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TRANSACTIONAL INTIMACIES IN CONTEXTS OF HARDSHIP: SOCIO-ECONOMIC DRIVERS, VULNERABILITY, AND HEALTH RISKS IN BLESSER–BLESSEE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG AFRICAN YOUTH

***Humphrey Lephetha Motsepe**

Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Towoomba Research Centre),
Management College of Southern Africa (MANCOSA) and University of Venda, South
Africa.

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***Corresponding Author: Humphrey Lephetha Motsepe**

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Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Towoomba Research
Centre), Management College of Southern Africa (MANCOSA) and University of
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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the socio-economic drivers and vulnerability associated with bleaser-blesee relationships among African youth. Using a mixed-methods synthesis of recent empirical studies, policy reports, and qualitative accounts, the paper maps how poverty, food insecurity, disrupted education, and aspirations for social mobility shape engagement in transactional relationships. Primary epidemiological and programmatic findings indicate that transactional relationships increase the odds of HIV, sexually transmitted infections, adolescent pregnancy, and intimate partner violence. The article situates these empirical patterns within psychosocial narratives that emphasise both constrained agency and active negotiation of material needs. The theoretical frame draws on sexual economy perspectives and intersectional vulnerability to explain how gender, age disparity, and structural inequality produce risk. Methodologically the paper uses secondary analysis of population-level survey results, synthesis of qualitative studies among university and township populations, and content analysis of recent academic and sector reports. Key findings show that poverty and food insecurity are consistently associated with higher likelihood of involvement with bleasers, while school attendance and higher household wealth reduce the probability of such relationships. Health consequences include elevated HIV and STI risk and reduced power to

negotiate condom use. The discussion highlights implications for integrated interventions that combine economic strengthening, access to education, targeted sexual and reproductive health services, and community-level gender-transformative approaches. The paper concludes by recommending multi-sectoral programming and longitudinal research to better model causal pathways and evaluate prevention strategies.

KEYWORDS: Blesser-blessee relationships, Sexual and reproductive health, Socio-economic drivers, Transactional sex, Youth vulnerability.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Transactional sexual relationships, often referred to in South Africa and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa as “blesser-blessee” or “sugar” relationships, are increasingly visible in both public discourse and academic research. These relationships involve a significant power imbalance: an older or wealthier “blesser” provides financial or material support in exchange for intimacy, companionship, or sexual favours from a younger “blessee” (Lippman et al., 2022). These dynamics are far from trivial: they sit at the crossroads of economic hardship, gendered power asymmetries, and aspirational consumer culture. Economic scarcity remains a potent driver. In many communities, young people, especially young women, face constrained livelihood options, limited employment prospects, and persistent poverty (Chikovore et al., 2023). Food insecurity or unstable household income may push some to see transactional relationships less as moral compromise and more as a survival strategy or pragmatic pathway to financial stability (Mbatha & Ndhlovu, 2021). At the same time, consumer culture and peer influence magnify the appeal of material gifts, designer clothes, smartphones, social status, that blessers can provide (Richter et al., 2022).

From a public health perspective, these relationships are concerning. Epidemiological research consistently links transactional sex and age-disparate partnerships to elevated risk of HIV, other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancy, and intimate partner violence (IPV) (Wamoyi et al., 2021). The underlying mechanisms include reduced negotiation power around condom use, pressure to conform to expectations of reciprocation, and coercive dynamics born from the material dependency (Mbetwa et al., 2023). In other words, the very financial or material support that draws youth in can also undermine their capacity to protect themselves. Simultaneously, scholarship has nuanced our understanding of agency in these relationships. Rather than portraying young blessees purely as victims, qualitative studies reveal that many exercise strategic decision-making. They may weigh

benefits against risks, negotiate terms, and sometimes even walk away (Lippman et al., 2022). Yet their “choice” is rarely made in a vacuum: it is shaped by structural constraints, gender norms, socioeconomic inequality, and limited alternative opportunities (Chikovore et al., 2023).

For the purpose of this article, the researcher defines a blesser-blessee relationship as a non-marital intimate or sexual partnership in which one partner (typically older and more economically privileged) offers financial or material support, while the other partner (typically younger) reciprocates through companionship, sexual intimacy, or other relationship forms. This definition aligns with conceptualisations in public health literature that describe such relationships as a subtype of transactional sexual relationships in which “older, relatively wealthier men (blessers) exchange material support for sexual relationships.” (Doyisa, Maharaj, & Dunn, 2023; Stoebenau et al., 2024). This study investigates two fundamental questions. First, what socio-economic and psychosocial factors increase the likelihood that young people, especially young women, enter into blesser-blessee relationships? Second, once in these relationships, how does their participation shape their vulnerability to HIV, STIs, adolescent pregnancy, and intimate partner violence? By mapping these dynamics, the researcher aims to synthesize empirical evidence that moves beyond moralizing or stigmatizing narratives and instead highlights the structural and relational forces at play.

Importantly, my approach centers on structural drivers rather than individual blame. Rather than asking whether blessees are simply “making bad choices,” the researcher situates their decisions in the context of poverty, gender norms, and limited opportunity. Rather than criminalizing blessers or judgmentally focusing on morality, this study underscores that policy and prevention efforts must address the root conditions that produce risk. The significance of this work is threefold. First, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand transactional relationships in their full social, economic, and interpersonal complexity. Second, by synthesizing evidence, the study offers practical guidance for more effective, multi-sectoral interventions that combine economic empowerment, education retention, and sexual and reproductive health services. Third, it provides a foundation for future research that can more precisely model causal pathways and assess the impact of targeted interventions.

In short, this study does not seek to demonize blessers or shame blesses, it seeks to humanize their experiences, highlight the structural forces that constrain choice, and offer insight into how we might support safer, more equitable futures for young people navigating transactional relationships in contexts of hardship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transactional sexual relationships have drawn growing scholarly attention over the last several years, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, because they sit at the nexus of poverty, gendered power, social aspirations, and health risk. Within this body of work, studies converge on several major themes: structural socio-economic drivers of transactional sex, the diversity of motivations (from survival to status), power dynamics around negotiation, and, importantly, the health and psychosocial consequences for young people who engage in such relationships.

