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## **Are “Blessers” a Refuge for Refugee girls in Tshwane, the capital city of South Africa? A Phenomenographic Study**

By Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This phenomenographic study reports on the engagement of refugee girls in sexual relationships with blessers in Tshwane, the capital city of South Africa. Data were collected from 20 refugee girls through open and intense individual interviews guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically using Sjöström and Dahlgren’s approach to data analysis. Results indicate that girls engage in the “blesser blessee” relationship in order to escape from poverty, sex work and poor living conditions.

Blessers provide refuge for refugee girls through meeting their basic needs such as food, shelter, clothes and means of communication. However, in the process, refugee girls are disempowered as their life is completely controlled by the blessers. Due to powerlessness, refugee girls end up in engaging in HIV risky sexual behaviour such as unprotected sex regardless of the knowledge that they are in multiple concurrent partner relationship. Despite the gender dynamics and risks involved in the intergenerational relationships, refugee girls consider the blessers as their gateway to freedom and survival in the city of Tshwane. In order to mitigate the risks and powerlessness entailed in blesser-blessee relationships, the researcher recommends development of a multi-sectoral intervention model focusing on harm reduction and empowerment of refugee girls involved in this type of relationship.

*Keywords:* Blessers, Phenomenography, Refugee Girls, South Africa, Tshwane

### **Background**

This paper reports on the engagement of refugee girls (aged 15 to 19 years) in intergenerational sexual relationships with blessers in South African cities. A refugee is defined as someone who has been forced to flee from his or her country because of persecution, war or violence (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2014). For this study, refugee will mean any person who had fled from the country for any reason including political instability, persecution, unemployment, war, violence or poverty. According to Urban Dictionary (2017), a “blesser” is someone, usually an older man with a lot of money, who provides money, expensive gifts and luxurious trips to young women in exchange for their company or sexual favours. “Blessers” are similar to sugar daddies but richer. Same dictionary defines a blessee as someone who is blessed through receiving a blessing from a blesser.

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Most refugees, including youth, have fled their countries due to economic collapse, hunger and political repression (Latham & Cohen 2013). In 2008, more than 3.4 million Zimbabweans have fled their country to find refuge in other countries, with South Africa as the main destination (Latham & Cohen 2013; Idemudia 2017). When they arrive in South Africa, they face hostility and homophobic attacks (Lindow 2008; Idemudia 2017). This situation put refugees in a compromised state due to the threats of physical harm and actual killings (Lindow 2008). Young people find themselves in a situation where they have to fend for themselves due to separation from their parents and other family members. Most refugee females, as compared to males, experience rape and sexual harassment. The worst scenario is that females are harassed by the male border officers and police officers who are supposed to protect them (Idemudia 2017). Giorgio, Townsend, Zembe, Guttmacher, Kapadia, Cheyip & Mathews (2016) report a similar situation where migrant women are facing abuse, facilitated by organised criminal groups and corrupt state officials.

On arrival in South Africa, refugees find themselves in a more compromised situation due to poverty and homelessness (Idemudia 2017). As a result of their marginalised status of being a female, the language barrier and a lack of legal documentation, many female migrants often experience challenges of obtaining legitimate employment (Krishnan, Dunbar, Minnis, Medlin, Gerds & Padianac 2008). Male migrants' situations differ from their counterparts, since most of them, regardless of their similar migrant status, are immediately integrated into the country's community because they are employed as labourers in different areas and in different institutions, including farms, factories, shops and the homes of the country's citizens. Some young refugee males do not even have to hunt for a job, because when they arrive in the country, recruitment agencies are waiting to offer them jobs.

The situation is completely different for young female refugees who remain unemployed, starving and homeless (Lindow 2008). The compromised and marginalised status of female refugees compels most of them to resort to sex work as the only source of their survival. This highlights also the issue of gender inequality, where men use their power to buy sex from vulnerable poor and homeless refugee women (Smith & Smith 2016). These authors allude that sex work is deeply structured in gender inequities where men who enjoy abusing women feel legitimised to abuse young migrant women because they have paid them. Only a few studies indicate the involvement of men in sex work (Dunkle, Jewkes, Nduna, Levin, Jama et al 2006). However, these practices are minimal.

