



The Relationships and Mental Health of "Slay Queens" in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Scoping Review of an Evidence Gap

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Abstract

Background: The booming trend in social class and materialistic lifestyles coupled with the increasing high rates of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa have birthed a new form of transactional sex termed the Blesser/Slay Queen relationship. Despite well-documented links to intimate partner violence, HIV, gender-based violence, and unwanted pregnancies, little systematic attention has been given to the mental health consequences for girls and young women in these relationships.

Methods: This scoping review followed the framework defined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and PRISMA-ScR reporting guidelines. We searched six databases using terms related to Blesser/Slay Queen, transactional, sugar, and intergenerational relationships in sub-Saharan Africa. After screening 581 records, 39 studies were included.

Results: The study underscores a lack of systematic research on the mental health of girls and women who engage in intergenerational transactional sex in Sub-Saharan Africa. Most studies (64%) were qualitative and conducted in South Africa (79.5%). While studies provide information on the nature of relationships between Blessers and Slay Queens, particularly HIV risk and gender-based violence, very little is known about participants' other close relationships, including family members and children. Only two of 39 studies directly examined mental health outcomes, finding high rates of PTSD and severe depression.

Conclusions: We suggest recommendations for further study and underscore the need for policy advocacy and interventions tailored towards mental health awareness and help-seeking behaviors among sub-Saharan women engaged in Blesser Relationships.

Keywords: Slay Queen, Blesser, Blessee, Transactional sex, Intergenerational relationships, Mental health, Sub-Saharan Africa, Scoping review

Introduction

The booming trend in social class and materialistic lifestyles coupled with the increasing high rates of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa have birthed a new form of transactional sex termed the Blesser/Slay Queen relationships/phenomena. The Blesser is usually an older man between the ages of 30 and 70, and the Slay Queen a young woman ranging from the ages of 13 to at least 30 years old. Because this age range includes girls under 18, relationships involving these younger participants fall under child sexual exploitation and abuse frameworks and carry legal and ethical distinctions from transactional relationships involving adult women; this distinction is important for how mental health outcomes such as trauma and PTSD are understood and for the policy and intervention implications discussed later in this review. These practices are documented in poor urban and rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa [1, 2], but also flourish in young girls in college, who may seek to gain prestige and trendier lifestyles.

This intergenerational practice of transactional sex has left many girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation [3-5]. It has also been linked to intimate partner violence, multiple partners, early pregnancies, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and social stigma and isolation [6]. Large-scale evidence from South Africa now confirms that adolescent girls and young women in Blesser relationships are significantly more likely to be HIV positive, experience intimate partner violence, and have an STI diagnosis compared to their peers [7].

There is strong evidence suggesting that girls and women who are involved in intergenerational transactional sex are prone to

experience serious and often long-term mental health problems [8], which may also affect their pregnancies, children, and whole families. Indeed, recent research has highlighted the combination of intimate partner violence, HIV, and mental health in sub-Saharan Africa as a "triple epidemic of global proportions" [9]. Despite these links, little systematic attention has been given to the mental health consequences of girls and women who are engaged in Blesser/Slay Queen relationships. Understanding the mental health of affected girls and women and their relationships with partners and close others is important for developing policies and programs that could improve their mental health trajectories, but also those of their children and families.

We undertook a scoping review to better understand the size and scope of available research literature on the relationships and mental health of Slay Queens in sub-Saharan Africa. As a methodological approach, scoping reviews allow for an overview and exploration of what has been written on a topic [10]. Using evidence maps, scoping reviews provide a mapping of research activity, including the type of study (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods), location, participants, and study aims. This allows for an identification of main themes, major research gaps, and areas for future study.

Definitions

A variety of terms are used to describe young girls and women in sub-Saharan Africa who engage in transactional sex with older men who provide them with material advantages, support, or money. The terms include "Slay Queen," "Blessee," "Sugar Babe," or "Taxi Queen" [11, 12] for young girls. Similarly, corresponding terms can be found for older men, including "Blesser," "Sugar Daddy," and "Taxi Sugar Daddy." These terms are often used interchangeably in the literature. However, the terms also vary from region to region within sub-Saharan Africa [13-16].

The different terminology reflects in part changing conceptions about shame and stigma associated with Blesser/Slay Queen relations [17]. The term "Blesser" became the preferred term over "sugar daddy," for instance, because it implied no shame in dating older men for material benefits. Girls and women engaging in these relationships in fact upload pictures of the gifts and money obtained from their Blesser with no remorse, instead showing pride under an acceptable and widely adopted hashtag #Blessed [18-20].

In this paper, we utilize the term "Slay Queen" as it is the term most found in recent literature. However, our scoping review includes literature that covers intergenerational transactional sex, 'sugar babes,' and 'sugar daddies.' Our research does not cover commercial sex work since participating women and girls do not identify themselves as 'prostitutes' and 'clients,' and the exchange of gifts for sex is often a part of a broader set of obligations that might not involve a predetermined payment or contract [21].