Structural Drivers: Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Economic Marginality

A strong strand of recent research links transactional relationships to structural economic vulnerability. Several large-scale quantitative studies suggest that poverty, food insecurity, and resource constraints are among the most consistent predictors of youth engagement in transactional sex or age-disparate partnerships. For example, research in rural and peri-urban sub-Saharan settings shows that adolescents and young women who report food insecurity or unstable household income are substantially more likely to enter relationships where material support is exchanged for companionship or intimacy (Chikovore, Adebayo, & Mukora-Munyanduri, 2023). These findings underscore that for many young people; transactional arrangements are not merely a luxury or choice but a response to pressing financial need. Food insecurity, in particular, has emerged repeatedly as a key risk factor. When households cannot reliably provide stable meals, young women may feel compelled to seek relationships in which an older partner can supply food, clothing, or cash (Mbatha & Ndhlovu, 2021). Such relationships often become more formalized, crossing boundaries from informal assistance to structured exchanges resembling what social scientists' term transactional sex. In contexts of high unemployment and limited social protection, these relationships may be one of the few available means of coping with daily subsistence needs (Chikovore et al., 2023). Beyond immediate survival, longer-term economic marginality plays a role. Interrupted schooling, for instance, is associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in transactional sex. Young people who drop out of school may view a relationship with a financially stable older partner

as a substitute for lost opportunities, offering both material security and a means of social mobility (George, Gwala, Bergh, Mathews, & Jonas, 2025). This aligns with broader scholarship on economic inequality: where formal employment and upward mobility are weak, transactional relationships become alternative economic strategies.

Motivations: Survival, Consumption, and Aspirations

While structural vulnerability is a central driver, the motivations for transactional relationships among youth are nuanced and multifaceted. Qualitative studies in recent years paint a more complex picture, showing that motivations span a spectrum from survival to consumerist aspirations. On one end, survival-based motivations dominate when young women face dire financial insecurity. In these cases, transactional sex is not a choice borne of glamour, but a hard decision forced by limited options (Duby, Jonas, McClinton Appollis, Maruping, Vanleeuw, Kuo, & Mathews, 2021). These women may prioritize basic needs, food, shelter, or school fees, and transactional relationships provide a necessary lifeline. But transactional relationships can also serve as a route to status. In peer-focused environments, social comparison and consumer culture exert a strong pull. Young women may be drawn to relationships with older or wealthier partners precisely because of the material rewards they offer, designer clothing, airtime, technology, and social prestige (Lippman et al., 2022). These non-survival motivations are not superficial; they reflect broader aspirations for social mobility, inclusion, and recognition in societies where consumer goods carry symbolic power. Some qualitative work shows that for certain young people, the allure of a “blesser” is not simply pragmatic; it also carries symbolic meaning. The relationship can promise not just financial relief, but access to a social world that would otherwise seem out of reach. In this way, transactional sex becomes interwoven with hopes, dreams, and identity formation (Lippman et al., 2022).

Power Dynamics, Reciprocity, and Negotiation

One of the most potent themes in the literature is how reciprocity expectations and power imbalances shape the nature of transactional relationships. Even when youth willingly enter such relationships, they often do so with limited power to negotiate terms, including crucial aspects like condom use. Duby et al. (2021) use a mixed-methods design, survey plus in-depth interviews, to show that when young women enter transactional relationships, there is often an implicit “contract”: the material provider expects something in return, and that expectation constrains the young woman’s choices. This implicit contractuality can make it

difficult for them to refuse unprotected sex or to demand safer sexual practices. Negotiation is not just a matter of persuasion but involves navigating deeply unequal social and economic positions. Similarly, studies of age-disparate partnerships demonstrate how the power gradient often lies with the older, financially stable partner. Researchers have found that young women in such relationships may feel coerced or pressured into unprotected sex because they cannot risk “losing” the material support or standing in the relationship (Mbetwa, Aigbogun, & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2023). This power imbalance undermines meaningful consent, even when the younger partner perceives some degree of agency. Psychosocial studies further complicate the picture by highlighting that while some blessees feel that they negotiate, they do so in constrained conditions. Their “choices” are deeply shaped by what is possible in their lived environment, social norms, economic dependency, and relational expectations all narrow the field of real options (Chikovore et al., 2023). In effect, agency is exercised, but within a bounded structure.

Health and Psychosocial Consequences

Transactional relationships, especially age-disparate ones, have critical health and psychosocial implications. The literature over the last five years strongly documents links to HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancy, and intimate partner violence (IPV). Large epidemiological studies highlight elevated HIV risk among young women engaged in transactional or age-disparate relationships. The power dynamics described above, reduced negotiating capacity, fear of losing financial support, and unequal decision-making, translate into lower condom use, higher rates of unprotected sex, and ultimately greater vulnerability to HIV (Wamoyi, Stobeanau, Bobrova, Abramsky, & Watts, 2021). In some contexts, transactional sex has been identified as a significant driver of the generalized epidemic among adolescent girls and young women. Beyond HIV, involvement in these relationships is frequently associated with other STIs. The lack of consistent condom use, combined with potential multiple partnerships or sexual concurrency, heightens infection risk (George et al., 2025). Qualitative interviews reinforce that blessees often feel unable to insist on protection, especially when refusing might jeopardize the relationship or the flow of material support (Duby et al., 2021). Adolescent pregnancy is another documented consequence. Young women in transactional relationships may face pressure to comply with sexual expectations, and unprotected sex often increases the risk of unintended pregnancies. These pregnancies can have long-term social and economic impacts, further perpetuating cycles of vulnerability (Mbetwa et al., 2023). In addition, a pregnancy might deepen

dependency or shift power further into the hands of the older partner, especially in contexts where the financial reward is tied to “investment” in a future family. Intimate partner violence is also a recurrent theme. Frieslaar and Masango (2021) examine how blessing-bleesee dynamics can normalise coercion, control, and abuse. Their research reveals that some young women experience emotional shame, manipulation, and even physical violence when they do not meet the expectations associated with the transactional relationship. The very structure of the exchange, material dependence in return for reciprocity, can enable exploitative behaviour. For some, the relationship becomes less of a consensual bargain and more of a conditional contract with deeply asymmetrical power. Psychosocial well-being is impacted beyond physical health. Qualitative accounts suggest that some blessees internalise feelings of shame, stigma, and emotional burden. The social gaze can judge them harshly, labelling them “gold diggers/slay queens,” even as they are making difficult survival decisions (Lippman et al., 2022). In other cases, they may feel trapped: emotionally invested, financially dependent, but socially vulnerable. The negotiation is not just about sex or money, it is also about dignity, social belonging, and self-worth.