Unfortunately, sex work is burdened with many risks such as unprotected sex (with accompanying HIV infection and unplanned pregnancies), sexual abuse, human trafficking, physical abuse and killings for different purposes (Lindow 2008; Weine & Kashuba 2012; Smith & Smith 2016). Similar risks were reported by Giorgio et al (2016), who mentioned that women who migrate from other countries travelling via Mexico face high risks of sexual violence (rape, sexual abuse, sexual intimidation and forced sex work), trafficking, kidnapping, extortion and physical violence which are all sexual and gender based (Giorgio et al 2016). Due to the high incidence of sexual violence (it is estimated that six out of ten women will experience sexual violence), rape and sexual assault become so "normalized" that it is considered by some migrant women "as a sacrifice for their journey which just needs women to take contraceptives prior to migrating" (Giorgio et al 2016). This indicates that the concern is only on preventing pregnancies, not sexually transmitted infections like HIV which are documented to be very high among female migrants as compared to their male counterparts (Chen, Peeling, Yin & Mabey 2011; Camlin, Hosegood, Newell, McGrath, Bärnighausen & Snow 2010; Giorgio et al 2016).

Dahl (2015) discovered that orphaned girls that are culturally and economically ill-equipped prefer having sugar daddies than being offered the gifts a boyfriend could provide and when receiving gifts offered by welfare organizations, they used the resources offered to attract more and wealthier boyfriends. Some use the financial support to access sugar-daddy dating sites that specialize in pairing young, attractive sugar babies with older, wealthy sugar daddies. Motyl (2013) defines a sugar-daddy relationship as a relationship where a younger individual (sugar-baby) receives an allowance from an older man (sugar daddy) in exchange for sex and companionship. The allowance is mostly money in the form of a prepaid credit card, a credit card, cash, or a Paypal transaction. Allowances can be paid monthly or can be provided per meeting. In addition to the regular allowance, sugar babies expect luxurious gifts such as spa treatments, dinners, vacations or clothes. This is not different to what is currently happening in South Africa. Though currently, instead of calling the men "sugar-daddies", they call them blessers. Young girls who are receiving gifts are called "blessees". A "blessee" is usually a young female who is financially cared for by her blesser in exchange for sexual favours or companionship. This is still an intergenerational relationship, which is one of the key drivers of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) epidemic (Chinake, Dunbar & Van der Straten 2002).

Doherty, Shiboski, Ellen, Adimora & Padian (2006) identify intergenerational sex as dissortative sex, which means a sexual partnership between an individual with a low HIV risk with someone from a high HIV risk group. This is considered a dissortative sexual relationship because young people who have had less sexual exposure are sexually connected with adults, whose HIV infection rates are likely to be higher. Intergenerational relationships play an important role in the observed differences in HIV epidemiological patterns among refugee girls and boys of the same age (Leclerc-Madlala 2008).

Intergenerational sexual relationship is also practiced by young refugee girls to satisfy their socio-economic needs (Nkosana 2004). These relationships, the disruption of family life, an increase in sexual violence and an increase in socio-economic vulnerability, mainly occur as a result of poverty (Hallman 2005). Intergenerational sexual relationships increase the HIV infection rate among young refugee girls (Shisana et al 2009). Sugar daddies are often older men with numerous previous sexual partners who expose young refugee women and girls to potential abuse, pregnancy and specifically HIV infection (Mandela 2002). Doherty et al (2006) mentioned that in intergenerational sex, the main contributing factors to the HIV spread is a power imbalance, non-condom usage and the high possibility of starting the relationship with HIV discordant results (one partner is HIV negative whilst the other one is HIV positive). Meel (2003) mentioned that sometimes men, who know that they are infected with HIV, intentionally engage with young women and girls with the belief that sex with a virgin is a cure for HIV, which is just a myth.

South Africa hosts a large number of refugees because of the porous nature of its borders (Uwantege 2007).

