

# ***“We tend to like young girls as we are older” – attitudes and perceptions of intergenerational relationships and sexual activity among older adults***

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## **Extended Abstract**

### **Background**

Older people alongside migrants, persons with disabilities and indigenous persons were identified at a United Nations’ International Conference on Human Rights as among key populations characterized by exclusion and marginalization in sexual and reproductive health rights access (Sexual Rights Initiative 2013). This neglect of older people’s sexual health needs is highly likely to make older persons vulnerable to engage in activities that place them at increased risk of acquiring STIs including HIV (Calvet 2003). One of those practices is intergenerational sexual relationships. However, little is known about perceptions and attitudes of older people towards intergenerational sexual relationships as much of the literature on the subject is focused on the vulnerability of the younger partners in such relationships. Using data from community dwelling older adults in this study we explore the attitudes and norms of intergenerational relationships and sexual activity of older people aged 50 years and older in Sub-Saharan Africa. This study offers an opportunity to uncover the often-neglected issue of sexual behaviour among older people amidst other ageing-related health concerns. This study is important for informing the general public’s attitude and perception of older people, and in reducing ageism and misconceptions about old age and sexual activity.

### **Methods**

#### ***Study setting***

This study was conducted among community dwelling adults in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study was conducted in two purposively selected areas - Botha’s Hill (BH) and Chatsworth (RK). The former is peri-urban and predominantly habited by black African population group. While the latter is urban and predominantly habited by South Africans of Indian/Asian origin. These study sites were purposively selected to give us a broad representation of the demographic, epidemiological and social context of the study population for a nuanced understanding of our study topic.

#### ***Design***

This study was cross-sectional in nature and used a mixed methods approach. There were two phases to the study. Phase one of the study was a quantitative component whose aim was to examine sexual behaviour patterns and prevalence of co-morbidities such as diabetes, hypertension, renal and cardiovascular diseases among older adults aged 50+ years within a setting of high HIV prevalence. Phase one was conducted in 2016 and enrolled 435 older adults. Whereas, phase two conducted in 2017/2018 was qualitative by design using focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual in-depth interviews (IDIs). In this analysis we present only findings from the FGD analyses. Participants in the FGDs were randomly selected from the individuals who had been enrolled for

phase one of the study. In each area we conducted one FGD for men and one FGD for women. A total of 60 individuals participated in the 4 FGDs across the 2 sites (BH and RK).

### ***Theoretical framework***

This study was guided by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen 1991), which posits that people are rational and systematic (informed by information available to them) in their decision making to perform an action such as to engage or not to engage in sexual activity. According to the TPB, motivation to perform a behaviour (behavioural intention) is the most important determinant of actual behaviour. This motivation or intent is informed by the individual's attitude towards that behaviour, subjective norms around the implications of complying or not complying with that behaviour, and how much control an individual perceives to have over executing the behaviour. This theory was appropriate to study sexuality in older adults as there are many beliefs and misconceptions about sexual activity in older adults that likely influence their sexual behaviours, but which we do not fully understand. The theory was also appropriate in that it helps us to identify where and how targeted interventions could lead to sexual behaviour change in older adults to reduce sexual health problems as well as their risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.

### ***Procedures***

Approval for this study was obtained from the South African Medical Research Council Ethics committee. Selected participants were visited at their homes for an introductory briefing of the study and those interested to participate were then booked an appointment to come to the research site for the rest of the study procedures including the informed consent process. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in a quiet room at the site, and in the case of Botha's Hill the FGDs were conducted at a community hall near the site due to construction work that was going on at the research site. Each FGD lasted approximately 70 minutes and was tape recorded.

Discussions were conducted using semi-structured interview guides that elicited responses and experiences related to the following domains: 1) General health concerns among older people; 2) norms regarding sex, sexuality and HIV in old age; 3) attitudes towards sexual activity and HIV in older people; 4) perceived behavioural control; and 5) facilitators and barriers to sexual behaviour including access to sexual health information. Sample questions included: *what would say are the main health concerns of older people in this community? What are your views on sexual relationships and having a partner for people of your age group? Tell me about sex in older people of your age group; is it a good or bad thing for older people to engage in sexual activities? Why or why not? Are you sexually active? Are older people able to engage in sexual activity if they desired? Why or why not? Who do you normally turn to when you want to discuss or share matters relating to your sexual feelings or desires? Have you personally received any kind of advice or counselling about safe sex?*