Agency, Resilience, and Social Negotiation

It is important not to reduce all blessees to passive victims. A growing body of work emphasizes their resilience, strategic negotiation, and agency, even under constrained conditions. For instance, some qualitative studies show that young women consciously decide whom to commit to, how to structure their relationship, and when to push for safer sex practices, even in the face of risk (Lippman et al., 2022). These decisions are not made lightly. Many blessees articulate risk calculations: they weigh material benefits, emotional costs, future goals, and health implications. While the older partner may have more socio-economic resources, the younger partner sometimes negotiates relationship terms, often informally, through repeated conversations, testing, or even exit strategies (Chikovore et al., 2023). This negotiation reflects a form of bounded agency, where the blessee does not passively accept all conditions but exerts influence where possible. Resilience also emerges through peer networks and social support. Adolescent girls and young women sometimes rely on friends, mentors, or community structures to share experiences, warn each other about exploitative dynamics, or get emotional support when relationships go wrong (Lippman et al., 2022). These networks can offer a counterbalance to the power of blessers and foster collective reflection on risk, dignity, and well-being. Moreover, some young people view transactional relationships as temporary strategies rather than long-term life plans. They may

intend to use these relationships to stabilize their immediate circumstances, save money, complete education, or build a network, and then disengage. These temporality dynamics complicate simplistic narratives that portray blessers and blessees as engaged in fixed or permanent arrangements (Chikovore et al., 2023).

Broader Macro-Social and Gender Norms

Transactional relationships cannot be fully understood without situating them in broader social norms and gendered power structures. Gender norms in many sub-Saharan African societies still privilege men's economic authority and women's relational dependency. As such, the phenomenon of blessers is not merely a personal choice, it reflects deeper social scripts about masculinity, provision, and feminine "sexual capital" (Frieslaar & Masango, 2021). In many communities, providing materially to a younger partner is seen as a demonstration of masculinity, status, and respectability. A "successful" man may be judged not just by his wealth, but by how generously he supports a younger woman. This social expectation reinforces the transactional logic: provision is not just an act of generosity but a marker of social legitimacy (Lippman et al., 2022). Conversely, young women are often socialised to accept such relationships as a legitimate route to social mobility or recognition. In peer networks, having a blesser can confer status, especially when material goods obtained from the relationship elevate one's social standing. This social reward reifies the transactional logic: success in material exchange is not entirely concealed or moralised; it is sometimes celebrated (Richter, Sherr, Adato, Belsey, & Desmond, 2022). Community attitudes also matter. In some contexts, transactional relationships are not strongly condemned; they may even be tacitly accepted or normalized, particularly in environments with widespread poverty and limited social services (Chikovore et al., 2023). This normalization reduces the stigma that might otherwise discourage youth from seeking help or exiting exploitative arrangements.

Gaps in the Literature

While the literature offers rich insight into the structural drivers, motivations, and consequences of transactional relationships, there remain several important gaps:

First, longitudinal evidence is limited. Much of what we know comes from cross-sectional surveys or retrospective qualitative interviews. These designs make it difficult to unpack causality. For instance, while poverty and food insecurity strongly correlate with transactional sex, we cannot always tell whether they precede engagement, or whether

transactional relationships themselves lead to changes in socio-economic status over time (George et al., 2025).

Second, intervention research is relatively underdeveloped. There is a dearth of rigorous evaluations of programs that combine economic empowerment (e.g., cash transfers), educational support, community-based gender-transformative work, and sexual health services to reduce harmful transactional relationships. Without such evidence, policy recommendations remain largely theoretical, even though the health risks are well documented.

Third, diversity of youth voices is not fully captured across contexts. Much scholarship focuses on adolescent girls and young women in urban or peri-urban settings. Less is known about how transactional sex plays out in rural communities, among out-of-school youth, or among young men who engage in similar relationships with older women (i.e., “sugar mommy” dynamics). The male blessee experience remains comparatively understudied.

Fourth, psychosocial dynamics over time need more attention. While research documents shame, stigma, and negotiation, fewer studies trace how these emotional landscapes shift as relationships evolve or when youth leave these arrangements. Understanding these trajectories could inform better social support and counselling interventions.

Finally, mechanisms of resilience and exit strategies are not fully understood. Although emerging studies highlight that some youth view these relationships as temporary or strategic, we know little about what enables or constrains their ability to exit safely, rebuild, or re-integrate into non-transactional forms of partnership. What social, economic, or policy supports help youth transition out of exploitative relationships?

Synthesis and Implications

Bringing together these thematic threads, the recent literature provides a compelling and deeply human picture: transactional relationships among youth in sub-Saharan Africa are not simply about sex or exploitation. Rather, they represent a complex trade-off in which structural deprivation, social aspiration, and relational power converge. Poverty and food insecurity remain foundational in driving youth toward transactional exchanges. Yet motivations cannot be reduced to desperation alone: many young people are motivated by status, modern consumption, and the desire for a better life, and they navigate these relationships with a mixture of agency and constraint. Power imbalances around age, gender, and economic capacity infiltrate every stage of the relationship, shaping the capacity for negotiation, consent, and safety. The health risks are real and serious, HIV, other STIs,

unintended pregnancy, and intimate partner violence are well documented in the literature. But equally, the psychosocial costs, shame, emotional burden, stigma, must be understood as part of the multi-layered toll these relationships exact. At the same time, narratives of resilience, negotiation, and temporality push back against simplistic depictions of blessees as helpless victims. At a social level, these transactional dynamics are embedded in gendered norms that valorise male provision and female dependency. Community acceptance, peer networks, and consumption culture reinforce the transactional logic, making these relationships both a symptom and a strategy within broader social and economic systems. Yet the evidence base still needs to strengthen, especially in terms of longitudinal trajectories, intervention impact, psychosocial follow-up, and marginalized subpopulations. Without these, policy and programming risk being premised on assumptions rather than on what actually sustains or undermines healthy choices over time.

Conclusion of the Literature Review

In summary, the literature over the past five years illuminates transactional sexual relationships among young people in sub-Saharan Africa as deeply structural, relational, and multi-dimensional. These relationships are not simply moral issues, they are responses to real hardship, social pressure, and constrained opportunity, and they carry significant health, emotional, and social consequences. To move forward, research agendas must further document how these relationships originate, how they evolve, and how vulnerable youth can be supported to navigate or exit them safely. At the same time, interventions must address not only individual behaviours, but the broader economic and gender systems that shape them.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives that help explain the structural forces, personal motivations, and health consequences underlying blesser-blessee relationships among African youth. These lenses offer a way to understand how agency and vulnerability coexist and why transactional intimacy persists even when it places young people at significant risk.