Although transactional sex arrangements between younger and older partners occur worldwide, we focus this review specifically on sub-Saharan Africa because in the Blesser/Slay Queen phenomenon there is an embedded distinct set of terms, norms, and cultural meanings, such as the reframing of "Blesser" as a source of pride rather than shame and the region-specific structural drivers described above, that separate it from superficially similar transactional relationships (e.g., Western "sugar dating") in other parts of the world. This regional specificity is also why our literature search, while broad enough to capture related terminology such as "sugar daddy" and "sugar babe" so that no relevant study was missed, was ultimately restricted through full-text screening to studies conducted in, or specifically addressing, sub-Saharan Africa.

Methods

Scoping review methodologies seek to identify all relevant literature on a given area of study regardless of its specific study

design (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, longitudinal). The literature search is iterative in nature, meaning that search terms are not strictly limited at the outset, but are redefined to ensure that the literature is comprehensively searched. Two individuals typically with different expertise work together to ensure comprehensiveness [22]. In this study, this was accomplished by a three-member review team with complementary expertise spanning international social work in sub-Saharan Africa, poverty and policy, mental health and trauma, and gender-based violence and human rights frameworks. Full author affiliations and areas of expertise are provided on the title page in accordance with this journal's blinded peer-review policy.

Our scoping review followed the framework defined by Arksey and O'Malley [22] and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR). This included establishing the research questions, selecting relevant studies, charting the data, and synthesizing main themes and results.

Research Questions

We sought to address three research questions:

1. What is the scope (i.e., study approach, country of study, year of publication, etc.) of existing literature on the family relationships and mental health of girls and women in sub-Saharan Africa who engage in transactional sex with older men?
2. What are the main themes and variables studied?
3. What are major gaps in the literature that future studies will need to address, especially regarding family relationships and mental health?

Identifying Relevant Studies

We searched the following databases to identify peer-reviewed articles that examined the relationships and mental health of Slay Queens in sub-Saharan Africa: Google Scholar, African Diaspora 1860–Present, African Studies Centre Database (Leiden), Gender: Identity and Social Change, PubMed, and ProQuest. The search terms used were: 'Blesser,' 'Slay Queen,' 'Blessee,' 'Africa,' 'sugar daddy,' 'sugar babe,' 'sexual relationships,' and 'transactional relationships' across all the databases; some databases yielded no results due to their ability to filter searches better than others. The resulting articles were then imported to Zotero where duplicates and books were identified and removed. This yielded a total of 581 articles. Several of these search terms (e.g., "sugar daddy," "sugar babe") are not unique to sub-Saharan Africa and were deliberately included, alongside region-specific terms, to cast a wide enough net that no relevant sub-Saharan African study was missed; the sub-Saharan African focus of the final sample was then enforced through the eligibility criteria and full-text screening described below, not by the search terms alone.

Eligibility Criteria

We included peer-reviewed articles published in English that focused on Slay Queens, intergenerational relationships, sugar relationships, and transactional sexual relationships in sub-Saharan Africa. Excluded material included books, articles not in English, articles about boys or young men involved in transactional sex with older women, those about prostitution, and others that did not specifically address Slay Queens or transactional relationships in sub-Saharan Africa. Dissertations were included to increase the literature analysis scope due to the limited amount of literature available on Blesser relationships. Furthermore, sugar daddy relationships, intergenerational relationships, and transactional relationships were added to the search criteria and inclusion criteria to obtain a more comprehensive scoping review.

Figure 1 shows a flow diagram of the steps leading to the included articles. The chart shows a step-by-step process of the screening, inclusion and exclusion criteria, excluded articles and reasons for exclusion, and finally the articles included in the synthesis of results.

