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“Let’s hope there are some good girls”. Sugar Relationships and Feminine Respectability in Post-Independence Zambia*¹

1. Introduction

Sugar daddy stories abound in many places; they are not specific to eastern and central Africa. However, they have a distinct (moral) history in this region. Sugar daddies, blessers, sponsors, ATMs, *fataki* – different terms are used to describe intimate relationships between wealthy older men and young women, indeed often schoolgirls, in which money and other goods change hands. The Swahili word *fataki* means explosion, a term that mirrors the ambiguity of sugar relations. Sexual relations, love talk, and gifts can be excitingly explosive, but *fataki* also connotes a ticking time bomb, an explosion that will eventually damage or kill, a reference to the possibility of the transmission of HIV.² In a 2018 BBC documentary series, Zimbabwean journalist Nyasha Kadandara argues that the boom of sugar relationships in Kenya is no longer driven by poverty, but by a form of vanity fuelled by socialites. She establishes a link between the recent explosion of sugar relationships on the African continent and the coming of age of millennials and their use of social media.³ Kadandara’s work is important because it paints a complex picture that defies easy explanation. She does not treat these women as victims of sexualised violence or other kinds of exploitation, although she does highlight what she sees as the dangers associated with sugar relationships: Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), violence, as well as the stigma of sex work. But most importantly, her documentary invites us to think also of the glamorous side of such relationships, a side which is rooted in the material but at the same time transcends it, entering the imaginary – dreams and fantasies.

*I would like to thank Sarah Bellows-Blakely for her generous advice and Lena Dasch for her help with this piece of research.

¹ This article is based on research that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement number 681657: ‘Comparing the Copperbelt: Political Culture and Knowledge Production in Central Africa’).

² See Antigone Barton, How to Stop so Many Sex Partners? Fataki!, in: Science Speaks. Global ID News, 11 June 2009, at: <https://sciencespeaksblog.org/2009/06/11/how-to-stop-so-many-sex-partners-fataki/>; access: 7 December 2020, 12 paragraphs.

³ See Nyasha Kadandara, Sex and the Sugar Daddy, in: BBC News, at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/sex_and_the_sugar_daddy; access: 7 December 2020, 65 paragraphs.

This article sets out to interrogate such dreams and fantasies; specifically, the fantasies held by people who think, talk, and write about sugar daddies and sugar babies. I focus on the fluid feelings sugar relations produce in observers, writers, and readers of the *Zambian youth magazine "Speak Out!"* from the 1980s to the 2000s, which range from shame and jealousy to fury and anxiety. I use the lens of emotions to understand how these stories of censure that target women, stories which also produce uneasy arousal, can be fertile terrain through which we are able to understand larger anxieties. The sugar daddy script expresses a desire for order; an order disturbed by the people involved in sugar relationships, particularly the women. The feminine figure, at once unsettling and glamorous, intimidating and innocent, provides a foil for anxieties of social decline, general disorder and corruption that are closely tied to an urban environment perceived as tainted, morally and otherwise. Sugar stories also give insight into the global crisis of masculinities on the African continent.⁴

The *Zambian copper mines* are a site where such anxieties thrived for decades. Africanist scholarship has long discussed the central African Copperbelt as a model for successful African 'modernisation' and industrialisation, and more recently company paternalism and developmentalism.⁵ Towns sprang up around the mines in the 1920s, then under British colonial rule, uniting labour migrants and their offspring hailing from the entire region of central and southern Africa. Subsequently, the copper boom led to rapid urbanisation, and until today, the Copperbelt towns of Kitwe, Luanshya, Chingola, and Chililabombwe are among the densest populated urban spaces in Zambia. After a brief period of stability in the post-independence 1970s, economic decline hit the copper industry and led to structural adjustments from the early 1980s onwards. This resulted in large scale lay-offs, mass

⁴ The literature has explored various aspects of masculinities in Africa, such as violence and warfare, sexuality and public health, and labour migration, shedding light on shifts in generational and gender hierarchies under colonial rule and global capitalism, see Lisa A. Lindsay and Stephan F. Miescher, *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*, Portsmouth 2003. Within this literature, a discourse on the 'crisis of masculinity', understood as consequences of the distortions of global capitalism and public health crises, has emerged. At the same time, simplified images of African men as violent and criminal, on which certain strands of the narrative of the masculinity crisis in Africa rests, are being contested, see Carole Ammann and Sandra Staudacher, *Masculinities in Africa beyond Crisis: Complexity, Fluidity and Intersectionality*, in: *Gender, Place and Culture*, (2020), 1–10.

