested informal arbitration procedures were not really about the dispensation of justice in respect of the victim, but rather to share out the lucrative ‘spoils’ levied for this nature of sex offence, especially if the girl is aged below 18, enrolled in school or both. The main beneficiaries often include the girl’s parents and law enforcement officers.

## **Policy and programme recommendations to reduce child protection violations**

Ambiguity in the definition of cross-generational sex has negatively affected the framing, structuring and implementation of child protection policies and the interventions in rural and urban contexts. The legal and punitive interventions designed to mitigate child sex violations, for instance, have been turned into lucrative avenues that do not benefit the victim but their families, perpetrators and law enforcement officials such as the police and local village counsellors. The end result of which is the perpetuation of child protection violations associated with these exploitative relationships.

In a bid to address this situation, the following policy interventions are recommended.

- Child protection policies and interventions should integrate poverty reduction and socio-cultural components aiming to explicitly address the combined and stultifying effects of income poverty and social norms drivers.
- There is a need to strengthen delivery of, and access to, social services that are deemed to have the most protective functions for children – particularly primary and secondary education, primary health care, information about sexual and reproductive health, community sensitisation around sexual abuse and related risks/social norms

and judicial facilities. A crucial target audience in this respect are families themselves – who are key formal and tacit promoters of cross-generational and transactional relationships.

- Since child protection institutions at all levels have emerged as ineffective avenues of redressing child protection violations, including those linked to sexual abuse, new and locally focused training initiatives based on lessons from integrated programming must be promoted. These initiatives must involve elements that address local caseload corruption (fee exploitation) and the basic organisational needs of child protection stakeholders at family, community and institutional levels.
- The emerging Management Information System (MIS) being developed in Uganda’s Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, should recognise the connecting nature of both economic and social norms drivers with respect to cross-generational relationships. The MIS can therefore connect monitoring and evaluation indicators for interventions working on these issues simultaneously, although more investment is required on conducting replicable baselines on Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) surveys and associated instruments.
- Child protection policies and programmes should integrate a specific component to address the issue of early sexual relationships, including information about possible exploitative relationships and their risks, using both international and national policy and programme initiatives and the areas of ‘early marriage’ and HIV/AIDS proliferation as an entry points.

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