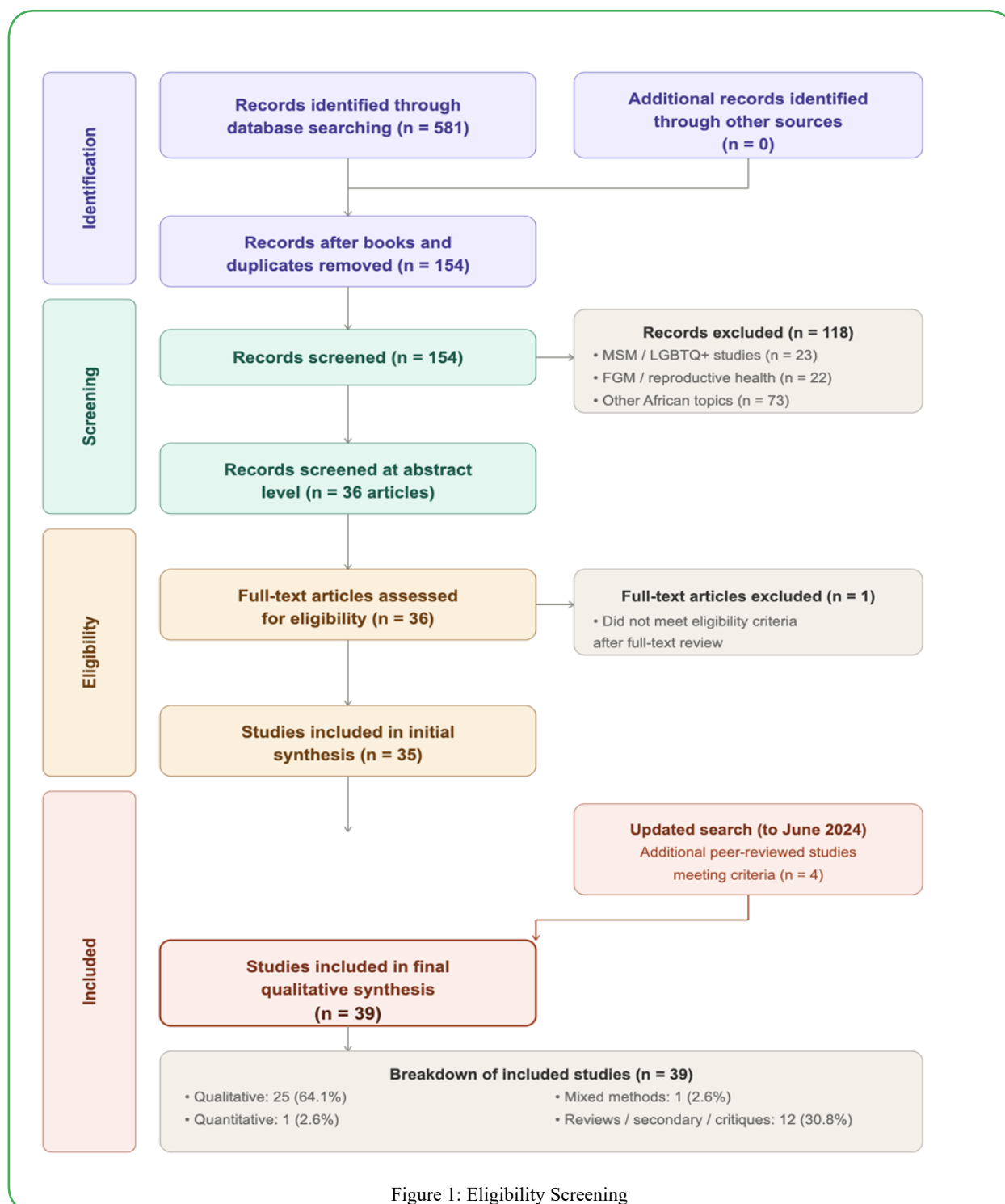


Figure 1: Eligibility Screening

Initial Title and Peer-Reviewed Screening

The initial screening of title and peer-reviewed articles from the results yielded a total of 581 studies. 203 were excluded because they were books and 224 were either not in English or it was evident through the title that they were not about Blesser/Slay Queen relationships nor transactional relationships in sub-Saharan Africa. This left a total of 154 studies to be screened further.

Abstract Screening

The remaining 154 studies were included following the initial screening of title, dissertation, or peer-reviewed status. These 154 articles were then abstract-screened to check if the abstract fit the inclusion criteria. Twenty-three were about men who have sex with men or who were LGBTQ+ ($n = 23$), twenty-two were about

reproductive health and female genital mutilation (FGM) ($n = 22$), and 73 were about varying topics in Africa including politics and culture ($n = 73$). This screening yielded 36 articles. Because of the large number of dissertations ($n = 13$) on Blesser/Slay Queen relationship content, we included them in the hope of discovering information on potential psychological effects and mental health implications of the relationships.

Eligibility

The included articles were eligible on the basis that they were about Blesser/Slay Queen relationships, intergenerational sexual relationships, transactional relationships, sugar daddy relationships, and sugar relationships in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, the articles had to be peer-reviewed, dissertations, or literature reviews;

focus on the mentioned aspects; be conducted in sub-Saharan Africa; and be published in English.

Full-Text Screening and Coding

Full-text screening for each of the 36 articles was done to determine the areas of focus in these articles. As much as all these articles were about Blesser/Slay Queen relationships, transactional relationships, cross-generational relationships, or sugar relationships, there was a need to determine the themes covered in order to assess whether any of this literature conveys the psychological and mental health effects of these relationships on the women involved and their families. One article was excluded after full-text review for not meeting eligibility criteria, leaving 35 studies. An updated database search extending through June 2024 identified four additional peer-reviewed studies [23–26] that met all inclusion criteria, bringing the final sample to 39 studies.