⁵ See James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity, Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, Berkeley 1999; Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu, *Bana Shaba Abandonés par Leur Père. Structures de l'autorité et histoire sociale de la famille ouvrière au Katanga, 1910–1997*, Paris 2001; Iva Peša and Benoît Henriët, *Beyond Paternalism: Pluralising Copperbelt Histories*, in: Miles Larmer, Enide Geune, Benoît Henriët, Iva Peša and Rachel Taylor eds., *Across the Copperbelt. Urban and Social Change in Central Africa's Borderland Communities*, Woodbridge/New York 2021, 27–51.

unemployment, food riots, a change of regime and eventually the privatisation of the mines in the 2000s.⁶

Throughout this long economic crisis and the public health crisis caused by the consequences of HIV/AIDS in Zambia since the late 1990s, Copperbelt residents have claimed social and political belonging through town life.⁷ Historically, the Copperbelt has been depicted as both Zambia's economic and political motor and as a site of materialist temptation and moral downfall. It is here that a discussion of sugar relationships in Zambia is most fruitful.

Understanding sugar relationships in this broader context, I use the discourse on faked or corrupted love and the unsettling feminine figure as a prism through which we can learn more about anxieties and jealousies than we can about romance. Looking at the three most popular settings in which sugar stories unfold – the school, the workplace, and the national stage – I seek to reveal the ambivalent and complex meanings attached to women who are involved in sugar relations. Sugar stories function not only as windows into gender dynamics, but also into tensions around class, generation, and race.

With this approach, I move beyond scholarship that has mostly understood sugar relationships as a result of economic structures on the one hand, or has focused on the agency of the women involved in an effort to challenge a structuralist view of them as merely victims, dupes or pawns on the other. The social science literature on transactional sex explores the phenomenon of sugaring through the lens of structural inequality and poverty, too often reproducing the cliché of women as powerless victims unable to make choices of their own, while also framing the men who see such women as greedy, materialistic, and unable to harbour authentic romantic feelings.⁸

Historical and anthropological literature insists on historicising and complicating the relationship between materialism and love. Mark Hunter coined the term “provider love”: a form of love, care and male providership that explicitly includes the material without voiding

⁶ See Miles Larmer, *Mineworkers in Zambia. Labour and Political Change in Post-Colonial Africa*, London 2007, chapter 6.

⁷ See Miles Larmer, *Living for the City. Social Change and Knowledge Production in the Central African Copperbelt*, forthcoming, Cambridge, UK 2021.

⁸ See Rachel Hagues, *Sex for Soap? A Contextual Approach for Understanding Young Girls' Involvement in Sex in Tanzania*, in: *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 29, 6 (2019), 819–831; Margrethe Silberschmidt and Vibeke Rasch, *Adolescent Girls, Illegal Abortions and “Sugar-Daddies” in Dar es Salaam: Vulnerable Victims and Active Social Agents*, in: *Social Science & Medicine*, 52, 12 (2001), 1815–1826.

its romantic aspect.⁹ Jennifer Cole's work reveals that material exchange was always part of the expression of care and love in pre-colonial Madagascar, but missionary and colonial ideology has subsequently glossed over these older ties and cast the women involved as sex workers.¹⁰ It is crucial to recognise the complexity and variety of sexual and emotional relations, rather than conflating them all under the banner of sex work, precisely because such reductionism has political currency and the figure of the 'prostitute' is frequently wielded "to denounce unruly women and demarcate the boundaries of female respectability"¹¹, as Lynn Thomas reminds us.