### ***Data analysis***

The recorded FGD audio files were transcribed verbatim into the language of the interview, which was isiZulu for all FGDs except the female FGD at Chatsworth as all participants were of Indian-origin and comfortable in English. The transcribed focus group discussion files were translated into English and back translated to the native language by experienced native language speakers. The transcripts were then quality controlled by a third person to ensure accuracy in the translations and back translations before being imported into NVivo for data management and analysis. A priori themes based on the interview guide were reviewed from which using thematic analysis we identified salient themes and relationships in the data. The codebook was then finalised, and each transcript coded. Thematic analysis was used to identify salient themes and relationships guided by the theoretical

framework. Findings from the focus groups were triangulated with data from the quantitative phase one study to further reflect on the perception and attitudes of participants regarding sexuality, sexual behaviour and HIV in older adults.

## Results

A total of 60 individuals (30 women, 30 men) participated in the four focus group discussions. The mean age of the study participants was 58.2 years (standard deviation (6.5)). Most of the study participants were black African (78.3%), currently married (58.3%), had primary (45.0%) or higher (41.7%) level of education, were unemployed (81.7%) and were receiving a government grant (66.7%). Furthermore, 63.3% said they were sexually active, and one-in-five of the study participants were HIV positive.

Several themes emerged in this study, however, for this paper we will focus on the theme of intergenerational relationships and sexual activity among older people.

### Perspectives on intergenerational relationships and sexual activity in older people

Participants expressed their views on relationships and sexual activity in older persons. Participants discussed types of relationships, fidelity and intergenerational relationships among older persons, whether older people were sexually active including frequency, preferences, and barriers and facilitators to acting on their sexual intentions. Participants also discussed alternative sexual practices and beliefs.

Regarding intergenerational sexual relationships, participants said intergenerational relationships do occur between old and young people (male 64 BH site, Male 57 RK site, male 65 BH site, male 66 BH site, female 58 RK site, female 56 RK site, female 56 RK site P4, female 53 BH site). Some of the reasons given for older men getting into relationships with young woman included: young girls making older men feel young again, influence of substance use, remarriage after divorce or death of spouse.

*“we tend to like young girls as we are older, because young girls makes us to be young again (laughter).” (male 58 RK site)*

*“A child knows how to treat you as an old person, being fond of you, calling you with a cute pet name, you would be hooked.” (male 66 BH site)*

Religion was also said to be a factor in older people being in relationships with young girls.

*“In other religions for instance at Shembe (Nazareth Baptist Church), they arrange a marriage for you and pick a wife on your behalf. They want you to choose a wife within the church. If you can't get someone who is your age you would end up taking a child.” (male 65 BH site)*

In the female-only FGD a 56-year-old woman from RK site believed older men get into relationships with young girls because their spouses are not providing for them sexually

*“The reason that I see that the older men are going for younger women is because they've got wives and they don't want to satisfy them sexually....It is because of women they are not giving their husband what they want. If your husband says let's have sex, yohhh! You will still be trying to do this and that - your man is going to go out there looking. He is going to bring that HIV and give it to you not knowing that he's got it. it's hard like as a woman to say I'm married I've a husband but what does*

*your husband require? You [are] not interested in sex, you are not interested in anything - the man is going to go and look for younger women. Then you are going to say, that girl is a bitch but you as a woman must be brave, that's why your husband is looking elsewhere" (Female 56 RK)*

It was not, however, only older men who were said to be in relationships with young women. Even older women were said to be in sexual relationships with young guys. A 58-year-old woman from RK reported of older women in their 50s being in relationships with young guys in their 30s and 40s. A similar experience of older women liking young boys was shared by a 53-year-old woman from BH.

*"Some old women are after young men, I remember there was a woman who was in a relationship with a 30-year-old man, she was 50 something. I heard her telling someone that she likes young boys." (female 53 BH site)*

Some said the young guys were going for the older women because they were not being sexually satisfied with their own age group.

*"Maybe ehhe younger guys are falling for the older because maybe they don't have a better sex in that age and that is why they are falling for married ones, the older persons." (female 56 RK)*

The general view was that intergenerational relationships were happening among both older women and older men (female 52 RK, female 59 RK, male 80 BH, male 63 BH).

*"Yes, I think it is both ways....(all laughing)" (female 59 RK).*

Older women being in relationships with young men was said to be happening in the community, but that

*"the community reject it, we usually wonder what attracted the young boy to an old woman." (male 63 BH).*

Several participants were not in support of older people being in relationships with younger persons (male 71 RK, male 64 RK, female 52 RK, female 56 RK, male 69 BH, male 61 BH, female 55 BH). Men from BH were unanimous in saying relationships between young and old people were happening. There was disagreement, however, on whether such relationships were acceptable or not:

*"Yes, we know about it, but you would hardly see it. It's not accepted" (Men, talking at the same time).*

But one 64-year-old male participant from BH said that there cannot be a blanket condemnation of such relationships as it depends on the two individuals involved.