Some of the girls engaged in sex with older men under the guise of the "blesser-blessee phenomenon"; a phenomenon with the primary motive of obtaining economical favours. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of young refugee girls being in sexual relationships with blessers in Tshwane, the capital city of South Africa.

## **Methods**

### *Design*

This study adopts a phenomenographic design. This strand of phenomenology requires researchers to explore and discuss variations in participants' experiences and to understand the phenomena (Struksnes et al 2012). Thus, researchers adopting a phenomenographic design seek to identify the multiple experiences and the understanding that a particular group of people has of a particular phenomenon. Hence, the outcomes of a phenomenographic research study are joint products of interactions between the participants and their experiences of their external world. These products, which capture the meanings of the participants' multiple experiences and their understanding of phenomena, are referred to as conceptions or thematic categories (Langdridge 2007).

### *Sampling and Recruitment*

This study was conducted in Tshwane (formerly known as Pretoria), a capital city of South Africa. This city was identified as one of the places where refugees from different countries reside in lieu of getting employment. Following ethical clearance and managerial permission to conduct the study, the participants were identified and recruited for participation.

Convenient and snowballing sampling techniques were employed. The researcher knew two refugee girls who have sugar daddies. The researcher gave these two girls information about the study and provided each of them with an information sheet that contained the aim, inclusion criteria and benefits of the study. These girls led the researcher to other refugee girls with sugar daddies in the City of Tshwane. The sample consisted of 20 refugee girls from different African countries – Democratic Republic of Congo (4), Kenya (2), Nigeria (4), Rwanda (2), Tanzania (2) and Zimbabwe (6). The number was determined by data saturation. The ages of the participants ranged between 18 to 19 years – girls younger than 18 years were intentionally excluded owing to the challenges of obtaining consent, because most of them were not living with their parents, and those who had parents, did not want them to know what they are involved in.

### *Data Collection*

Informed consent was sought and obtained from each participant before data collection. Data were collected from April to May 2013 through in-depth individual interviews with each participant in order to collect first-hand information. The data collection process was guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. The interview schedule consisted of open questions and prompts to enable the participants to freely discuss issues related to being involved in a sexual relationship with a sugar daddy. The session started with questions on a variety of informal, conversational aspects about being refugees in South Africa in order to gain trust and make the participants more comfortable. This was followed by the following central question: "Kindly share with me your experience of being involved in a relationship with a blesser?" Probes and open-ended questions from the interview schedule, together with minimal encouragers, were used to enhance the responses. All the interviews were audio-recorded. Each interview lasted for 45 minutes to an hour. Field notes were compiled to capture and describe the non-verbal cues observed during the interviews. At the end of each interview, some time was spent on debriefing the participants and referring them to relevant areas such as counselling centres and social workers, depending on the seriousness of their socio-economic situation.

### *Data Analysis*

Data collection and analysis were conducted in parallel so that the selection of participants could be guided by the data already yielded. The audio-recorded data were transcribed verbatim and analysed manually by author one and author two, while author three acted as an independent coder. The notes and transcripts were analysed manually using Sjöström and Dahlgren's (2002) seven-step approach to analysis.

### *Rigour*

Rigour is a measure of the overall quality of the research, reflected in the data collection and analysis processes (Macnee & McCabe 2008). A range of guidelines is available for ensuring the rigour of qualitative research. This study adopts Guba and Lincoln's (1994) framework of trustworthiness, as it fits in well with the qualitative world of multiple realities and ways of knowing. It includes five criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability and authenticity. Notes were taken during interviews to ensure dependability and confirmability. A sample of the audio-recorded data was independently transcribed and analysed by the researcher and an independent coder researcher for confirmability reasons. Both the researcher and an independent coder agreed on the outcome of their analysis. Rigour was further enhanced by member checking and validity checks to improve the credibility and dependability of the study's outcomes. With regard to the former, transcripts were sent to some participants to determine their accuracy and in all cases the participants were satisfied. Validity checks on the master list of themes were carried out by a colleague who is an expert in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research to ensure that the themes were relevant and evidenced in the data.