Corrie Decker, writing about the power of seduction held by Zanzibari schoolgirls under colonial rule, argues that through their sexuality and protected by the innocence of female seclusion, these schoolgirls had "the power to enrapture and infantilize any man".¹² In her study of working-class girlhood and popular culture in Britain, Valerie Walkerdine seeks to understand little girls' eroticism in the context of thoroughly classed fantasies and aspirations of upward mobility which hinge on the vision of obtaining a better, more glamorous life.¹³ Decker and Walkerdine both make space for girls' own fantasies and actions, a space where, as Walkerdine puts it, little girls can be "other than the rational child or the nurturant quasi-mother, where they can be bad".¹⁴ Naturally, this can be both a space of immense power for girls and young women, and a space in which they can be exploited.

In the comments about the girls and women in my source material, the power they can hold over men is inherent but never explicitly stated. It is this "place where they can be bad" which renders these girl children and young women both desirable and unsettling, as they represent the very possibility of women successfully contesting existing gendered, classed and racialised hierarchies on account of their uncomfortable eroticism. The threat of women's power over male bodies and minds, then, generates the fluid feelings in "Speak Out!'s" observers of the phenomenon.

⁹ Mark Hunter, *Love in the Time of AIDS. Inequality, Gender, and Rights in South Africa*, Bloomington 2010.

¹⁰ See Jennifer Cole, *Love, Money, and Economies of Intimacy in Tamatave, Madagascar*, in: Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas eds., *Love in Africa*, Chicago 2011, 109–134.

¹¹ Lynn M. Thomas, *Gendered Reproduction. Placing School Girl Pregnancies in African History*, in: Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, Stephen Miescher eds., *Africa After Gender?*, Bloomington 2007, 48–62, 55.

¹² Corrie Decker, *The Elusive Power of Colonial Prey: Sexualizing the Schoolgirl in the Zanzibar Protectorate*, in: *Africa Today*, 61, 4 (2015), 43–60, 56.

¹³ See Valerie Walkerdine, *Daddy's Girl. Young Girls and Popular Culture*, Basingstoke 1997.

¹⁴ Walkerdine, *Daddy's Girl*, see note 13, 183.

Obviously, “Speak Out!’s” sugar stories are a sensationalist genre. Wealthy old men, often with protruding bellies, bald heads, and expensive cars, and seductive, greedy, and unruly schoolgirls are the clichéd figures which populate them. The stories in “Speak Out!” are moralistic tales, written to discipline youth but also with a view to their worries and aspirations. They are not factual accounts of sugar relations, even though “Speak Out!” frames them as true stories. They invite and generate moral judgment, and their function is to make it clear to women that engaging in sugar relationships will have disastrous consequences for their health and social reputation as well as for their emotional lives. The moral judgments contained within them are informed and driven by the feelings of those who convey the judgment. The very fact that feelings about these women are in flux and are shaped by the spatial configurations in which they unfold, such as the school, the workplace, and the national stage, demonstrates that morality, which is often perceived as rigid, frequently rests on fluid feelings, which in turn brings ambivalence to moral judgments.¹⁵ As a consequence, the same type of relationship is depicted in “Speak Out!” in contradictory ways, revealing the fluidity of opinions about the women and girls involved.

“Speak Out!” was launched in 1984 by the Catholic Church as an ecumenical Christian paper addressing issues that concerned youth.¹⁶ It was printed by the Franciscans at Mission Press in the Copperbelt town of Ndola. The youth magazine was read countrywide. Alongside evangelical themes, it covered topics such as education and professional work life, music and dance, as well as increasing unemployment and economic decline and its impact on youth; and of course a myriad of articles, letters, and questions about ‘true love’, partnership, sexuality, and marriage. Throughout the 1980s to the 2000s, “Speak Out!” featured articles on sugar relations, which were commented upon by readers in letters to the editor.