Sexual Economy Perspective

The sexual economy perspective provides an important foundation for analysing transactional relationships as part of broader social and material exchanges rather than isolated romantic decisions. Recent studies demonstrate that transactional sex is embedded in economic and symbolic economies in which resources, affection, and status circulate between partners

(Duby et al., 2021). This body of work shows that intimate relationships among young people in South Africa often operate within informal systems of reciprocity where money, gifts, or lifestyle benefits are exchanged for stability, protection, or aspirational consumption. Researchers emphasise that these exchanges are shaped not only by material scarcity but also by powerful social norms that construct men as providers and young women as recipients, thereby linking affection and sexual availability to material gain (Wamoyi et al., 2021). Empirical studies continue to show that structural constraints such as poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, and interrupted schooling make such exchanges rational choices within limited opportunity environments (Mbatha & Ndhlovu, 2021). Within the sexual economy, consumer aspirations also play a significant role. Young people are increasingly exposed to social media cultures and peer expectations that valorise luxury goods and fashionable lifestyles. These pressures incentivise engagement in relationships with older, wealthier partners who can provide immediate access to desired forms of social status (Stoebenau et al., 2024). The sexual economy framework therefore highlights how structural inequalities and cultural expectations intersect to create conditions in which transactional arrangements are normalised and even valorised.

Intersectional Vulnerability

Intersectional vulnerability deepens the analysis by acknowledging that risk is not evenly distributed across young populations. Instead, social identities such as age, gender, class, and educational status combine to shape not only the likelihood of entering a transactional relationship but also the outcomes associated with it. Recent research shows that young women who are poor, out of school, or orphaned experience multiple layers of disadvantage that magnify their exposure to harmful relational dynamics (Chikovore et al., 2023). These intersecting vulnerabilities reduce their bargaining power in relationships and weaken their ability to negotiate safer sexual practices. Studies conducted among adolescent girls and young women in South Africa illustrate how these overlapping identities create heightened susceptibility to exploitation, intimate partner violence, and health risks such as HIV infection (Mbetwa et al., 2023). However, intersectional analysis also underscores the importance of recognising agency within constraint. Even under conditions of social and economic pressure, young women may choose transactional relationships as a means of meeting immediate needs, securing temporary stability, or pursuing upward mobility (Lentoor, 2022). This perspective challenges simplistic narratives of victimhood by

acknowledging that young people make meaningful decisions within structurally restricted circumstances.

Integration of Frameworks

When combined, the sexual economy and intersectional vulnerability frameworks provide a comprehensive explanation for the prevalence and diversity of transactional relationships. Together, they show how structural forces create both risk and perceived opportunity, how gendered norms shape expectations of exchange, and how individual agency is mediated by poverty and social marginalisation. These frameworks also illuminate why transactional relationships are strongly linked to adverse outcomes such as HIV acquisition, sexually transmitted infections, adolescent pregnancy, and intimate partner violence (George et al., 2025). Importantly, they offer significant guidance for policy and programme design. Understanding transactional sex as part of a sexual economy helps illustrate why interventions must address economic scarcity, while intersectional vulnerability explains why structural change must target gender norms, educational access, and youth economic empowerment. Both perspectives converge in demonstrating that transactional relationships cannot be understood solely at the individual level. They are shaped by embedded social structures and require multi-dimensional interventions that address material inequalities, social expectations, and gendered power relations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a secondary research design that integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence from multiple credible sources. The aim is to generate a coherent and analytically rich understanding of the blesser-blessee phenomenon by drawing on existing empirical work rather than conducting new primary data collection. Secondary research is widely recognised as an efficient and ethically sound approach for examining sensitive topics such as transactional relationships, particularly where robust datasets and detailed qualitative accounts are already available (Cluver et al., 2021).

Secondary analysis of cross-sectional datasets and epidemiological reports

The first strand of the study synthesises findings from large-scale cross-sectional surveys and epidemiological studies that document the relationship between socio-economic precarity and participation in transactional relationships. These include multi-province analyses of adolescents and young adults in South Africa and broader Southern Africa, where transactional relationships have been consistently associated with poverty, food insecurity,

and school interruption (George et al., 2025). To strengthen the reliability of the synthesis, the researcher drew only on peer-reviewed statistical analyses and nationally representative reports that apply rigorous sampling procedures and validated measures of economic vulnerability and sexual behaviour. Recent work linking socio-economic distress to transactional sex was particularly important, as it provides updated evidence of how poverty interacts with gendered power dynamics to shape relationship choices (Kilburn et al., 2022). Although these datasets differ in focus, collectively they offer a consistent quantitative foundation for interpreting the economic drivers that underpin blesser-blessee relationships.

Systematic thematic synthesis of qualitative studies (2020–2025)

The second strand incorporates a thematic synthesis of qualitative research published between 2020 and 2025. Qualitative studies are essential for understanding how young people interpret their own experiences, since motivations, negotiations, and relational dynamics cannot be fully captured by survey measures alone. The researcher reviewed peer-reviewed journal articles and university research repositories that used in-depth interviews or mixed methods with adolescent girls, young women, and university students in South Africa and neighbouring contexts. These studies provided nuanced accounts of how material scarcity, aspirations for social mobility, and gendered expectations influence decisions to participate in transactional relationships (Wamoyi et al., 2021). They also highlighted how young women navigate constrained environments while exercising varying degrees of agency, which aligns with recent work showing that transactional relationships are shaped not only by deprivation but also by social norms and the pursuit of emotional or material stability (Masvawure, 2022). After identifying eligible studies, the researcher coded emerging themes relating to motivations, psychosocial impacts, and risk factors. This process allowed for the development of cross-cutting insights that reflect the diversity of lived experiences across different settings.

Content analysis of academic commentaries and policy-oriented literature

The third strand involved a content analysis of policy briefs, research commentaries, and academic reviews published within the past five years. These sources are valuable for understanding how transactional relationships are framed within public health, gender-based violence, and social protection debates. Policy documents have increasingly highlighted the blesser phenomenon as a community-level concern, linking it to gendered power structures, unequal economic opportunities, and heightened exposure to HIV and other health risks

(UNICEF, 2023). Academic commentaries similarly emphasise the need to situate blessing relationships within broader discussions about structural inequality and youth vulnerability (Mthethwa & Ngcobo, 2022). By analysing these texts, the researcher identified dominant policy narratives, emerging research priorities, and proposed intervention models, which informed the study's interpretive and theoretical positioning.

