

‘Main’ girlfriends, girlfriends, marriage, and money: the social context of HIV risk behaviour in sub-Saharan Africa *



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Among the elements important for an understanding of sexual behaviour and the prevalence of STDs are the types of sexual union into which individuals enter... different types of union, with their related social status, obligations, and expectations for partners and their families, have different implications for the range of sexual experiences that occur before and outside the union (Caraël and Allen 1995:216).

Abstract

Research on African societies documents the magnitude of the AIDS epidemic, and shows that at younger ages women are more likely to be affected than men. Young African women are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection because sexual relations with men are an important means to achieve social and economic status, and for some women they are necessary for survival.

Many African adolescents and young adults engage in premarital sexual relationships, either sequentially or simultaneously. Unmarried African males commonly have a ‘main’ girlfriend whom they expect to marry, and one or more other girlfriends, for whom there are no such expectations; some females have similar strategies. This study uses focus-group data from Cameroun to describe popular types of premarital sexual relationships, and to examine gender differentials in the motivations for engaging in such relationships and in perceptions of the factors that affect the marriage prospects of these premarital relationships.

Economic need leads many young women to use premarital sexual relations for economic support, despite high levels of HIV infection. These findings help inform policy-makers and program managers in Africa about gender differentials in the motivations for engaging in premarital sexual unions, which in turn can help improve the design and implementation of social and health policies and programs.

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The magnitude of the AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa is well documented (e.g. Caraël and Piot 1989; Bassett and Mhloyi 1991; Nkowane 1991; Caldwell, Caldwell and Qiggin 1994; Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell 1994a), and there is a growing awareness of its destructive potential among young people, especially women (Caraël and Allen 1995; Munodawafa and Gwede 1996). For many women, economic and social status, if not survival,

hinges on sexual relations with men (Bassett and Mhloyi 1991:144-153). The finding that in many African societies young women have higher levels of HIV infection than men highlights the need for HIV intervention programs to consider the social and sexual relations that affect each individual's exposure to HIV infection.

Only limited research on sexual relations has been undertaken in sub-Saharan Africa, even by anthropologists (Caldwell, Orubuloye, and Caldwell 1994:1). Research on young adults' premarital relationships, and the decision-making progress that is involved in finding a suitable marriage partner, is particularly scarce. As individual partner choice gradually replaces arranged marriages, and age at first marriage rises, African adolescents often engage in a number of premarital sexual relationships, either sequentially or simultaneously, which implies both socio-economic and health risks. While marriage may be the motivation for some of these relationships, many appear to be motivated by other factors. Unmarried males commonly have a 'main' girlfriend whom they are expected to marry, but may also have one or more 'other' girlfriends, for whom there are no such expectations. Often girls have similar strategies. The complexities associated with the formation of conjugal relationships have direct implications for the spread of the HIV virus and other sexually transmitted diseases (Caraël 1994), and it is important for policy-makers and program managers to consider them in order to increase the efficiency of HIV intervention programs.

This study uses recent focus-group data from Cameroun to examine current types of premarital sexual relationships among urban youths, the motivations and objectives of both males and females for engaging in such relationships, and their perceptions of the factors that enhance or decrease the marriage prospects of these premarital relationships.¹ This type of information is needed to inform HIV intervention strategies, and help them achieve their full potential.

A review of the literature

Although marriage continues to be central to the transition to adulthood for both men and women in sub-Saharan Africa, they often have different interests regarding sexual relations and marriage (Standing and Kisekka 1989:54). Many societies expect men to have multiple sexual partners before marriage. Traditionally, having many wives and fathering many children was a sign of success and virility (Orubuloye et al. 1994a:31). Clearly, not all courtship leads to marriage, and lover relationships can be enjoyed for their own sake (Caldwell, Caldwell, and Quiggin 1994:145-146). Often, a man will have one 'main' girlfriend whom he will introduce to his parents and whom he expects to marry. For a man, the perfect wife is one who is totally committed to serving the interests of her husband and her children, even if this is not in her own interest (Gaidzanwa 1985:29). Since there is no intention of marriage with any other girls he is seeing, they need not fit this picture. For example, in her research on Sierra Leone, Harrell-Bond (1975:169) remarks that boys seem to distinguish between girls who are seriously pursuing an education and whom they might possibly marry, and those girls whom, for one reason or another, they would not consider marriageable but whom they will court.

