

DIGNITY.

SAFETY.

VOICE.

POWER.

Young women have a right.



### Newspaper Article

Imagine you are Sara, a 12-year-old girl whose parents have died of AIDS. You now live with your Auntie and her five children. Since Auntie's husband disappeared last year, she has been struggling to pay school fees for the two eldest boys. Before your father died you loved school and made very good grades, but now you must help your Auntie with the housework and babies. Auntie says she wants to send you to school but she has no money, and that God will create a way for you.

The next day Sam, a business partner of your late father's, greets you. He tells you what a beautiful young woman you are becoming. When he finds out you are not in school he becomes upset. He tells you that he made a promise to your father before he died to help with your education. Sam tells you to meet him at his house tomorrow evening to collect the money for your school fees.

At first you are so happy and thank God for answering your prayers! Later, you begin to have some doubts. Sam is your late father's colleague so you should trust him, but why all of sudden is he paying you so much attention? You remember a friend who told you she had to have sex with her neighbor to get her fees paid. You don't want to owe Sam anything but you need the money for school and feel like you have no other choice.

Sara's situation is not uncommon. Young girls across Africa are forced to make such choices. Practices such as transactional sex, marriage of young girls to much older men, and male infidelity put our young women at increased risk for HIV and even violence.

Transactional sex, or the exchange of money or favors for sex, puts Sara at risk in many ways. Because of his age, Sam likely has a longer sexual history with more chance of exposure to HIV. The fact that Sara's body and reproductive system is still developing, and the fact that she does not really want to have sex with Sam, will mean that there is a greater likelihood of tearing during sex, making her chances of getting HIV from Sam even higher.

Sam clearly has more power than Sara. He has the money that she needs, status in the community, and more experience that comes with age. This makes it very difficult for Sara to say no or to negotiate with Sam about safe sex practices like condoms. When young girls are married to much older men, they face similar risks due to their lack of control over sex. When husbands have sex outside the marriage their risk of contracting HIV increases. Young wives who have limited financial options and nowhere to go cannot easily speak up to protect themselves -- even when they know the risk.

Once young women test positive for HIV, studies show that they are very often at increased risk for violence from their partners. A study in Tanzania found that HIV-positive women were more than two-and-a-half times more likely to have experienced violence by their partner than HIV-negative women. Women are in danger of being beaten, abandoned or thrown out of their homes if they reveal an HIV-positive status, a fact which often prevents them from accessing treatment.

No one wants this to be the story of the young women we know, so make a decision to take action! There are many small things that you as an individual, parent, teacher, or community leader can do that can make a big difference. Parents can talk to their children about transactional sex, HIV and how to say no. Fathers in particular can be positive role models for their children by modeling a non-violent relationship where decision making and communication is shared. Women and men can form groups that mentor and support youth that are at risk. Teachers can commit to be aware of warning signs among their students, talk to them and offer support. Community leaders can form counseling and discussion groups so that men and women can begin to communicate about the issues of HIV, relationships, power imbalances, and violence. Each one of us can confront men we see and know who are exploiting young women. Young people themselves can counsel friends about the risks and help connect them to supportive adults.

Join us from November 25 to December 10 for the 16 Days of Activism Against Violence Against Women. This year, men and women of all ages across Africa will be focusing on ways to make our communities safer for young women so they can stay free from violence and HIV/AIDS. Change starts with you – will you take up the challenge?