Ethical considerations

This article relies entirely on secondary sources rather than new interactions with human participants. The analysis draws on de-identified quantitative datasets, published qualitative narratives, and publicly accessible reports, all of which have already undergone ethical review at the point of original data collection. As secondary research of this kind does not involve collecting personal information or engaging directly with vulnerable populations, additional ethical clearance is not required (Cluver et al., 2021). Where qualitative studies were synthesised, the researcher relied on the ethical procedures reported by the original authors, each of whom described informed consent protocols, confidentiality assurances, and appropriate safeguarding measures. The secondary synthesis respects those procedures and does not reproduce any identifying information. This approach allows for robust analysis of a sensitive issue while maintaining a high standard of ethical integrity.

RESULTS

Socio-Economic Drivers

Across multiple rigorous studies, a pattern emerges: structural poverty and food insecurity significantly predict engagement in blessing-blessee or transactional relationships among young people. Underlying financial hardship is not a marginal factor, it is central. For instance, in a large mixed-methods study, Duby, Jonas, McClinton Appollis, Maruping, Vanleeuw, Kuo, and Mathews (2021) found that women who reported financial instability in their households, especially food insecurity, were substantially more likely to enter relationships characterized by material transfer. Their data showed that adolescent girls and young women from poorer households frequently described needing monetary or in-kind support, not merely for discretionary consumption, but for basic survival needs (Duby et al., 2021). Similarly, cross-sectional analyses by George, Gwala, Bergh, Mathews, and Jonas (2025) reinforce these findings. Their work indicates that respondents who reported lower household wealth or irregular income were more likely to disclose involvement with blessers. In contexts where economic opportunities are limited or unreliable, blessers may represent

one of the few relatively stable sources of material assistance for young people who cannot rely solely on their family or wage labour. In such relationships, the blesser functions, in effect, as a provider whose material support helps buffer the effects of economic precarity (George et al., 2025).

Moreover, food insecurity specifically appears as a robust correlate across contexts. In township and peri-urban settings, studies have revealed that when households struggle to put food on the table, young women feel a strong pressure to seek help through intimate partnerships (Mbatha & Ndhlovu, 2021). The exchanges in these relationships often include not just money, but essentials like food, transport, and housing, making the relational economic support intertwined with basic needs. Interrupted or incomplete schooling also sharpens vulnerability. Duby et al. (2021) note that participants who had dropped out of school, or who were struggling to pay for continuing education, were more likely to engage in relationships with older or wealthier partners. The promise of financial support from a blesser can partially compensate for the lost economic opportunity that comes with not finishing one's schooling. Conversely, school attendance itself acts as a protective factor. Young women who remain enrolled in secondary or tertiary education report lower rates of transactional relationships, highlighting that access to education can reduce reliance on material-exchange partnerships (George et al., 2025). In summary, the socioeconomic drivers identified in the literature are multifaceted but interlinked. Poverty and food insecurity are more than background conditions, they actively shape relational strategies. Interrupted schooling deepens risk, while education serves as a buffer. Blessers, for many young people, provide more than symbolic status: they function as a pragmatic response to material precarity.

Motivations and Psychosocial Factors

Beyond basic survival, qualitative studies reveal rich and nuanced motivations for entering blesser-blessee relationships. These motivations are not uniform; they reflect a continuum of need, aspiration, and identity negotiation. On the survival end, many young women describe entering transactional relationships as a last resort in times of economic crisis. In in-depth interviews, participants in Duby et al.'s (2021) study shared how they viewed blessers not as glamorous sugar daddies but as vital support systems. Some spoke of paying rent, buying groceries, or even funding their siblings' schooling through the assistance they received. For them, these relationships were less about luxury and more about sustaining daily life under

conditions of scarcity. Yet, at the other end of the spectrum, motivations rooted in aspiration and social mobility are equally prominent. Many young women expressed a desire to access modern consumer goods, smartphones, fashion items, and social experiences, that they might otherwise afford only with help. These possessions are more than status symbols; for many, they represent belonging, self-worth, and upward social mobility (Lippman et al., 2022). The ability to present oneself in a particular way socially or digitally carries weight in peer settings, and blessers can make that possible.

The psychosocial dimension extends further. Peer pressure and social media amplify the appeal of material exchange. In interviews, young women frequently reported feeling envious or left out when their peers owned high-end items. Social media platforms, in particular, create constant and visible benchmarks for success and 'desirability,' reinforcing the belief that material wealth is tied to social value (Duby et al., 2021). This, in turn, normalizes transactional relationships as a legitimate strategy for achieving both material and social goals. Some blessees also speak of the relational aspect: beyond money or goods, they value the emotional attention, mentorship, or stability that blessers sometimes offer. In their narratives, blessers are not merely economic benefactors but also confidants or role models. The relationship, therefore, can carry emotional meaning, even if it originated from material exchange. This duality underscores the inherent complexity of these partnerships: they are not purely transactional, but often imbued with personal significance (Lippman et al., 2022). At the same time, these motivations coexist with tension. Many young women describe a constant balancing act: they acknowledge the material benefits, but also feel uneasy about dependence, reciprocity, and the social stigma tied to being in a “sugar” relationship. Some articulate a keen awareness of risk, even as they appreciate the financial relief. These psychosocial reflections reveal that entering such relationships is rarely a straightforward decision. Rather, it is a negotiated choice, shaped by realistic assessments of benefit, risk, and personal aspiration (Duby et al., 2021).

Health and Safety Outcomes

The health and safety consequences associated with blesser-blessee dynamics are stark and well-documented. A consistent pattern across empirical studies shows that participation in these relationships significantly correlates with heightened vulnerability to HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), adolescent pregnancy, and intimate partner violence.

First, HIV risk emerges strongly. Epidemiological data and systematic reviews robustly link transactional sex, especially involving older or wealthier partners, to elevated HIV infection rates among young women. Wamoyi, Stobeanau, Bobrova, Abramsky, and Watts (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of transactional sex in sub-Saharan Africa, and their findings suggest a meaningful association between transactional sex and HIV incidence. The biological risk is compounded by structural constraints, young women often lack negotiating power to insist on condom use, fearing that refusal could sever the material support that the relationship provides (Duby et al., 2021).

Second, STIs beyond HIV are also more prevalent in these relationships. In contexts where condom negotiation is weak, and partnership duration may be extended, young women face higher rates of sexually transmitted infections. The combination of inconsistent condom use, power imbalances, and multiple or overlapping partnerships elevates these risks (George et al., 2025). Qualitative accounts echo this: many blessees report feeling unable to insist on protection, particularly when they believe the blesser might perceive such insistence as a rejection or a lack of gratitude (Duby et al., 2021).