Single women who have never been married are said to be preoccupied with finding men to marry (Gaidzanwa 1985:61). For a woman, the right man must be able to support his wife

¹For a discussion of marriage and family formation in Cameroun, see Ritzenthaler and Ritzenthaler 1962; de Garine 1964; Brain 1972:116-117; Nelson et al. 1974; Laburthe-Tolra 1981:202; Guyer 1984; Songué 1986:39-43; Copet-Rougier 1987; van Beek 1987:81-82; Houseman 1988a,b; Sterner and David 1991; Balépa, Fotso and Barrère 1992:67.

and her children economically (see Karanja 1994:200). Educated girls prefer to marry a man with professional qualifications (Harrell-Bond 1975:158-62), but because few such men are available they look for love, physical attractiveness, and a good family background. Women who want to find a husband often have no choice but to engage in sexual relations. As one Sierra Leonean girl explains: 'In order to get a good husband you have to be good, but you also have to be careful not to be *too good*' (Harrell-Bond 1975:158).

Since unmarried women who want to marry a man compete with his other girlfriends (Gaidzanwa 1985:90) they may need to prove that they will be able to have children. In many African societies the birth of the first child is customarily considered an essential step in the development of a marriage (Radcliffe-Brown 1950:49; Marguerat 1983:497; Karanja 1987, 1994; Paarup-Laursen 1987:158; Lyons 1991:109; Abéga 1992:102), and the inability to have children may result in divorce (Ardener 1962; Ritzenthaler 1966:106; Nelson et al. 1974:91; Geschiere 1982:359; Feldman-Savelsberg 1994:470). Consequently, some women are expected to have children before marriage in order to prove their fertility to their future husband (Dynowski-Smith 1989; Karanja 1994; Meekers 1994); others favour premarital pregnancy hoping that marriage will follow (Schuster 1979:47; Koussidji and Mueller 1983; Obbo 1987:265; Orubuloye et al. 1994a:19). Thus, cohabitation or pregnancy can be a means to test if a relationship should be pursued (Little 1973; Gage and Bledsoe 1994).

It appears fairly common for unmarried males to entice a girl with the promise of marriage, only to later acknowledge that they had no intention of marrying her because other girlfriends are better qualified to marry, because they did not want to take responsibility for her pregnancy, or because they subsequently met another woman (Gaidzanwa 1985:55-57). Boyfriends generally expect women to remain sexually faithful to them regardless of their marriage intentions and their own infidelities (Schuster 1979:99). Many women who are seriously involved with their first lovers are seriously disappointed when they learn the man only pretended to be serious (Schuster 1979:62). Sometimes a woman knows of her boyfriend's unfaithfulness but tolerates it hoping that he will marry her eventually (Gaidzanwa 1985:62).

Nevertheless, among women there appears to be a decreasing value placed on formal unions. Some women are more committed to future careers than to marriage, and approach affairs with an essentially casual attitude. Other young women try to maximize the number of sexual partners as a way of increasing their economic security (Standing and Kisekka 1989:54). In such cases informal unions are not a precursor to marriage, but rather an alternative to formal marriage. For example, a woman may become an 'outside wife' to a married man, who financially supports her and recognizes paternity of the children resulting from their unions (Little 1973; Karanja 1987, 1994). Better educated women sometimes prefer to engage in informal unions because this type of union involves less direct control by the husband than in a customary marriage (Bledsoe 1980; Obbo 1980; Hakansson 1985; Mann 1994). To avoid subordination women sometimes choose not to marry, particularly if they are economically independent because they are educated, are employed in the formal wage sector, or have access to agricultural land. In Cameroun, single motherhood is increasingly common among women who need to choose between a job and a family (Gaillard 1991:51). After playing the field for a while, outside wives may find it difficult to find a suitable single man who will marry them (Karanja 1994:201).

