

## YOUTH LAB POLICY CONVERSATION – Kwa Zulu Natal 2016

## “Blessers” and “Sugar daddies” matter: understanding the impact of transactional sexualities

## THE BACKGROUND

In the Department of Health’s 2016 budget speech, South African Minister of Health announced that the department will embark on a 3 billion rand project focused on countering the trend of transactional sex characterised by “sugar-daddies”, who are commonly older men who spend money on younger women in exchange for a sexual relationships and “blessers” who are typically well resourced young men who have relationships based on money and gift exchanges with young women. Supported by the Department of Social Development, the Department of Health seeks to create awareness about the health risks associated with unsafe sex and multiple partners, such as STIs and HIV that have been shown to be consequences of transactional sexuality. Due to the disproportionate power relations between men and women in transactional and transgenerational sexual relationships young women aged 15-24 are often at high risk of sexually transmitted infections and are also at risk of unwanted pregnancies in these relationships. This is particularly a concern when thinking about women who are from disadvantaged backgrounds and have very few options for upward economic and social mobility, leaving them susceptible to sexual manipulation or coercion based on an economic incentive. While research has argued this consistently for intergenerational transactional relationships, not enough is known about what motivate the more recently popular “blesser” subculture where men who enter into transactional relationships are also young and the economic status of the women in these relationships.

More than sexual health risks the “blesser” and “sugar daddy” subcultures throw up a range of issues such as new patterns in gender relations, the links between economic empowerment and sexual decision-making, as well as questions about the agency of women as framed as willing participants rather than victims in transactional sexual relationships. There is a renewed need to better understand what drives old and emerging transactional relationships, particularly from the perspectives of young people living these realities. As health practitioners revealed in the early 2000s, sexual behaviour change required more than the threat of disease and knowledge alone, it requires shifts in cultural and community socialisation to effect change. It is thus necessary to understand transactional sex as a cultural phenomenon first before deciding nature and indeed the need for an intervention.

## THE CONVERSATION

Youth Lab, a youth-led policy think tank, in partnership with **Youth-InterActive** will host a policy conversation in **Kwa-Mashu L Hall Durban**, on Tuesday 7 June at **13:00-15:00** with youth from the surrounding communities about their views on the “blessers” and “sugar daddy” subcultures of transactional relationships. The conversation aims to gain insights from young men and women on the drivers of transactional sexuality and its impact on sexual health and socioeconomic outcomes. The conversation will be guided by the following questions:

- How do young people understand the terms “blesser” and “sugar daddy”?
- What makes men to become “blessers” or “sugar daddies” and what motivates women to be “blessees” or “sugar babies”?
- Can transactional sex be a safe option in the pursuit of sexual health?
- What is the role of gender empowerment and economic opportunities in understanding transactional sexualities?

**CONVERSATION STARTERS**

We have invited a representative from ZaziSA, a women's sexual health empowerment movement to be the conversation starter at the event. The event will be structured as an interactive discussion with workshop activities and small group discussions.