2. Women and Disorder in the Zambian Copperbelt

Women’s sexuality has always been a political issue. As Lynn Thomas has shown, moral and political questions are debated through struggles over reproduction, sexuality, and

¹⁵ See Ute Frevert, *Moral Economies, Present and Past: Social Practices and Intellectual Controversies*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft, Sonderheft 26* (2019), 13–43.

¹⁶ While there were many Christian denominations in Zambia, the Catholic Church was the most influential one on the Copperbelt, thanks to a thriving printing press, a comparatively egalitarian culture and the opportunity to popular participation and appropriation, see Stephanie Lämmert, *Reimagining the Copperbelt as a Religious Space*, in: Miles Larmer et al. eds., *Across the Copperbelt*, see note 5, 347–372.

motherhood.¹⁷ In a similar vein, policing disorder and moral corruption and attempts at bringing the ‘right order’ to urban space have a long history in the Zambian Copperbelt.

Since the advent of missionaries in the British colonial Copperbelt in the early twentieth century, the behaviour of women has provoked much debate. Women smoking, women wearing lipstick, women entrepreneurs, and unmarried women in general were portrayed negatively. In particular, the copper mines and copper towns were seen as places of immorality and corruption where women could escape their fathers’ and husbands’ control. Sinful behaviour was most commonly associated with women who, missionaries believed, were particularly susceptible to a corrupted lifestyle.¹⁸

This view reflected the anxiety felt by missionaries (and many men, both European and African) about the independence women found in town life, where economic opportunities enabled them to challenge male dominance and resist marriage.¹⁹ Although miners’ wives, not to mention unattached women, were prohibited from the compounds until the 1940s, both unmarried women and dissatisfied wives flocked to the Copperbelt. From the 1930s on, women in the Copperbelt mostly earned their money by beer brewing, urban gardening, and domestic and sexual services. There were also successful women entrepreneurs and shop owners. So-called ‘temporary mine marriages’ became a regular practice.²⁰ Most contemporary observers found that anxieties about women’s alleged promiscuity, unruliness, and materialism were ubiquitous.²¹ These anxieties led to company interventions into family and marital life of their employees. The interventions were driven by a ‘perennial anxiety’ regarding the ability of African women to transition to an idealised form of urban society.²² While ideas about feminine respectability have changed in subsequent decades under British rule and in post-independence Zambia, the feminine body is still at the heart of crucial debates, as the ban on miniskirts in the 1970s and again a misogynist debate around ministers

¹⁷ See Lynn M. Thomas, *Politics of the Womb. Women, Reproduction and the State in Kenya*, Berkeley 2003, 4–5.

¹⁸ See Stephanie Lämmert, *Reimagining the Copperbelt*, see note 16, 353–355.

¹⁹ See Jane L. Parpart, *Sexuality and Power on the Zambian Copperbelt: 1926–1964*, in: Sharon B. Stichter ed., *Patriarchy and Class. African Women in the Home and the Workforce*, Boulder 1988, 115–138, 121.

²⁰ See George Chauncey Jr., *The Locus of Reproduction: Women’s Labor in the Zambian Copperbelt, 1927–1953*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 7, 2 (1981), 135–164, 163; Parpart, *Sexuality and Power*, see note 19, 121.

²¹ See Hortense Powdermaker, *Copper Town. Changing Africa*, New York 1962.

²² See Larmer, *Living for the City*, see note 7, chapter 5.

wearing mini-skirts in the late 1990s show.²³ The long economic decline since the 1980s produced new feelings of messiness, and the accompanying desire to restore order to Copperbelt society.

This is the backdrop to the material I am presenting. The language used in the sugar stories is reminiscent of older anxious debates about disorder in the copper towns. The instability of feelings about sugar relations which I found in “Speak Out!” parallels the fluid nature of social hierarchies during the massive economic and social transformations in Zambia in the second half of the twentieth century.