Young adults may also engage in premarital relationships for pleasure or economic reasons. Some men, sometimes called 'sponsors', help schoolgirls pay their school fees (Bleek 1976; Dinan 1983; Akuffo 1987; Gage and Bledsoe 1994:150-151; Orubuloye, Caldwell, and Caldwell 1994b:40). 'Sponsors' are often older wealthy men ('sugar-daddies'), and in some cases they are teachers. Often girls in such relationships do not intend to marry their partners; rather, they are a means to further their education or to make job contacts

(Little 1973:139; Gage and Bledsoe 1994:151-55). Should a girl decide that the man will make a good husband, she may drop out of school and marry him, but otherwise she will probably marry someone else later. While some of these men get engaged to a schoolgirl and pay for her education in order to get an educated wife, many such girls end up marrying younger men (Little 1973:139). Likewise, research has shown that schoolgirls who have a boyfriend of their own age often do so mainly for financial reasons. This finding implies that girls' involvement in premarital sexual relationships is an attempt to provide for basic needs, rather than experimentation, or a desire for marriage and early motherhood (Akuffo 1987:160).

The purpose of this paper is to study current types of sexual relationships among urban youth, and to examine the marriage prospects of these premarital relationships, as well as male-female differences in emphasis placed on formal unions.

Data

This paper is based on focus-group interviews on 'Love relationships and marriage among the new generations of Camerounians', conducted in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroun, during the summer of 1995. Because both gender and education are expected to influence family values, separate focus-group interviews were conducted for young men and women (aged 17-25), and for students and non-students. These interviews contain information on common categories of girl or boyfriends and the expectations and level of commitment associated with each of these categories, whether premarital childbearing increases or decreases a girl's marriage prospects, normative age at marriage, and marriage aspirations.² All interviews were conducted in French, the official language of Cameroun.

Using information from these interviews, we examine the terminology of common types of premarital sexual relationships, and discuss the motivations of both males and females for engaging in such relationships, and the marriage prospects of each of these relationships.

Relationship terminology

While both male and female adolescents believe that premarital sexual relationships were uncommon in the past, there is strong agreement that premarital sexual relations have become the rule in urban Cameroun, and that virgin marriages only occur in those cases where a girl gets married at a very early age. While this may still happen among some of the more traditional ethnic groups living in the northern part of the country, such as the Peul, it is rare in the major urban areas. In Yaoundé, the norms expecting adolescent girls to be sexually active are so strong that virgin girls tend to be marginalized, not only by males, but also by other females:

We say that when a girl doesn't go out with men there is something wrong [with her].
(Francoise, age 25, p.76)

Similar norms discouraging sexual abstinence also exist in other African societies (e.g., Munodawafa and Gwede 1996:6, on Zimbabwe). The existence of strong social norms

²In addition to the focus groups, sample survey data were collected among 547 single males and females aged 15-25 living in Yaoundé. The survey questionnaire includes a range of questions on the characteristics of the respondents' current sexual relationships, their subjective evaluation of the relationship, their image of the ideal girl or boyfriend, and their image of the ideal spouse. The analysis of these survey data is in progress.

encouraging adolescents and young adults to engage in sexual activity implies that HIV intervention programs that try to promote sexual abstinence are unlikely to be successful, and that other approaches such as condom use and reducing the number of sexual partners need to be emphasized. At present, having multiple sexual partners is common.

Adolescents in Yaoundé use several terms to refer to their sexual partners. The most common terms to refer to a boyfriend and girlfriend are *mon petit* and *ma petite* ('my little one') respectively; the terms *mon copain* and *ma copine* ('my friend') are also fairly common. Previously other expressions such as *mon Chaud* and *ma Chaude* ('my hot one') were also used, but informants claim that these terms are nowadays only used in the villages. Among university students, the term *Cacao* is commonly used to refer to a girlfriend, and 'Coffee' to refer to a boyfriend. Of the above, the terms *petit* and *petite* are said to represent the closest relationship.

In addition to these sexual relationships between peers, it happens that young women, students in particular, go out with older men, often well-off married men. Youths call these 'sugar-daddies' *les cous pliés*, the 'folded necks', in reference to the fact that 'sugar-daddies' are often old, and sometimes obese (a reflection of their wealth). Other terms used to refer to 'sugar-daddies' are 'sponsors' and *VVV*, an acronym for 'Car, House, and Money' (from the French words *Voiture, Villa, and Virement*). A variation on the 'sugar-daddy' phenomenon is what respondents call the *faitman*, a term derived from the French *fait main* which means 'hand made'. A *faitman* is also a wealthy man, often a businessman, who is likely to own a large car and a comfortable house, but he tends to be much younger than the typical 'sugar-daddy', often between ages 20 and 30. Relationships between a younger man and an older woman, a 'sugar-mummy', may also occur, but respondents did not have any specific terms to refer to such a relationship.