Results

Scope

Table 1 provides an overview of main characteristics of the 39 articles that were identified for this scoping review, including the study's approach, country of study, year of publication, and publication type. Twenty-five of the 39 studies (64.1%) were qualitative and were predominantly undertaken in South Africa (79.5%). The qualitative studies utilized focus groups and in-depth interviews. Participants were typically between the ages of 14 and 35, ranging from college students, graduates, and high school students and dropouts. Most articles ($n = 35$) were published between 2010 and 2024. Approximately 49% of articles were published in peer-reviewed journals.

Characteristics	n	%
Study Approach		
Quantitative	1	2.6
Qualitative	25	64.1
Mixed Methods	1	2.6
Other (lit reviews, secondary analyses, critiques)	12	30.8
Country of Study		
South Africa	31	79.5
Kenya	2	5.1
Tanzania	1	2.6
Madagascar	1	2.6
Sub-Saharan Africa (multi-country or review)	4	10.3
Year of Publication		
2000–2009	4	10.3
2010–2024	35	89.7
Publication Type		
Peer-reviewed journal article	19	48.7
Thesis or dissertation	13	33.3
Open forum / critique / editorial	3	7.7
Literature review / secondary analysis	4	10.3

Table 1: Overview of Characteristics of 39 Included Studies

Themes and Variables

Table 2 provides an overview of the study variables for each of the 39 articles, and major themes, along with information about study participants, key findings, and country where the study was conducted. Beyond supporting the narrative synthesis below, this table is intended to stand alone as a consolidated reference for researchers and practitioners seeking a single overview of the existing Blesser/Slay Queen literature.

Most of the articles ($n = 30$) focused on the prevalence of HIV and STIs in the relationships and described the relationships as risky and a breeding ground for HIV and sexually transmitted infections. Other measured variables included poverty, transactional sex, peer pressure, risks (physical and mental), power dynamics, violence and vulnerability, upbringing, home life, education, community life and beliefs, relationship with caregivers and parents, intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, HIV, sexual relationships, gender norms, patriarchy, age, sexual risk behaviors, food security, perceptions, consequences, and father absence or lack of parental emotional support.

The largest of the included studies, a cross-sectional survey of 18,926 adolescent girls and young women across four South African

districts, found that those in Blesser and other age-disparate partnerships had substantially elevated HIV risk, along with higher rates of multiple partnerships and other risky sexual behaviors, compared to peers not in such relationships [27].

Several studies sought to establish the prevalence of Blesser/Slay Queen relationships in sub-Saharan Africa [17, 20, 28–30] and the varying reasons for engaging in them. Identified motivations ranged from poverty, naivety, and lack of alternative economic opportunities, to social status and gender and socioeconomic inequalities that leave women desperate for resources [17, 20, 28, 29, 31], as well as the relationship between these relationships and HIV/AIDS prevalence among young girls involved in them [17, 20, 28, 30]. With regard to men, most studies mentioned sexual gratification and dominant/patriarchal cultural tendencies as factors that play a major role in their involvement in the relationships.

More recently, Doyisa et al. [23] explored perceptions among university students in Durban and found that both men and women understood these relationships to be common and risk-laden, with older men driven primarily by sexual gratification and women by material and monetary gain. George et al. [24] found that women often adopted subtle negotiating strategies to try to secure their intended benefits, but frequently experienced disillusionment over

the course of the partnership, as any assertion of their preferences risked losing the Blesser and the associated material support. Sprague et al. [26] further documented that women in Blesser relationships frequently experience normative conflicts between their personal values and the social expectations sustaining these partnerships,

generating significant psychological tension. A systematic review and meta-analysis covering sub-Saharan Africa by Mihretie et al. [25] confirmed that transactional sex is significantly associated with HIV, other STIs, unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortion, and physiological trauma.