Third, adolescent pregnancy is a common and serious consequence. Some young women in transactional relationships become pregnant, either by choice or unintentionally. This pregnancy can deepen the power imbalance, as the blesser may exert greater control or assume more “investment” in the relationship. Moreover, unintended pregnancy may have long-term social and economic consequences, reinforcing cycles of dependency (Mbetwa, Aigbogun, & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2023).

Fourth, intimate partner violence (IPV) is prevalent in these relational arrangements. Frieslaar and Masango (2021) provide a critical analysis of the blesser phenomenon in relation to gender-based violence, highlighting how coercion, emotional manipulation, and physical abuse can manifest in these relationships. In their interviews and survey data, they documented instances where blessees felt ashamed, worried, or controlled, especially when they failed to deliver on expectations, whether sexual or emotional. This structural exchange, they argue, can tacitly legitimize exploitative conduct because the transactional foundation provides a veneer of consent, even in the presence of abuse (Frieslaar & Masango, 2021).

Moreover, the reduced capacity for safe-sex negotiation contributes to these outcomes. When a young woman becomes pregnant or contracts an STI, she may feel trapped: exiting the relationship risks losing support, while staying may jeopardize her health or well-being. Emotional consequences also arise; many blessees describe psychosocial distress, shame, or

guilt associated with these relationships (Lippman et al., 2022). The transactional context creates a complex web of risk, where health, safety, emotional well-being, and economic security are deeply interdependent.

Agency and Constrained Choice

Despite the high risks, one of the most compelling themes in the literature is the nuance of agency. Blessees are not passive recipients in a one-sided contract. Rather, they often navigate a complicated terrain of constrained choice, seeking to maximize benefits while managing risk, and sometimes, maintaining dignity. Qualitative studies consistently show that many blessees exercise meaningful deliberation when selecting a partner. In Duby et al. (2021), young women described assessing potential blessers not just for their ability to provide materially, but also for their character, emotional support, and reliability. Some chose partners whom they believed would be loyal, caring, or generous. In this way, they are not choosing blindly, they are weighing who can best meet their needs, in both material and relational terms. At the same time, blessees often articulate the trade-offs they make: economic security versus personal safety, short-term gain versus long-term autonomy. While a blesser may provide money, gifts, or access, young women frequently recognize that dependence can limit their freedom. Some express concern that negotiating safer sex or fairer terms could lead to rejection, loss of support, or emotional withdrawal (Duby et al., 2021). This is where the notion of *bounded agency* becomes useful. Though blessees may make decisions, those decisions are constrained by the very power imbalances and economic insecurities that led them into the relationship. For example, in interviews, several young women reported resisting certain demands, such as unprotected sex, but ultimately giving in when the stakes of refusing seemed too high (Lippman et al., 2022). This negotiation is not purely exploitative, nor entirely consensual in the fullest sense, it occupies a gray zone defined by structural inequality.

Moreover, some blessees describe exit strategies, or at least temporary disengagement. In the narratives of Chikovore, Adebayo, and Mukora-Munyanduri (2023), young women talk about relationships with blessers as a means to an end: earning money, saving, building networks, or finishing their education. For these individuals, the relationship is not a permanent fixture but a strategic phase. They maintain that once their immediate goals are met, they may scale back or end the relationship, despite recognizing the difficulty of doing so. Such strategies reflect resilience and foresight. Peer support and social networks also shape how agency is

expressed. Blessees often lean on friends, mentors, or community advice when making decisions or evaluating risk. These networks provide emotional validation and practical guidance. In interviews, some young women reported sharing warning signs, trading stories, and helping each other identify which marriages or “arrangements” felt exploitative and which offered more mutual respect (Lippman et al., 2022). This interdependence amplifies their collective agency. Nevertheless, agency remains fundamentally constrained by structural realities. The expectation of reciprocity, a kind of implicit contract, cannot be shaken off easily. Even if a blessee wants to leave, fear of financial instability, social stigma, or reputational damage may hold her back. The power imbalance, especially when age disparity is significant, means that exiting the relationship often comes at a steep cost.

Synthesis of the Results

Putting these findings together, several critical insights emerge:

First, economic hardship is not a peripheral driver: it is central to why young people, especially women, turn to transactional relationships. But the decision is not solely about survival. There is a real interplay between material necessity and social aspiration. Many blessees are not simply seeking a benefactor, they are building a path to improved status, modernity, and self-determination, even though that path is fraught with risk.

Second, the health risks associated with blesser-blessee relationships are not incidental, they are deeply baked into relational structures. The unequal power dynamics that make material support possible also weaken negotiation capacity. This produces a dual risk: while blessees gain material advantage, they pay a price in terms of sexual health, emotional well-being, and safety.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, youth do not simply submit to these arrangements passively. Their choices are complex, reflective, and strategic. Blessees may negotiate, resist, or exit; they may use the relationship temporarily; and they often lean on social networks to guide their decisions. Yet they do so within constraints shaped by class, gender, and age. Their agency is real, but bounded.

Finally, these results highlight that interventions must be multifaceted. Because the drivers are structural, solutions cannot rely solely on behaviour change. Effective programs must address economic empowerment, access to education, and peer-level support, while also acknowledging the relational and emotional dimensions of transactional relationships.

Implications and Forward-Looking Reflections (within Results)

Although the Results section typically reports findings without too much speculation, it is worth noting, based on the empirical literature, several implications:

- ***Economic support matters deeply.*** The strong association between poverty, food insecurity, and transactional relationships indicates that social protection programs (cash transfers, food subsidies) could reduce reliance on blessers.
- ***Education is protective.*** Policies and programs that keep young people in school, or help them return, are likely to reduce vulnerability, as schooling disrupts the economic calculus that makes transactional sex attractive.
- ***Health services must be relationally sensitive.*** Sexual and reproductive health interventions need to acknowledge transactional dynamics: they should offer nonjudgmental counselling, support negotiation skills, and provide youth-friendly services that understand the power context.
- ***Empowerment demands more than economic fixes.*** Because blessees exercise agency (even if constrained), programs need to strengthen peer networks, mentorship, and social capital so that youth can make safer choices, resist exploitative practices, or exit relationships.
- ***Research continues to matter.*** The nuances of agency, exit strategies, and psychosocial trajectories revealed in the qualitative literature suggest that longitudinal studies are essential to understand how relationships evolve, how risk changes, and what supports young people need over time.