At least in recent times, it is not uncommon for young men to have more than one girlfriend simultaneously, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, for young women to have more than one boyfriend.³ When a man has more than one girlfriend, or when a girl has more than one boyfriend, it is typical to have a strong and outspoken preference for one of these partners. Camerounian youths use the terms *ma Meilleure Petite* and *mon Meilleur Petit* to refer to the 'main' girlfriend and boyfriend, respectively. The abbreviations 'MC' (from Master of Ceremony) and 'MP' (from Military Police) are sometimes substituted.

The 'main' girlfriend and boyfriend are clearly distinguished from any other partners. Focus group participants explain that the 'main' girlfriend is the one you prefer, the one for whom you have deeper feelings, the one you love most. Young men claim that their main girlfriend is the one they can trust, on whom they can count, who is faithful, and with whom they spend most time. Among a man's girlfriends, the main girlfriend is the one who is known to his family members, as evidenced from the following statements by male respondents:

The 'main' girlfriend is the one they know at home. I don't bring all my girlfriends home to introduce them to my parents (Nyobe, carpenter, age 23, p.100).

It isn't all girls you meet that you will introduce at home. Myself, I cannot go to a bar and just pick up any girl and introduce her to my parents. In general, you must introduce only one girlfriend to your parents; she can come to your house at any time and you can come to her house at any time too. When you knock at her door, and [her parents] ask who it is, you can give them your address, you can even sleep over at her place and she can sleep at your

³One-night-stand partners are typically not considered boyfriends or girlfriends, but are referred to as men or women one 'knows'.

place. You can do that because the parents are reassured, after all, you are her 'main' boyfriend (Alain, carpenter apprentice, age 21, p.127).

These statements suggest that the main girlfriend is the girl a man may marry, though some men admit that they sometimes use the term 'main girlfriend' to entice a girl. One of the informants referred to his main girlfriend as *la Titulaire*, or *la Titus* for short (Corneil, age 21, p.14), an expression which has strong connotations of ownership, thereby suggesting a long-term relationship that may lead to marriage. Other males confirm that their relationship with their main girlfriend resembles being married, and that the relationships with their other girlfriends are often conducted secretly and can be broken easily (e.g. 20-year old male student Alain, p.15). Although the main girlfriend has a higher status than a man's other girlfriends, a main girlfriend is not yet a fiancée, as there have not yet been any formal discussions about marriage. The terms *fiancé* and *fiancée* are typically not used until after the parents of the couple have formally discussed and agreed to the marriage. One of the female respondents claimed that the term *fiancé* is now being used in lieu of *petit*, but quite clearly distinguished between the two in the remainder of the discussion (Francoise, working unmarried mother, age 25, p.73).

Motives and objectives

Young respondents frequently attribute the high incidence of premarital sexual relations to increased exposure to Western values through television, movies, novels, magazines and newspapers, and to peer pressure and a lack of parental control. Such factors help explain why adolescents start having sexual intercourse, but give little insight into the reasons why different types of premarital sexual relationships exist. More detailed inquiries reveal that respondents frequently enter relationships in order to achieve specific goals, for example to gain sexual experience, sexual satisfaction, financial or other economic benefits (including networking), or in order to find a spouse. The specific goals may differ by gender, and may depend on the type of the relationship.

Women's motives and objectives

Many respondents, males and females alike, comment on the economic aspects of relationships. They indicate that many young women have boyfriends (*copain, petit*) because these men tend to give them things, such as money, gifts or clothes. While it is evident that virtually all relationships have an economic component, the importance of this aspect of a relationship varies greatly from case to case. At one extreme, a man may merely pay for a girl's drinks, food, and the like, not unlike boyfriend-girlfriend relationships in Western countries. At the other extreme, there may be an explicit exchange of money for sexual favours:

When you meet a guy, he invites you for drinks and food, and then he tells you he would also like to go and rest somewhere. He sees a hotel and asks you how much you want. I tell him that I want 5,000 CFA. He may offer 3,000 CFA and I may accept. But before we leave I want the money. You don't pay afterward, no, pay before being served! (Elisabeth, single mother, age 20, no steady employment, p.94).