#	Author, Year	Country	Design (n)	Measured Variables	Key Findings	Theme(s)
1	Brouard & Crewe [32]	South Africa	N/A	N/A	N/A	HIV; stigma; women empowerment; poverty; intergenerational sex
2	De Beer [29]	South Africa	Qualitative (23)	Gender; personal meaning; power dynamics; vulnerability	Transactional sex more favorable to men; normalization of transactional sex; laziness	HIV; transactional sex; poverty; materialism
3	Doyisa [16]	South Africa	Qualitative (15)	Poverty; materialism; peer pressure; physical/mental risks; power dynamics	Need for parental support, awareness, women empowerment	HIV/STIs; transactional sex; poverty; materialism; peer pressure
4	Doyisa, Maharaj & Dunn [23]	South Africa	Qualitative (15)	Perceptions; motivations; HIV risk in blesser relationships	Both parties at HIV risk; men driven by sexual gratification; women by material gain	HIV; blesser-blesee; university students; risk
5	Fasselt [33]	South Africa	N/A	Girl power; post-feminism; power dynamics; agency	Blesser/Blessee framed as postfeminist agency; complex gender politics	Chick-lit politics; girl power; post-feminism; gender
6	Frieslaar [34]	South Africa	Qualitative (5)	Upbringing; home life; relationship with caregivers; education; community life	Violence; abuse; exploitation; lack of parental support; school dropouts	Abuse; violence; poverty; pastoral care; intergenerational sex; HIV
7	Frieslaar & Masango [35]	South Africa	Qualitative/narrative	IPV; GBV; HIV; poverty; gender norms; patriarchy	Patriarchy; commodification of women; need for pastoral care and healing	IPV; GBV; HIV; poverty; gender norms; patriarchy
8	George et al. [27]	South Africa	Quantitative (18,926)	HIV status; STI status; relationship type; age; sexual risk behaviors; food security	Multiple partnerships; high HIV risk in blesser relationships; risky sexual behaviors	HIV; age disparate; risk; STIs
9	George, Maqsood & Sprague [24]	South Africa	Qualitative (22)	Negotiated rewards; perceived risk; risk-mitigation strategies	Women adopt subtle negotiating strategies; disillusionment common; agency compromised	HIV; risk; agency; power dynamics; transactional sex
10	Glasscoe [31]	South Africa	Qualitative (31)	Knowledge; motivations; perceptions; consequences	Emotional dangers: betrayal, deceit, dependency; relationship morality issues	HIV; agency; vulnerability; power dynamics
11	Goso et al. [8]	South Africa	Qualitative (15)	Father absence; parental emotional support; poverty; multiple partners	Need for intervention programs; female empowerment; financial independence	Father absence; poverty; multiple partners; STIs
12	Hoss & Blokland [15]	South Africa	Mixed methods	Mental health status; experiences; perceptions of girls	PTSD and severe depression common; power imbalance; manipulation; vulnerability; agency	Mental health; PTSD; depression; poverty; patriarchy; inequality
13	Jeawon [36]	South Africa	Qualitative (22)	Masculinity; control; dominance; reasons for older men's participation	Self-esteem and social standing driving forces for men in transactional sex	Masculinity; sexual gratification; self-esteem; sugar daddy; control
14	Jonas [37]	South Africa	Secondary analysis	Youth culture; materialism; age-disparate relationships; spirituality; theological response	Blesser phenomenon linked to poverty; need for awareness; culture a contributing factor	Patriarchy; culture; gender inequality; materialism; HIV/AIDS

Table 2. to be cont...

15	Kaufman & Stavrou [38]	South Africa	Qualitative (64)	Gift-giving economics; sexual risk behaviors; patterns	Gift-giving shapes sexual relationships; cash associated with prostitution by youth	Gifts; power imbalance; sexual relationships
16	Kinuthia [19]	South Africa	N/A	Terminology; meaning; characteristics of Slay Queen/Blesser	Definitional overview of Blesser/Blessee/Slay Queen	Terminology; social media; materialism; celebrities
17	Leclerc-Madlala [11]	Southern Africa	N/A	HIV risks; prevention policies; risk perceptions; relationship factors	Money/gifts central; women blamed for seducing men; polygamous culture normalizes practice	HIV; young women; age-disparate sex; poverty; patriarchy
18	Letsoalo & Lentoer [39]	South Africa	Qualitative (10)	Psychosocial dynamics; HIV vulnerability; transactional sex	Cannot negotiate safe sex; serious psychosocial and health consequences	Transactional sex; HIV; vulnerability; psychosocial dynamics; materialism
19	Longfield et al. [14]	Kenya	Qualitative (28M; 8 FGs)	HIV/STI risk perception; condom use; motivations for cross-gen relationships	Low risk perception; women's safe-sex capacity compromised by age/economic disparities	HIV; STIs; power play; poverty; age disparities
20	Luke [13]	Sub-Saharan Africa	Literature review	Age mixing; economic transactions; behavior dynamics	Transactional intergenerational relationships common; associated with unsafe sex; HIV risk	HIV; transactional sex; power play; vulnerability
21	Luke & Kurz [40]	Sub-Saharan Africa	N/A	Prevalence; motivations for cross-generational sex	Cross-generational sex normative; most end in unintended pregnancy	Cross-generational sex; HIV; reproductive health; women empowerment
22	Makhanya [28]	South Africa	Qualitative (20)	Multiple partnerships; cultural values; sexual double standards	Male students more likely to report multiple partners; Zulu cultural values promote multiple partners	HIV; risky behaviors; patriarchy; polygamy; violence; cultural beliefs
23	Mampane [18]	South Africa	Qualitative (12)	Perceptions; sociobehavioral/ sociocultural/ socioeconomic factors; HIV risk	Structural factors influence transactional sex susceptibility and HIV risk	HIV; patriarchy; economic factors; poverty
24	Masanya [41]	South Africa	N/A	Traditional gender roles; HIV; women's seduction power; patriarchy	Women's seduction power perceived to unsettle patriarchal order; girls seen as victims of HIV	Cross-generational; patriarchy; HIV; feminism; Christianity
25	Mavhandu-Mudzusi [42]	South Africa	Qualitative (20)	Motivations; refugee girls' perceptions and experiences	Blessers provide refuge; poverty and sex work as drivers; basic needs provided	Poverty; sex work; HIV; vulnerability; women empowerment
26	Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al. [2]	South Africa	IPA qualitative (20)	Factors contributing to refugee girls' intergenerational sex involvement	Powerlessness; curiosity; culture; anonymity; poor educational status; poor living conditions	Poverty; HIV; vulnerability; education; women empowerment
27	Mihretie et al. [25]	Sub-Saharan Africa	Sys. review & meta-analysis	HIV; STIs; unintended pregnancy; unsafe abortion; physiological trauma	Transactional sex significantly associated with all adverse health outcomes across SSA	HIV; STIs; unintended pregnancy; physiological trauma; SSA
28	Moodley & Ebrahim [43]	South Africa	N/A	Terminology shift; risk discourse; gift-giving vs. prostitution; non-economic benefits	'Blesser' framing makes transactional sex more appealing; immunizes it from risk discourse	Consumerism; blesser; transactional sex; technology; lifestyle; companionship