*"The question was, is it allowed for an old and young person to be in a relationship? I think it depends to both of them, they have a right to do as they please as long as they are happy and if no one is forced to stay in this relationship then that's a different case." (Male 64 BH)*

The age difference between the parties in such a relationship was also said to matter as said by an 80-year-old man from BH who said:

*"It is accepted to have age difference within partners because we men tend to age quickly. You can't marry someone who is the same age as you are. She would age and look like a mother to you. This would also put you under pressure when you start going*

*out to seek younger people outside. There should be a gap of 5 to 10 years between you. They [women] have bad features they [women] age quickly” (male 80 BH)*

### **Financial and transactional relationships**

Intergenerational relationships were described as transactional in nature. Older men in relationships with young girls were referred to as blessers. An 80-year-old man from BH said the practice:

*“... is accepted but we shouldn't condone the issue of blessers. Some people say we are blessers (laughing). We must be pushed by love not the idea of wanting to be blessers we must avoid being blessers.” (male 80 BH)*

A 64-year-old man from BH cited an example of a 71-year old influential American man who was in a relationship with and had a child with a 29-year-old woman saying it was okay because he was financially secure:

*“If you are not financially secured it's not a good idea because the child would suffer, but for him, he is a wealthy man and his child would enjoy the fruits of his labour.” (male 64 BH)*

Even among women transactional relationships between older women and young men were said to be happening. It was said that

*“because you see ladies has got money” (female 59 RK).....“the old woman is doing everything for the boy, buying him clothes and food.” (male 80 BH).*

Intergenerational relationships were widely accepted among both older men and women. However, some were concerned about sexual activity in such relationships. A 71-year-old man from RK said being in such relationships was okay but:

*“sex is the only thing that is dangerous to us” (male 71 RK).*

Older people were content with having sex, but only embarrassed about getting pregnant in old age

*“It is a good thing, it is natural and must happen, we are old having sex in our house, in our bedroom privately without anyone looking at us. The only issue is when an old person gets pregnant, it is quite embarrassing when that happens. But behind walls, everything stays between us” (male 80 BH).*

Men were very vocal about sexual activity (male 75 RK, male 71 RK, male 64 RK, male 55 RK), saying *“It is easy to have sex” (male 80 BH)*. There was a belief that men do not get old (male 75 RK, male 71 RK) and that older men could go on having sex as long as they lived:

*“Yes, we are still sexually active, we will die having sex (laughing). As long as the situations allow me I would continue to have sex.” (male 71 BH).*

*“Sex is very important to us as older people, it's compulsory to show that we can still do it as the male, we are following the idiom that says, ‘Men are not getting old’.” (Male 75 RK)*

### **Discussion & conclusion**

In this study we explored the attitudes towards intergenerational relationships and sexual activity among older persons aged  $\geq 50$  years. The study examined through the theory of planned behaviour

the barriers and facilitators to older adults acting on their sexual intentions. Our findings show clear differences in perceptions and norms between older men and women regarding intergenerational relationships and sexual activity. Although there was general agreement that intergenerational relationships were happening among both older men and older women, it was among the former that the behaviour appeared more acceptable. Some age difference between the partners was considered desirable and even intergenerational relationships acceptable where there was no coercion or abuse in such relationships. Some facilitators of intergenerational relationships included:- desire of older people to feel young again, the special treatment and attention older people receive from younger partner, remarriage after divorce or death of spouse, religion, lack of sexual satisfaction from their peer age group and material benefits for the younger partners.

Older people in Africa face challenges of declining physical and cognitive health as well as being infected and affected by HIV (Nyirenda et al. 2012; Xavier Gomez-Olive et al. 2010; Nyirenda et al. 2013; Govender and Barnes 2014). As people continue to live longer and remain sexually active (Nyirenda et al. 2018), and as intergenerational relationships as well as the practice of re-partnering in later life following divorce or widowhood becomes more common and acceptable (Freeman and Anglewicz 2012), sexuality and sexual behaviour in older adults needs to be brought to the attention of policy and programme makers. Health professionals in particular need to acknowledge sexuality in old adults and to incorporate sexual health needs of older people as part of the general health care delivery.

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