Some women engage in such exchanges mostly in order to be able to achieve or maintain an upscale lifestyle. However, at least in some cases this monetary aspect of the relationship is

driven by the woman's financial needs. A striking example is the situation where unmarried mothers have boyfriends in order to help support their child or children:

Now that I have my child I can no longer go out with a man who does not give me anything. When you are not going to give me anything, what will my child have to survive? (Claire, single mother, age 22, seasonal worker, p.95).

Young women, and also young men (see below), may also engage in a sexual relationship for the purpose of achieving a long-term objective. Indeed, such relationships can be used for contacts with wealthy and high-prestige people, which may be beneficial in the long run.

Young women who go 'here and there' can get to meet important people. They can meet white men for example, he can even pay for her schooling (Hassan, student, age 25, p.29).

The economic motivation of a relationship is perhaps most obvious in the case of the 'sugar-daddy' relationships of many female students. Because students are expected to be independent, female students often get little support from their parents. Such women need to get by on their own, and often end up going out with 'sugar-daddies' who will help them pay the rent, school-fees, and for clothes and food. Because of their higher socio-economic status, 'sugar-daddies' can also be instrumental in helping their lovers find a good job. Furthermore, many 'sugar-daddies' give their lovers pocket money that enables these young women to buy expensive clothing, shoes, make-up and perfume, and to go to the hairdresser. Consequently, girls can enhance their socio-economic status by having a 'sugar-daddy'.

However, young women emphasize that these relationships with older men are valued not only for their economic benefits, but also because older men behave differently from younger men, and because they can provide greater emotional stability.

Because [young men] can get as many girlfriends as they want they don't make any effort to keep you, while the 'sponsor' knows that to keep you, he needs to take good care of you (Viviane, university student, age 23, p.10).

While young men agree with young women that 'sugar-daddy' relationships are not solely based on economic motivation, they have different opinions about the appeal of such relationships. Some young men believe that women like having 'sugar-daddies' because they can provide them with the affection that their parents (as opposed to boyfriends) failed to give them;⁴ others argue that women prefer older men because they are less demanding sexually.⁵ The latter statement is contradicted by the claim that girls prefer a *faitman* over a 'sugar-daddy' because the former is younger.⁶

Men's motives and objectives

The finding that many young women have economic motives for sexual relationships suggests that males engage in such relationships mainly for the purpose of gaining sexual satisfaction. Male respondents confirm that they are always trying to find girls, and that girls are difficult to resist. If it is true that women's motives for seeing men are mostly economic, then such a pattern appears beneficial to men who have money, but unfavourable to those who are poor:

⁴Male student, age 20 (Alain, p.41).

⁵Male employee, age 22 (Jean-Bernard, p.120).

⁶Working single mother, age 25 (Francoise, p.89).

The day I got money, [girls] would be around me like flies. But the day when I don't have any money I don't see any of these girls. I tell you, the girls of today are materialistic (Jean-Bernard, employed, age 22, p.137).

Several males complain about the costs involved in having more than one girlfriend, and some young men complain that they are unable to maintain a long-term relationship with a girl, because girls leave them for wealthy 'sugar-daddies' with whom they are unable to compete financially (Amadou, 25-year old student, p.40).

Nevertheless, as is the case for women, men may also have economic motives for a sexual relationship. Male respondents, particularly those who are unemployed or who have poorly paid jobs, admit having financial motives for going out with girls. Several such men explained that they would go out with girls who could help them occasionally, or who would cook for them.⁷ Indeed, several men indicate that material support is one of the main reasons why it is good to have more than one girlfriend:

The main advantage of having many girlfriends is money ... with many girlfriends you increase the chance that one of them can help you when you need it (Alain, student, age 21, p.23).

As far as the material aspect is concerned, one girlfriend is not enough. In case I need some help, and if one girl cannot help because she has no money, I go to the next one. It is a big advantage (Nyobe, carpenter, age 23, p.102).

Likewise, because of the current economic recession in Cameroun an increasing number of young men, particularly among students, are engaged in relationships with 'sugar-mummies'. Those male respondents who admitted personally having had a relationship with a 'sugar-mummy' said they did so to get food or money in exchange for sexual favours.⁸ It is pointed out, however, that a 'sugar-mummy' cannot be a young man's main, or only, love affair.

Furthermore, men may also use relationships for networking purposes. As one of our respondents explains, the indirect economic benefits of a sexual relationship may even continue after the relationship has ended:

If you are the son of a poor man, you can look for the daughter of a politician, and get in touch with the 'big shots' she knows. Consequently, by the time you break up you will be friends with the sons of politicians and directors, and that will help you get a higher social status (Albert, student, age 18, p.22-23).