### *Ethical Measures*

Ethics approval to undertake the study was sought and obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa. Permission to collect data was obtained from the City of Tshwane Municipality. Both verbal and written consents were obtained from each participant before the interview. Confidentiality and anonymity were also respected throughout the study. The participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. All data were stored securely in accordance with the privacy and data collection laws. Follow-ups, debriefing and even referrals were done according to the needs of the participants after the interviews.

### **Results**

Participants were from different countries in Africa as presented in Table 1. All of them were aged 18 to 19 years. Under 18 years were excluded to avoid complications related to obtaining consent from parents or legal guardian as most of the girls are not with the family. Those staying with the family, they might not want their parents to know about their sexual activities. All participants have stayed in South Africa for a minimum of 12 months.

**Table 1: Details of Young Refugee Girls Interviewed**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Length of stay in South Africa</b>	<b>Age</b>
P1	DRC	14 Months	18
P2	Tanzania	13 Months	18
P3	DRC	24 Months	19
P4	Zimbabwe	16 Months	19
P5	Zimbabwe	17 Months	19
P6	Kenya	28 Months	18
P7	Nigeria	36 Months	19
P8	Rwanda	24 Months	18
P9	Zimbabwe	15 Months	19
P10	Zimbabwe	36 Months	18
P11	Zimbabwe	13 Months	18
P12	DRC	17 Months	19
P13	DRC	15 Months	18
P14	Kenya	17 Months	19
P15	Nigeria	24 Months	18
P16	Nigeria	19 Months	18
P17	Nigeria	36 Months	19
P18	Rwanda	16 Months	19
P19	Tanzania	24 Months	19
P20	Zimbabwe	13 Months	18

The participants provided a detailed descriptive account of their unique experiences of their relationships with blessers. Two superordinate themes emerged from the participants' narratives: (a) "meeting basic needs"; and (b) "disempowerment". Table 1 shows the summary of these superordinate themes and the relevant themes. Extracts from participants' narratives are used to support the discussions of identified themes. The initial "P" standing for participant followed by a number will be used at the end of quotation to identify the origin of extract.

**Table 2: Summary of Results**

<b>Super-ordinate theme</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
<i>Meeting of basic needs</i>	<i>Economic relief</i>	Paying for accommodation
		Money for food
		Means of communication
	<i>Safety</i>	Protection from Sex work
		Freedom from being kidnapped
		Safe from being raped or killed
	<i>Sense of ownership</i>	Blesser known by other girls
		Ability to call when need arise
		Do not fight over a partner
<b>Disempowerment</b>	<i>Lack of freedom</i>	Restricted cellphone communication
		Restricted movement
		Monitoring of calls
	<i>Engagement in HIV sexual risk behaviours</i>	Non-condom usage
		Being in multiple concurrent relationship

*Meeting of Basic Needs*

Findings indicate that, being in a relationship with a blesser assists in meeting the basic needs of the refugee girls. These needs are met through economic relief, ensuring safety and a sense of ownership.

*Economic Relief*

Besides cultural acceptability when engaging in sexual relationships with the blessers, the participants considered this type of relationship as a source of economic relief. Life in a foreign country without any financial means is costly. Refugee girls who live in the City of Tshwane believe that the only way of surviving is through engaging in sexual relationships with blessers who will provide them with money to buy whatever they need. One of the participants stated the following:

*“One cannot survive in this city (Tshwane) without money. You have to buy everything from food, water, clothes, accommodation, and phones. That’s why we need blessers who will give us cash to buy whatever we need. As I am speaking now, he (blesser) has bought a new flat and every time I can just go. I have the key but he says I should first phone to inform him if I want to go there. He buys me food and clothes. He also bought me this phone, so when I want to talk to him, I just send “please call me” message and if he is free, he will call me. He is making my life easy.”(P6)*

*“It is very difficult to find a job in this country (South Africa). They want a person to have the work permit and certificates. They also want a person who is able to speak English, isiZulu or Southern Sotho. Because I need money to survive, one of the refugee girls who came before me introduced me to a rich man who is now my blesser. He bought me clothes and food. He also gives me money to buy things like perfumes and expensive skin lotions and other cosmetics. I am also able to go to salon” (P16).*

### *Safety*

Participants believe that having a blesser is a safer way of getting money as compared to other means such as sex work.