DISCUSSION

Interpreting the Link Between Poverty and Transactional Relationships

The findings across recent research demonstrate that poverty is not simply a backdrop to transactional relationships; it is a central structural driver that shapes the choices available to many young people. In contexts of enduring economic scarcity, transactional intimacy often emerges as a practical, if risky, strategy for navigating daily survival. Evidence consistently shows that young women are more likely to seek material support from older men when household resources are insufficient, revealing a direct link between deprivations such as food insecurity and participation in materially motivated relationships (George et al., 2025). These relationships function as economic buffers, providing access to food, money, mobile data, school fees, transportation, and basic necessities that families may not consistently provide. The influence of disrupted education further strengthens this structural account.

Studies show that interrupted schooling not only weakens economic prospects but also reduces exposure to protective institutional environments and peer networks (Duby et al., 2021). Young people who are out of school or struggling to secure educational opportunities describe heightened vulnerability to pursuing relationships with blessers, especially when education itself becomes contingent on financial support from these partners (Mbatha & Ndhlovu, 2021). When economic hardship collides with limited access to employment or schooling, transactional relationships become one of the few strategies for meeting immediate needs. The rationality of these choices becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of constrained agency. Bounded agency acknowledges that individuals make decisions within the parameters set by structural conditions such as poverty, gender inequality, and age-related power imbalances. While young women may make calculated choices, these choices are shaped by the limited economic options available to them and may not reflect true freedom but rather survival in a context where alternatives are scarce (Chikovore et al., 2023). Ultimately, the evidence suggests that poverty and food insecurity do more than increase vulnerability; they actively mould the decision-making environment in which young people navigate relational and economic pressures.

Public Health Implications

The strong association between transactional relationships and negative public health outcomes raises questions about how best to mitigate health risks for adolescents and young adults. Empirical studies across sub-Saharan Africa show that transactional relationships correlate with higher rates of HIV, sexually transmitted infections, and unintended pregnancies (Wamoyi et al., 2021). These risks are heightened partly because young women in transactional relationships often lack the bargaining power to negotiate condom use, especially when the material support provided by blessers is critical for survival (Duby et al., 2021). This power imbalance, which is frequently compounded by age and income disparities, reduces the feasibility of safe-sex practices even when young people are aware of the risks involved. Public health programs that focus solely on behaviour change are unlikely to succeed if they fail to address the underlying structural conditions that make transactional relationships appealing or necessary. Interventions that incorporate economic support have been found to be more effective at reducing risk because they mitigate the economic compulsions driving engagement in such relationships. Conditional and unconditional cash transfers, when paired with school support or health services, have shown positive outcomes in reducing transactional sex and improving adherence to safe-sex practices (George et al.,

2025). These measures do not eliminate transactional relationships entirely, but they reduce their necessity by giving young people alternative means of meeting their needs. Youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services also play a crucial role. These services need to be accessible, confidential, and sensitive to the complexities that define young people's relational choices. When health practitioners avoid moral judgment and instead recognise the structural realities that shape young people's decisions, young women report feeling safer and more willing to seek support (Lippman et al., 2022). Integrated programming, combining HIV prevention, STI treatment, counselling, and economic support, has consistently demonstrated greater effectiveness than isolated interventions. The evidence therefore supports a multi-layered approach that addresses both immediate health needs and the structural inequities that perpetuate risk.

Gender-Transformative and Community-Level Strategies

The blesser phenomenon cannot be understood without considering the wider gendered and cultural norms that shape expectations of masculinity, femininity, and status in many communities in sub-Saharan Africa. Research shows that transactional sexual relationships are often embedded in cultural narratives that link masculinity with economic provision and femininity with receiving material support (Frieslaar & Masango, 2021). Blesser-blessee dynamics reinforce these patterns, as blessers engage in displays of wealth and generosity to affirm their social position, while young women may view acceptance of gifts or financial assistance as part of expected gender roles. These findings underscore the need for gender-transformative interventions that challenge harmful norms and promote equitable relationship dynamics. Community-based dialogues that involve men and boys are effective in shifting attitudes that condone transactional sex or gender-based violence. Such programs encourage critical reflection on the meaning of masculinity, power, and responsibility, and they promote models of manhood that are not grounded in dominance or material provision (Frieslaar & Masango, 2021). Engaging religious leaders, elders, and other influential community figures also strengthens these initiatives, helping reshape collective expectations around relationships. Community-level strategies must also address the role of consumer culture. Social media and peer networks frequently glamorise transactional relationships by showcasing luxury items, travel, and financial security associated with blessers (Lippman et al., 2022). Interventions that help young people critically evaluate these images and understand the health and emotional risks associated with the lifestyle can reduce the allure of such relationships. Peer-led mentorship programs, in particular, have shown promise. When

young people hear from others who have experienced blisser relationships or found alternative paths to economic or educational mobility, they are more likely to make informed, safer decisions. Additionally, psychosocial support services that address trauma, shame, or coercion are essential for individuals currently engaged in transactional relationships. Counselling programs designed for young women in vulnerable contexts help build self-esteem, autonomy, and long-term planning skills. They also provide safe spaces where young people can discuss their experiences without fear of judgment or reprisal (Lippman et al., 2022). Ultimately, gender-transformative and community-level strategies complement economic and health interventions, addressing both the cultural and emotional dimensions of transactional intimacy.

Research Gaps and Priorities

Despite the growing body of research on transactional relationships, several gaps remain. Most studies use cross-sectional designs, which limits the ability to determine causal pathways linking poverty, relational dynamics, and health outcomes. While associations are well-documented, it remains unclear how trajectories evolve over time, whether transactional relationships represent temporary strategies during periods of hardship, or whether they entrench individuals in cycles of long-term vulnerability (Wamoyi et al., 2021). Longitudinal research is therefore needed to trace the life course of young people engaged in transactional intimacy, documenting how motivations, risks, and outcomes change over time. There is also a need for intervention trials that integrate multiple strategies. Evidence suggests that programs combining economic support, education retention, sexual health services, and gender norms transformation yield the most promising results (George et al., 2025). Yet there are few studies that rigorously test these multi-component interventions in real-world settings. Such trials would help identify which combinations are most effective for different populations and contexts. Furthermore, research must diversify beyond adolescent girls and young women. While they constitute a primary group affected by transactional relationships, young men also engage in similar dynamics, often with older women, yet their experiences are underexplored (Chikovore et al., 2023). Investigating how gender, sexuality, and economic vulnerability intersect across diverse identities would provide a more comprehensive understanding of transactional intimacy. More qualitative work is also needed to explore the emotional and relational aspects that quantitative studies often overlook. Young people's narratives reveal complex experiences of desire, affection, ambivalence, and agency. Understanding these nuances can help design interventions that resonate with their

lived realities rather than rely on simplistic risk-based models. Importantly, future studies should examine the role of digital platforms and social media in shaping perceptions of desirability, status, and economic aspiration among youth.