Table 2. to be cont...

29	Moore et al. [44]	Sub-Saharan Africa	Mixed methods	Prevalence; meanings of exchange of money/gifts for sex; unmarried adolescents	Exchange of money/gifts for sex common across SSA; meanings and contexts vary	Gifts; transactional sex; HIV; adolescents; sub-Saharan Africa
30	Ntombela [30]	South Africa	Qualitative (39)	Risky sexual behaviors; HIV vulnerability; peer pressure; party culture	Risky behaviors among college students very common; lack of parental supervision; poverty	Poverty; peer pressure; HIV; risky behaviors; vulnerability
31	Palfreman [20]	South Africa	Qualitative (36)	Societal/peer perceptions; motivations; experiences of women	Material benefits primary motivation; negative societal perceptions do not deter women	Blesser; materialism; SRH; HIV; vulnerability; perceptions
32	Potgieter et al. [12]	South Africa	Qualitative	Male taxi driver attitudes toward transactional relationships	Men view relationships as entitlement; women seen as complicit	Sugar daddy; transactional sex; masculinity; GBV; Western Cape
33	Ranganathan et al. [1]	South Africa	Qualitative (45)	Young women's perceptions; HIV risk; economic instability; transactional sex	Economic instability drives transactional sex; women vulnerable to HIV; need for self-reliance	HIV; transactional sex; financial autonomy; vulnerability; agency
34	Shefer & Strebel [45]	South Africa	Literature review	Intergenerational sex; HIV; male sexual drive discourse; power inequalities	Power inequalities; economic necessity; few women exchange money for own desire	HIV; violence; unwanted pregnancy; patriarchy; poverty; sexuality
35	Singata [17]	South Africa	Secondary analysis	Agency; power dynamics; effects on lessee; structural factors	Agency minimal or non-existent; limited freedom of action; need for women empowerment	HIV; gender inequality; materialism; sexual coercion; poverty; agency
36	Sprague et al. [46]	South Africa	Qualitative (22)	Women's experiences; sexual/human rights; psychological toll; lack of autonomy	Structural gender inequality; psychological harm; lack of autonomy; emotional needs unmet	Blesser; HIV; gender inequality; sexual health; coercion; vulnerability
37	Sprague, Maqsood & George [26]	South Africa	Qualitative (22)	Social norms vs. personal norms; normative conflicts; self-efficacy; wellbeing	Normative conflicts generate psychological tension; women's self-efficacy important for health	Social norms; blesser; personal values; psychological wellbeing; South Africa
38	Stoebenau et al. [47]	Sub-Saharan Africa	Literature review	Agency; consumption; gender inequality; love; survival vs. aspiration; victimization	Women are agents but agency constrained; economic dependence key; globalization shapes motives	HIV; gender inequality; globalization; poverty; patriarchy; agency; consumption
39	Thobejane et al. [48]	South Africa	Qualitative (10)	Motivations; academic fee pressure; family background; peer pressure	Financial support primary driver; peer pressure; lifestyle maintenance; student loan pressure	Blesser; poverty; peer pressure; transactional sex; materialism

Table 2: Brief Summary of Included Articles

Note. N/A = not applicable. IPA = interpretive phenomenological analysis. GBV = gender-based violence. IPV = intimate partner violence. SRH = sexual and reproductive health. STIs = sexually transmitted infections. SSA = sub-Saharan Africa. FG = focus group.

Themes of vulnerability, power dynamics, and the occurrence of gender-based violence occurred in at least 28 of the articles. Most of these studies found that the significant difference in age and economic power between the young women/Blessees/Slay Queens and the Blessees/sugar daddies puts them in a vulnerable position, as it limits their bargaining power for safe sex and renders them vulnerable to HIV, STIs, and gender-based violence [18, 30, 43]. A few articles examined power dynamics in the relationships that exacerbated the spread of HIV, emphasizing that women lacked the bargaining power for safe sex and were vulnerable to gender-based violence and abuse by men who were usually twice their age [49-51]. Women's decision-making capacity was described as limited in such relationships

[17, 20]. Sexual coercion, consumerist culture and materialism, sexual health, vulnerability, sexual gratification, sexuality, and sexual pleasure were other recurring themes in the findings. These studies did not directly link violence and oppression to mental health.