*“It is good because I now have my own blesser who buy me food and clothes. Before having a blesser, I use to go to the street in the evening to work as a sex worker. Sometimes I will be on the street the whole night without having any customer. Sometimes some men will just pick me and have sex with me and tell me to go back to the street without paying me. I could not even force them to pay because one of the girls from my country was assaulted and be thrown in the street when demanding for payment. But now because I have my blesser, I no longer go to the street. When he needs me, he just phones and comes and pick me. He returns me back to the shelter safe” (P3).*

*“Because other girls in the shelter know my blesser and his car, even when I am not in they are not worried because they know that I am with him. I am also not afraid that my blesser can do anything bad to me or kill me because, if that happen, other girls can even go to the police station and report because they know him and his car”(P11).*

### *Sense of Ownership*

Young refugee girls assume that being with a blesser provide them with a *sense of ownership*. They feel that when they have a blesser, they specifically belong to them and are not being shared like a sex worker:

*“My blesser is known by some of the refugee girls because he comes to pick me up frequently. When other refugee girls see his car, they immediately tell me that he has arrived. So they know that he belongs to me and no one else in the shelter. This is unlike when we were still sex workers because you can be picked by everyone. One day it will be me, tomorrow it may be any one of us. But my blesser is mine. I do not share with any other girls. If he is not coming to pick me, I know he is busy or he is with his wife, not other girls” (P7).*

*“When we were still new in South Africa and engaging in sex work, we use to fight among ourselves (refugee girls) and also with other sex*

*workers over customers and also the waiting spots (the place where sex workers wait for sex buyers). But now we no longer fight because everyone has her own blesser. No one can take somebody else's blesser. When somebody's blesser arrive, we just mention the make of the car or plate number. The person will immediately go out to her blesser" (P12).*

### *Disempowerment*

Refugee girls in a sexual relationship with blessers are further disempowered. Women are generally considered inferior to men in the majority of societies in the world. Refugee girls feel disempowered when having to make decisions. Apart from being young and a refugee, girls in blesser relationships do not have any say because they are women.

### *Lack of freedom*

The terms of the relationship in the blesser-lessee phenomenon are determined by the blesser. Refugee girls in this type of relationship further lose their freedom as the blessers control their movements and activities.

*"He is the one who determines when we shall meet or communicate. He told me not to call him, and that he will only call me when he needs me. Sometimes he does not phone me, I will just hear other girls saying that he is waiting for me. If he comes and finds that I am not in the shelter, it becomes a problem even though I have just gone to the shop" (P1).*

*My blesser does not want to see me with any male person. He does not care even if the person is from our country or a relative. He told me that if he finds me with any man he will kill me. I always live in fear. If he phones me and finds that my phone is engaged, he becomes angry. Every time when he arrives he checks all the calls on my phone and also the messages. I should always explain everything (P4).*

### *Engagement in Sexual Risk Behaviours*

Refugee girls with blessers are at an increased risk of contracting HIV or even spreading HIV as the blessers do not want to use protective devices such as condoms.

*"Though I know that he also has a wife at home, I cannot tell him to use a condom. So we do not use condoms though I know the risk of contracting HIV. I do not think that I am the only girlfriend because sometimes when we are together when the phone rings he said 'baby, I am still at home with my wife' while he is with me" (P19).*

*"Sometimes he assaulted me because I requested him to use a condom. He told me that if I give him that plastic again he will dump me. From that day, I never say anything. I just give him what he wants. I am even afraid that I will fall pregnant. And he has already told me, if I fall pregnant, I will never see him again" (P13).*

## Discussion

South Africa is one of the countries in Africa with the highest number of refugees. As it is not easy to find employment in rural areas, most of the refugees flock to the cities. It is not surprising to get refugee girls from countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. As human beings, the refugee girls have basic human needs in order to survive. Unfortunately, the refugee girls cannot be employed in the country because of their refugee status, lack of work permits, lack of qualification and their inability to speak English or other indigenous languages spoken in South Africa. This is different from what happens to refugee boys who are employed to work in gardens or farms regardless of their refugee status. Krishnan et al (2008) and Idemudia (2017) came to the same conclusion when they observe that refugees in South Africa fail to get employment in the country due to their marginalised status as female migrants, the language barrier and the fact that they do not have legal documentation.