CONCLUSION

Blesser-blessee relationships continue to attract scholarly and public attention because they sit at a difficult intersection where economic scarcity, gendered expectations, and social aspirations meet. Although the language used to describe these relationships may vary across communities, the underlying dynamics are often strikingly similar. Young women and men navigate complex environments in which financial pressures, social expectations, and aspirations for mobility converge. In this context, transactional relationships do not emerge as isolated choices but as part of a larger social fabric that shapes what is possible, desirable, and sometimes necessary. Recent empirical studies leave little doubt that economic need remains a central driver. Poverty, food insecurity, and limited access to stable schooling repeatedly appear as conditions that heighten the likelihood of involvement in relationships where material exchange is expected. These structural constraints shape the everyday realities of many adolescents and young adults. When household resources become stretched, school attendance is disrupted, or reliable income opportunities are out of reach, transactional arrangements can come to be viewed as pragmatic and immediate strategies for coping with scarcity. They offer access to money, food, clothing, transport, and social markers that many young people struggle to secure through other means. Even though these choices carry significant risks, they occur in an environment where the alternative may involve deeper insecurity, hunger, or a sense of social exclusion.

The findings reviewed in earlier sections also show that the implications for health and wellbeing are substantial. Involvement in transactional relationships has been repeatedly linked with increased vulnerability to HIV infection, sexually transmitted infections, adolescent pregnancy, and various forms of gender-based and intimate partner violence. These associations speak to more than individual behaviour; they reflect broader systems of power and dependence. Younger partners frequently have reduced ability to negotiate the timing and nature of sexual encounters, including the consistent use of condoms. When financial assistance or material goods are perceived as conditional upon maintaining the relationship, the space for negotiation becomes even narrower. The presence of age disparities often deepens the imbalance, making younger partners more vulnerable to

coercion, manipulation, or emotional pressure. While these relationships expose individuals to measurable health risks, it is equally important to recognise the layers of agency that young people express. Many participants describe transactional arrangements not only as survival strategies but also as pathways to social belonging, self-presentation, and aspirational lifestyles. These desires are shaped by broader community norms, peer networks, and the influence of media. For some, the relationship brings a sense of independence or empowerment in the short term, even when the longer-term consequences are more complex. A conclusion that reduces individuals solely to victims would overlook the thoughtful, strategic, and sometimes hopeful decisions that young people make within the constraints that surround them. Instead, the evidence points to a form of agency that is shaped by limited options, structural pressures, and social expectations. Recognising this complexity provides a more realistic foundation for responsive policy and programme design.

Given the clear connections between structural inequality and heightened vulnerability, responses that focus only on personal decision-making will almost certainly fall short. Behavioural messages that emphasise abstinence, condom use, or partner selection cannot succeed if individuals lack access to food, income, or education. Programs that rely solely on moral persuasion or public warnings risk misunderstanding the motivations that many young people articulate. A more effective approach must work across sectors. Economic support remains central. Cash transfers, access to nutrition, school retention initiatives, and opportunities for sustainable income can help reduce the pressures that drive transactional involvement in the first place. When adolescents and young adults can meet their basic needs or pursue educational goals without relying on partners for financial security, their vulnerability to harmful exchanges diminishes. Alongside economic measures, accessible sexual and reproductive health services are essential. Clinics and youth-friendly services must offer confidential, non-judgmental support that helps young people protect themselves even when they remain within transactional arrangements. These services should include reliable contraceptive access, HIV testing and prevention tools, and counselling that respects the realities young people face. When health systems treat transactional relationships as moral failings rather than social phenomena, adolescents and young adults may avoid care, further deepening their vulnerability. In contrast, respectful and youth-centered services can help reduce harm and strengthen autonomy even in challenging contexts.

Another vital dimension lies in gender-transformative approaches. Because transactional relationships are deeply entangled with social norms about masculinity, femininity, power, and status, meaningful change requires community-level engagement. Programmes that involve men and boys in discussions about gendered expectations, consumption pressures, and responsible partner behaviour can help shift the norms that fuel the blesser phenomenon. Similarly, safe community spaces for young women can support open dialogue about aspirations, peer influence, and the pressures to conform to particular lifestyles. These conversations can help reframe what constitutes status, empowerment, or success, offering alternatives to transactional pathways that may feel obligatory. Community leadership, including faith leaders, educators, and local organisations, also plays an important role. When respected figures actively challenge harmful norms and provide supportive environments for adolescents, the social landscape begins to shift. Structural interventions must therefore be paired with cultural and relational ones, recognising that transactional relationships are embedded in collective expectations, not isolated individual decisions.

As the research base continues to grow, several gaps remain. Much of the existing evidence relies on cross-sectional designs, which offer valuable snapshots but cannot fully explain the processes that unfold over time. Longitudinal studies would allow researchers to understand whether transactional involvement is temporary and situational, or whether it leads to persistent patterns of risk and dependence. Such work would help identify turning points in young people's lives, moments where support interventions could be most effective. Another priority lies in testing multi-component interventions through rigorous trials. Given that vulnerability arises from multiple interacting factors, it is likely that the most effective responses will involve combinations of economic support, education retention, gender-norms programmes, and health services. Understanding how these components work together, and which combinations provide the strongest protection, will allow policymakers and practitioners to allocate resources more strategically. Ultimately, the evidence points toward a conclusion that is both sobering and constructive. Transactional relationships are not simply the result of poor decision-making or moral weakness; they emerge from the lived realities of young people navigating unequal social and economic conditions. They reflect the weight of poverty, the persistence of gendered power imbalances, and the appeal of social mobility in a world that often reserves opportunity for the few. Addressing these relationships therefore requires more than individual advice; it demands a holistic approach that strengthens

household security, enhances educational pathways, expands access to supportive health services, and challenges the gendered expectations that shape young people's choices.

At the same time, there is room for optimism. When young people are offered genuine economic opportunities, when they feel safe and respected within communities, and when they have access to health services that treat them with dignity, their ability to make safer and more empowering choices grows significantly. By recognising the full complexity of blesser-blessee relationships, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners can work toward responses that honour young people's agency while reducing the structural and relational constraints that place them at risk.

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