It is striking that the discussion of economic motivations for relationships rarely refers to the main girlfriend or main boyfriend. Nevertheless, although a man's main girlfriend tends to be the one who is most acceptable to his parents, and who is a potential marriage partner, this does not necessarily imply that economic concerns are completely unimportant, as is evidenced by this statement by one of the male respondents:

The 'main' girlfriend is the one who can help you the most, financially, or in another way (Nyobe, carpenter, age 23, p.131).

⁷E.g., statements by an unmarried male carpenter, age 23 (Nyobe, p.136), and by a 24-year old unmarried male car electronics apprentice (Manda, p.128).

⁸Statements by three male students, aged 21-25 (Corneil, p.42; Clement, p.42; Hassan, p.43).

The major difference between a man's relationship with his main girlfriend and his other girlfriends may lie in the fact that the former has a much stronger emotional component, is publicly acknowledged and therefore more stable, while this is not the case for the latter.

Premarital relationships and marriage prospects

The very fact that different types of relationships are intended to achieve different objectives explains the need for having multiple partners, or at least to have several partners sequentially. Because different relationships have different objectives, they are not necessarily in competition with one another, although it is clear that the marriage prospects of most of these relationships are very poor.

While it is frequently mentioned in the literature that proof of fertility may increase a woman's marriage prospects, our interviews indicate that having a child does not necessarily lead to marriage, and that a woman's marriage prospects may also be affected by her level of sexual experience or by her relationship with a 'sugar-daddy'.

Several respondents, male as well as female, argued that a woman's marriage prospects improve if she has some sexual experience, provided she did not get a bad reputation for 'sleeping around'. Men are said to prefer to marry a sexually experienced woman because they want to avoid having a woman 'who does not know anything on their wedding night'.

It is not by staying at home that a woman will find marriage (Unidentified male respondent).

Moreover, both men and women argue that premarital sexual experience enhances marital stability, because it reduces the need for sexual experimentation outside of marriage:⁹

Men don't have the patience to teach their wives, they might go and look 'outside' for what they cannot find at home (Virginie, student, age 23, p.3).

Although a 'sugar-daddy' is often a married man, who is unlikely to marry his younger lover (although on rare occasions she can become his second wife), having a 'sugar-daddy' relationship can enhance a woman's marriage prospects indirectly.

The sponsor makes the girl look 'fair', that is what we say here. That means, she will be clean, well dressed, she will have money to buy perfume and body lotions. In short, she will be physically attractive, and in Cameroun that is an important criterion for marriage. Men are weak in front of a beautiful well-dressed woman. Even if her intellectual abilities are zero she will find a husband easily (Amadou, student, age 25, p.44).

On the other hand, having a 'sugar-daddy' relationship may also decrease a woman's marriage chances, in part because she will tend to postpone finding a husband as long as she is with the 'sugar-daddy',¹⁰ and in part because young eligible men look down upon women who have dated older men.¹¹

In some cases, a woman can also enhance her marriage prospects by proving to her partner that she is able to bear children. Although young men may not always directly ask for

⁹Working single mother, age 25 (Francoise, p.77).

¹⁰23-year old female university student (Viviane, p.10).

¹¹23-year old female student (Solange, p.11).

proof of fertility, they may try to persuade their girlfriends to have a child in order to prove their love for them or to make their relationship official:

Sometimes a man will say 'Have my child, and we will get married' (Viviane, student, age 23, p.6).

I would rather have a child with the woman I want to marry before marriage because if she can't give birth it will create some problems and I will have to take a second wife (Unidentified male respondent, p.116).

Although the common assumption that proof of fertility is highly valued may still hold true, pregnancy does not necessarily lead to marriage. Many respondents state that men often abscond as soon as they hear that their girlfriend is pregnant. Because of the economic recession many men are unable to support the child;¹² others are said to escape because they fear the reaction of the girl's parents.¹³

When a woman is not able to marry the father of her child, her chances of marrying another man may be reduced. Although several respondents argued that women who have a child have no problem finding a husband, several men indicated that they would be reluctant to marry a woman with a child by another man.¹⁴ These men were worried that such a woman would always keep links with the father of the child and might continue to see him; they were also concerned about the extent to which they would have control, or lack control, over this child.¹⁵ Respondents further explained that some women hide their 'outside' children from potential suitors,¹⁶ which indicates that some women also have concerns that their marriage prospects are reduced because they already have a child by another man. If an unmarried mother is not able to get married, the chances are that she will have a lifetime of relatively short sexual relationships.