Lack of employment opportunities with no financial sources compels refugee girls to find other means of getting funds. The findings indicate that blessers assist in meeting their basic human needs. The refugee girls face challenges regarding getting money to buy food, clothes, water, phones, accommodation and other necessities like cosmetics. In order to obtain those things, they engage in sexual relationships with blessers who will provide in their material needs. The finding concurs with Motyl (2013) who mentions that young girls enter into a relationship with older men in order to receive financial assistance in the form of a prepaid credit card, a credit card, cash, or a Paypal transaction. The blesser's financial support helps the refugee girls to avoid a financial crisis and be more independent.

Refugee girls, who have been in the city for a longer time, assist the new-comers by connecting them to rich older men who will act as blessers. This approach of linking the young refugee girls with blessers by other refugee girls is not different from Dahl's (2015) findings where girls visit dating sites that specialize in pairing young, attractive sugar babies with older, wealthy sugar daddies. Refugee girls consider having a blesser as the safer way of making money as compared to engaging in other forms of sex work such as working on the street, waiting for any man who is willing to pay for sex. The participants also mentioned that before getting a blesser, they had to work in the streets at night, waiting for whoever will pick them up. The findings indicate that that practice was risky as some men will assault them (refugee girls) or just have sex with the girls without paying them. Lack of safety in sex work was also reported in several studies (Weine & Kashuba 2012; Giorgio et al 2016, Smith & Smith 2016). These studies report risks such as unprotected sex, sexual abuse, trafficking, physical abuse and killings. But the refugee girls feel safer having a blesser as most of the blessers are known to the other refugee girls as they usually pick up the blessee in the residential area where the girls live. Another positive aspect mentioned, is that the blessers return the refugee girls to where they have been picked up, unlike just being dumped on the road in the middle of the night. This gives the refugee girls a sense of safety, and if they disappear, the other girls will be able to report it to the police as they know the car of the blesser and can describe him to the police. The fact that the refugee girls are able to contact their blessers by using their cellphones, makes it also easier to trace a person, especially if the blessee have given his phone number to the other refugee girls.

Apart from being safe from all the mishaps that may occur during sex work, a blesser is considered a father figure for refugee girls. They feel that they have a protector and they also mention that having blessers in their life make them (refugee girls) feel safe in the city because they (blessers) will protect them from exploitation and abuse by other men. Blessers give the

refugee girls a sense of comfort, safety and security. The need for protection is a reality as Lindow (2008) reports that female refugees are in a compromised position due to possible threats of physical harm and actual killings. They therefore look for ways to fend for themselves due to separation from parents and other family members.

Besides safety and security, having a blesser provides refugee girls with a sense of ownership and belonging. Findings indicate that refugee girls feel that when they have a blesser, they do not share him with other refugee girls. This is different from being a sex worker where they usually fight for the waiting spot (the place where they wait for sex buyers) and even for customers. But when they have blessers, they do not compete with each other. They also have the authority to phone or send a text message if they want to meet with the blessers. When they need something, they may request and will usually receive it. Young refugee girls do not see anything wrong with having a blesser because in some countries it is cultural practice to promote the engagement of young girls with older men. The assumption is that older men are more caring and protective towards young women compared to younger men. Leclerc-Madlala (2008) came to the same conclusion.

Though having a blesser seems to be a safer means of meeting the basic needs for young refugee girls, it is also disempowering them. Findings indicate that refugee girls do not have any control or say in the relationship. The relationship is solely controlled by the blessers. The blessers will decide when they want to meet and they also control the young refugee girls' movements—some girls are not even allowed to leave the shelter or residential place or to make any calls. Thus, the young refugee girls remain completely dependent on the blessers as they cannot even go out and try to search for a job or interact with other people who may enable them to learn the local language or to get jobs.