By contrast, very little research was found on other close relationships, including family members and children. Yet studying these relationships may be critical for understanding the pathways and decisions girls and women make and for determining what their current support networks are.

It is worth noting that only two of the 39 studies focused exclusively on the mental health of participants. Hoss and Blokland [6] found that

PTSD and severe depression were common among girls and women in Blesser relationships, identifying unequal power dynamics, manipulation, and sustained vulnerability as contributing factors. Sprague et al. [46] similarly documented psychological distress, infringement of sexual rights, and undermined independence as outcomes, finding that women's emotional needs were frequently unmet within these partnerships.

One study focused on feminism, girl power, and the modern political arena, linking the Blesser/Slay Queen phenomenon to a symbol of girl power [33]. Though this study was more of a book critique and more politically inclined, it was included in the analysis for its mention of the Slay Queen phenomenon and the different perspective it presented on agency in Blesser/Slay Queen relationships. It is possible that agency exerts a positive effect on mental health outcomes due to positive attitudes toward their roles and the power held by women in getting their needs met. There is, however, no evidence that confirms this.

One study linked the Blesser/Slay Queen phenomenon to religion [34], suggesting the church can be a medium of intervention in the lives of the girls to provide counselling services. As much as this sounds somewhat relevant to mental health intervention, further analysis of the article reveals that it is more related to culture and religion and depicts African patriarchal tendencies to teach women modesty and obedience to help them become better wives that are morally acceptable to African societies.

Gaps

A major gap was the lack of systematic data on mental health outcomes in girls and women. There was also very little literature that addressed the children and families of the girls, despite several of the articles mentioning unplanned and unwanted pregnancies as one of the major outcomes of Blesser/Slay Queen relationships. In contrast to studies that looked at relationships between Blesser and Slay Queens, little research has been conducted on women's relationships in their families of origin and on current support networks, although a few studies looked at absentee fathers and the lack of parental support [34, 48].

The geographical concentration of the studies also presents a need for further research in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa to accurately investigate the prevalence of Blesser/Slay Queen relationships and the mental health sequelae in those regions. Of the 39 studies, 31 were conducted in South Africa, which presents a clear gap in the literature from other countries. This will help address the universal need for mental health awareness and interventions in Africa and tackle the gender inequalities and patriarchal cultural practices that render women economically volatile and vulnerable to risky behaviors like these relationships.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first scoping review of studies on the relationships and mental health of Slay Queens in sub-Saharan Africa. The study highlights the need for more systematic research on the mental health outcomes of Blesser/Slay Queen relationships and possible interventions in policy and programs to address needs that are noticeably being overlooked.

The constant focus on HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, abortions, and unwanted pregnancies emphasizes that the conditions are conducive for the occurrence and existence of mental health issues among sub-Saharan women in Blesser/Slay Queen relationships. Indeed, these and other variables, including poverty, patriarchy, peer pressure, and materialism, will need to be considered in such research, as they commonly emerge as co-occurring contexts that exacerbate outcomes. Recent evidence reinforces this picture: a systematic review and meta-analysis confirmed across sub-Saharan Africa that transactional sex is associated with elevated risk of HIV,

other STIs, unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortion, and physiological trauma [25], and large-scale survey data from South Africa show that adolescent girls and young women with Blesser partners are significantly more likely to be HIV positive, experience intimate partner violence, and carry an STI diagnosis [7].

The lack of research on mental health outcomes may be linked to a more general disregard for mental health in Africa [52, 53, 54]. As such, this presents a major challenge in creating awareness and providing mental health services to vulnerable individuals such as these young women. It may also present difficulties in gathering data from girls and women who may minimize or downplay mental health symptoms and sequelae.

Blesser relationships involve not only age disparity, but can represent a power disparity such that, although they are considered mutually beneficial, this power discrepancy can mean the women involved are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse and can experience negative impacts on their mental and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) [15, 20]. Taken together, the negotiating strategies and disillusionment documented by George et al. [24] and the normative conflicts identified by Sprague et al. [26] reported above suggest that psychological strain in Blesser relationships often arises less from a single traumatic event than from the sustained, everyday work of managing competing personal, relational, and economic pressures, a pattern with direct implications for how mental health interventions for this population might be designed.

It will also be critical to gather data on other relationships, not only to partners, but also close others and family, both past and present. Such studies may be important in identifying barriers to treatment, but also in understanding the pathways girls and women take and the intergenerational transmission of abuse, neglect, and trauma.