3. The School

The most commonly narrated sugar daddy story in “Speak Out!” involves schoolgirls. The reason for the prominence of the schoolgirl script lies in the precarity of schooling the girl child in Zambia. As the successor to the racially segregated colonial education system, Zambia’s post-independence education system had inherited many shortcomings. Access to secondary education and earning university entrance in particular remained the privilege of a small elite. In the late 1980s, less than 25 percent of Zambian children were enrolled in secondary school.²⁴ There was a heavy urban bias, making access to schooling in general and secondary education in particular much more difficult in rural areas. Girls represented a small percentage of the secondary pupils.²⁵

As the public debate in “Speak Out!” shows, the difficulty to obtain an education for girls resulted in tales of censure to prevent girl pupils from early dropout. Another reason for the popularity of the schoolgirl version of the sugar daddy story is that these stories are sensationalist and prey on scandal, while at the same time displaying a titillating eroticism fuelled by the taboo of illicit unions between teachers and their students. The schoolgirls themselves were depicted in ambivalent ways. There is the vulnerable and naïve schoolgirl who is abused by her teacher, and then there is the greedy schoolgirl who schemes to ‘bribe’ her teacher with her body. In return for intimacy, the girls usually receive gifts or money, and,

²³ See Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Dressing Dangerously: Miniskirts, Gender Relations and Sexuality in Zambia*, in: Jean M. Allman ed., *Fashioning Africa. Power and the Politics of Dress*, Bloomington 2004, 166–85.

²⁴ See Lawrence Mundia, *Secondary School Wastage, Continuing Education and Youth Unemployment in Zambia*, at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/citations?doi=10.1.1.620.8026>; access: 13 May 2021.

²⁵ See Brendan Carmody, *Education in Zambia. Catholic Perspectives*, Lusaka, Zambia 1999, 99–106.

more importantly for some of them, the grades they need to pass their exams and secure the opportunity for further study.

One example is the story “My Teacher Promised to Help Me”. It is a tale of a schoolgirl named Lassy, who contracted HIV/AIDS through her teacher. The story is narrated by Lassy’s best friend. Lassy had told her friend that she was unable to keep up with her schoolwork, but that her father needed her to excel. Lassy discussed her difficult situation with her teacher. “My teacher, Mr. X, promised to help me do well if I agreed to sleep with him.”²⁶ Lassy seized her chance. But when she realised the price she had paid for her decision – being infected with the virus – she attempted suicide. Her best friend prevented her from jumping off of a bridge, but eventually, Lassy was no longer able to get out of bed and died of depression. She is portrayed as suffering from feelings of guilt, desperation, and self-hatred. The teacher responsible does not figure at all, nor is there any expression of indignation or anger at him. The young woman is held solely responsible, and overwhelmed by her guilt and shame, she dies.

This story from 2004 must be read in the context of the deepening crisis in public health on the continent. It is one of many moralistic tales that support religious campaigns to abstain from sex. Unlike in the stories from the 1980s that I will discuss in the next section, the issue at stake here was not unwanted pregnancies, but feminine sexuality itself. This shift triggered by the HIV/AIDS pandemic changed the way schoolgirls involved in sugar relations with teachers were depicted. The blame is put entirely on the girls, while the men responsible are left out of the equation. The feminine figure may invite pity at best, but chiefly what she inspires is shame, for her and her entire family. Jealousy and anger, emotions that would feature in the script of earlier versions of sugar relations at school, did not appear at all in this context.

Before the public health crisis, schoolgirl pregnancies were the main issue in such stories. They could bring both havoc and blessing to a family. Unwelcome pregnancies could prompt expulsion from school, thus spoiling a family’s investment in schooling and eclipsing hopes for the daughter’s lucrative employment or desirable marriage. On the other hand, they could also lead to marriage, and to good matches and prosperous marriages at that.²⁷ This was the

²⁶ “My Teacher Promised to Help Me”, in: *Speak Out!*, 21, 4 (2004), 3.