The lack of power refugee girls experience, encourage them to engage in sexual practices which increase their risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections like HIV. This is because most of the blessers do not want to use condoms when engaging in a sexual relationship regardless of the fact that they also have formal partners or even wives. This echoes the findings of Shisana et al (2009) who documented that intergenerational sexual relationships increase the HIV infection rate among young refugee girls. The blessers also have a high risk of contracting HIV from the refugee girls as most of the girls, before they find a blesser, have been sex workers where condoms are usually not used during sexual intercourse. Some have been sexually abused on their way to South Africa as documented by Giorgio et al (2016) who mentioned that there is a high incidence of sexual violence among migrant women and that the refugees consider it a sacrifice in order to reach their destination. This sexual violence increases the HIV prevalence among female migrants as compared to their male counterparts (Chen, Peeling, Yin & Mabey 2011; Camlin, Hosegood, Newell, McGrath, Bärnighausen & Snow 2010; Giorgio et al 2016). Doherty et al (2006) mentioned that in intergenerational sex, the main contributing factors to the spread of HIV is the power imbalance, non-condom usage and a high possibility of starting the relationship with HIV discordant results (one partner is HIV negative whilst the other one is HIV positive). Gender inequality may prevent the refugee girls from revealing their knowledge of sexual matters, including the use of HIV prevention strategies which expose them to HIV infection (Khan 2011).

Despite the risks and disempowerment related to blesser-blessee relationships, refugee girls consider it the best type of financial gain as compared to other means of making money. This may be the reason why other participants mention that they might continue to have a blesser even if they get employment. The results attest to Dahl's (2015) report indicating that refugee girls, who were offered support to prevent them from engaging in an intergenerational relationship, use the

resources to enhance their chances of attracting men. This means that instead of discouraging refugee girls from engaging in the blesser-blessee relationship, efforts should be focused on empowering the refugee girls to engage in the relationship in a safer way.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings revealed that refugee girls engage in sexual relationship with blessers in order to meet their economic needs. This relationship also affords them safety, security and a sense of ownership and belonging. Regardless of the fact that this relationship is disempowering to the refugee girls, the relationship further increases their risk of contracting HIV and unplanned pregnancies. As this relationship seems to be a favourable means of getting economic support and safety, blessers can be considered as a “refuge” for refugee girls.

While there may be other means of ensuring support for refugee girls, previous studies have shown that some refugee girls continue to engage in intergenerational sexual relationships, sometimes using that support to attract more men. So what is more important is harm-reduction in blesser-blessee relationship. I, therefore, recommend that refugee girls need to be empowered so that if they prefer engaging in a blesser-blessee relationship, they might be provided with contraceptives and HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis. To enhance their safety, the refugee girls may have to provide their blessers' cellphone numbers to their fellow refugee girls in case something happens. Refugee girls should also be empowered with negotiation skills in order to be able to negotiate for their rights in that relationship. The blessers should also be informed about the dangers of having unprotected sex with blessees such as an increased risk of contracting infections which can spread to their families. They should also be informed about the consequences of having unplanned pregnancies with young refugee girls. The consequences may not be immediate but when that child grows up, he/she may want to trace his/her father, which may disrupt his family. However, these precautions require a multi-sectoral approach. If young refugee girls are well empowered in handling this type of relationship, some of them might end up completing their studies or even start they own business and become self-sustained. These situation may lead to self-sustainment of refugee girls which may results in them (refugee girls) claim back their freedom.

### *Limitation of the Study*

Only people aged 18 and 19 years participated in the study because of difficulty of obtaining informed consent from guidance or parents for refugee girls under the age of 18 years. As the study used the snowballing technique to recruit participants, there is a possibility that only refugee girls who are friends and who might all have similar experiences have participated in the study. These limitations need to be taken into consideration in order to understand the findings and the recommendations.

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