Conclusion

The AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa is sustained not only by biological factors but also by the social organization that supports it (Bassett and Mhloyi 1991). Consequently, HIV intervention programs need to take these social factors into account in order to increase their efficiency. In this context, it is important for policy-makers and program managers to recognize that many young African women need to engage in sexual relationships to increase their social and economic status. In this study, we analysed focus-group interview data from Yaoundé, Cameroun, to examine contemporary types of premarital sexual relationships, the motivation for engaging in such relationships, and the marriage prospects of each of these types of relationships. Enhancing our understanding of these relationships is important in order to inform policy makers and program managers responsible for HIV prevention programs.

¹²Unmarried mother, age 21, waitress in a bar (age Jeanne, p.79).

¹³21-year old male, working (Nyobe, p.133).

¹⁴Male employee, age 22 (Jean-Bernard, p.111); unmarried 24-year old male, car electronics apprentice (Manda, p.111).

¹⁵21-year old unmarried male apprentice (Alain, p.113).

¹⁶Unmarried male (p.115).

The results of this study confirm that it is not a socially acceptable option for young men and women to remain abstinent for a prolonged period of time. Consequently, HIV intervention strategies need to focus on increasing condom use and on reducing the number of sexual partners. It is common for young Camerounian men to have more than one girlfriend and, to a somewhat lesser extent, for young women to have more than one boyfriend. Usually there is a strong preference for one of these partners. Camerounians call such a partner their main boyfriend or girlfriend. A main girlfriend is distinguished from the others because she is the one for whom one has deeper feelings, and also the only one who has been introduced to parents and family members: the main partner is the person whom one may marry.

Adolescents engage in various types of relationships to achieve specific goals, including sexual experience and satisfaction, or marriage, or for economic reasons. All relationships have an economic component, but the size of this component varies greatly, and it may be motivated by the desire to lead an up-scale life-style or by poverty. The economic motives of a relationship are very pronounced in the case of 'sugar-daddy' relationships. Because female students typically get little economic support from their parents, many of them date 'sugar-daddies' who help them with expenses. Going out with a wealthy man can also enhance a woman's socio-economic status. Young men complain that women are predominantly interested in the financial aspects of a relationship, which they argue makes relationships expensive and also unstable because girls tend to leave them for a wealthier 'sugar-daddy'. However, the male respondents readily admitted to having their own economic motives for relationships. Men often go out with girls who cook for them, or who help them financially.

Because different types of relationships have different objectives, simultaneous relationships do not necessarily compete with one another. However, only one of these relationships is expected to lead to marriage. Nevertheless, engaging in premarital sexual relationships can affect marriage prospects in a variety of ways. Both males and females argue that having sexual experience enhances a young woman's marriage prospects, provided that she does not have a reputation for being promiscuous. Although few 'sugar-daddy' relationships lead to marriage, the higher socio-economic status associated with such relationships may make a woman a more desirable marriage partner.

Social norms and economic motivation encourage adolescents to be sexually active before marriage, and to have multiple sexual partners. Economic motives cause some young women to have relationships with 'sugar-daddies' who tend to have had a large number of sexual partners because they are relatively old and because their wealth allows them to attract many girlfriends. Consequently, a relationship with a 'sugar-daddy' tends to increase a woman's risk of HIV infection. The deteriorating economic conditions typical of most African countries are likely to further increase the use of premarital sexual relations with multiple partners as a means of economic support, despite the already high levels of HIV infection.

As Bassett and Mhloyi (1991:146) explain, many young African women have only a limited ability to reduce their risk of HIV infection because limiting their number of sexual partners would be equivalent to their social and economic demise. Under these circumstances HIV intervention programs promoting increased condom use are likely to be more effective than programs aimed at reducing the number of sexual partners. HIV intervention strategies are likely to be most efficient if existing HIV education campaigns are supplemented with efforts to increase women's options for increasing their social and economic status, such as the promotion of female employment. Taking into consideration the complexity and underlying motivations of sexual relationships will help policy-makers and program managers improve the design and implementation of health intervention policies.

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