Patriarchal characteristics of African cultures can further perpetuate victim-blaming and expect modesty and obedience from women compared to men. For instance, Masenya [41] argues that women's power of seduction is perceived to emasculate men's masculinity and unsettle the normal patriarchal order. Besides, Africa's patriarchal cultural customs and ideologies make it so hard for women to compete for resources at the same level as men and set boundaries to how far a woman can go with accomplishments, such that most women are left at the mercy of men regarding career advancements and success prospects. As such, due to this imbalance in gender and opportunities, even educated women have been found to succumb to risky behaviors such as transactional relationships with older men to gain favors and meet basic survival needs.

Consequently, there are numerous factors that perpetuate Blesser/Slay Queen relationships such as peer pressure, unemployment, gender inequality, and poverty [17]. These will need to be considered in future research. But studies have not yet explored these issues, nor have they tried to address how patriarchy has fueled unemployment and gender inequality, which has consequently led to poverty, desperation, and peer pressure that have pushed women into these unsafe and vulnerable relationships. Combating Blesser/Slay Queen relationships will require gender activism to balance opportunities for both men and women, reduce income disparities, and diminish women's reliance on men, so that they are not left vulnerable and reliant on such relationships to get employment opportunities or escape poverty.

Although girls and women are most often portrayed as the victims in these relationships, it is noteworthy that a few recent studies have argued that it is not always the case that women are primary victims and men the sole perpetrators [20, 21]. Masenya [41] also found that women hold the power of seduction, and this takes a more feminist perspective on women's sexuality and the power to get what they want. These two readings of Masenya [41] are not contradictory; rather, they describe the same perceived "power of seduction" from

two vantage points, as a threat requiring patriarchal control when viewed from outside, and as a form of agency when viewed from women's own perspective, and this tension is itself illustrative of the contested meanings surrounding women's sexuality in these relationships. Further research is needed to establish whether men in Blesser relationships are also vulnerable to abuse and what other consequences they may endure.

Studies that detail the current and long-term psychological trajectories of Slay Queens and their families will be critical for developing specialized interventions to address their mental health needs. There is a need for specialized services tailored towards addressing women's mental health needs. Further research will also help in informing policy adaptations and program interventions tailored towards identifying and addressing the mental health needs and help-seeking behaviors among sub-Saharan women. There is also a need to further advocate for policies that will promote gender equality and provide better and equal economic opportunities for women to promote economic power and independence. This will likely improve the livelihoods and mental well-being of young vulnerable women in sub-Saharan Africa.

Limitations

Several limitations of this scoping review should be acknowledged. First, the search was limited to articles published in English, which may have excluded relevant studies published in French, Portuguese, or other languages widely spoken across sub-Saharan Africa. Second, as noted, the majority of included studies were conducted in South Africa, limiting the generalizability of findings to the broader sub-Saharan African region. Third, the heavy reliance on qualitative studies and dissertations means that the evidence base is rich in lived experience but limited in epidemiological precision. Fourth, because scoping reviews do not formally assess the methodological quality of included studies, the strength of evidence across findings varies. Finally, the rapidly evolving social media landscape surrounding Blesser/Slay Queen relationships means that some aspects of this phenomenon may have shifted since the studies included here were conducted. These limitations further reinforce the need for more diverse, rigorous, and geographically broad research in this area.

Ethical Considerations

This scoping review involved no primary data collection with human subjects; it is a secondary analysis of previously published, publicly available literature and therefore did not require institutional review board approval. Ethical consideration is nonetheless warranted because the review synthesizes literature describing a vulnerable population that includes minors (ages 13 and older). Where included studies discuss participants under 18, we have framed our synthesis, consistent with the addition to the Introduction above, as falling within child sexual exploitation and abuse frameworks rather than treating the full 13-to-30 age range as a single homogenous phenomenon, in order to avoid minimizing the distinct legal and ethical status of minors in these relationships.

Conclusion

Mental health awareness and intervention is an underdeveloped field in most African countries. Now more than ever, addressing mental health awareness and implementing policies that make a difference in the lives of young women and girls is a necessity. While much focus has been given to the prevalence of HIV among Blesser and Slay Queens and how the practice has consequently amplified the spread of HIV/AIDS, little to no research has examined the psychological effects and mental health consequences and trajectories of Blesser/Slay Queen relationships.

Examining the mental health implications and trajectories of Slay Queens and their relationships with their families and close others will increase transparency on the variety and severity of mental health problems among young women and girls in sub-Saharan

Africa, which will consequently serve as a foundation for policy interventions to address the psychological well-being of young women and girls across sub-Saharan Africa. The evidence identified in this review, including documented normative conflicts, psychological disillusionment, and the broad structural harms of transactional sex confirmed across the region, only strengthen the case for making this research agenda a priority.

Declarations

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Authors' Contributions

The corresponding author conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, conducted the analysis. All authors contributed to the interpretation of the results, critically revised the manuscript, and approved the final version.

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