²⁷ See Thomas, *Gendered Reproduction*, see note 11, 50.

more fluid perspective of the 1980s, which was cased in a different language. The figure of the teacher, who remained faceless in Lassy's story, was vividly discussed. In 1988 for example, Raphael Bunyolo, a student at Mwashu Open Secondary School in Kabwe, raised the topic in a letter to the editor. "Many girls are being proposed to by their teachers in many primary and secondary schools in Kabwe. Are not teachers supposed to be same as parents? Are teachers now employed to propose to girls or to teach them? I would like to advise you girls that once you're made pregnant by a teacher, you'll be a useless girl because teachers who have made you pregnant will refuse to marry you. Teachers you should not propose to pupils, they are your children. So pupils of Zambia (girls) be careful of teachers they have become roaring lions."²⁸

Two strands appear in this letter that run through much of the material on intimate relations between teachers and schoolgirls – the 'useless girl' and the 'teacher as predator'. The contradicting images of erotic taboo and abuse – useless girls driven by materialistic aspirations who were guilty of seducing teachers and vulnerable schoolgirls who suffered exploitation at the hands of teachers gone wild – coexisted and were often blurred. They represented two sides of the same coin. This contradiction is mirrored in the fluid opinions and feelings schoolgirls evoked on the pages of "Speak Out!", feelings that could quickly shift. Nancy Nambela Sikombe's letter from St. Mary's Secondary School in Kawambwa is a case in point. Sikombe in 1987 critiqued the abuse of power by senior men in key positions. "The rate at which 'sugar-daddyism' is growing in Zambia has reached alarming proportions," she wrote. Due to high youth unemployment rates and anxiety about the future, she argued, many girls had no other choice but to succumb to their teachers. "I have known many girls who have been caught in this trap and have yielded to the desires of sugar-daddies. But it is time for the youth of Zambia to fight this injustice and demand a fair deal from employers and headmasters." But Sikombe also censured the girls who engaged in such relationships. "Some female students are more to blame than the sugar-daddies," she argued, "because they seduce the old men with their inviting bodies and glamorous appearance. I could easily describe such characters because they appear on the public roads and are as common as dirt. [...] We have overcome greater problems than prostitution, so why should we not overcome that too?"²⁹

²⁸ Letters to the editor, in: *Speak Out!*, July/August 1988, 7.

²⁹ Dear Sugar Daddies, in: *Speak Out!*, January/February 1987, 3-4.

Sikombe is one of many who associated such relationships with sex work, a worry that was on the minds of many parents who sent their daughters to boarding school.³⁰ Sikombe's judgment of the young women builds on the political currency of highly gendered stereotypes about schoolgirls. By employing the metaphor of dirt, she taps into the anxieties and insecurities in wider discourse, in which the symbolic language of dirt gives insight into fears of disorder, formlessness, and death, in contrast to order, structure, and life.³¹

Order is the central theme in many of the sugar daddy stories set in schools. The dirt metaphor represents the flip side of order and structure: moral corruption, literal bribery, and disorder. The theme of order and structure and the portrayal of women as threatening this order is one that pervades sugar stories in various spaces. This demonstrates the centrality of gender for our understanding of the political and economic order, and how broader tensions, in this case generational, become apparent in the ambivalent emotional responses to the precarity of order. For example, Crispin Mweemba from the Zimba Institute declared that teachers deserved respect not insults.³² By doing so, Mweemba defended hierarchies built on male seniority and qualifications obtained through formal education, thus silencing the girls' perspective. This was not uncommon among young men who felt left out of the circle of exchange that was open to girl students. Young men felt that girls passed with better grades and secured rare spots in higher education that they did not deserve, because their achievements were not based on merit but on sexual favours. By portraying schoolgirl behaviour as disrespectful and an insult to others, young men like Crispin Mweemba put the blame for illicit unions on girls, while at the same time defending networks of male privilege.

The controversy in "Speak Out!" lasted for about two years and reached its peak with an article of 1988 entitled "Why Do Teachers Fall in Love with Their Students?" penned by Ronald Mponda. Mponda blamed both parties involved, teachers and schoolgirls. He made use of all of the fairly common images to portray the girls: they were "turn[ed] into prostitutes" and led "into sin" by the teachers, they became "mothers of children they don't want".³³ In this way, Mponda put the blame on the teachers while still judging the young women for playing along. On the other hand, Mponda described the girls as actively tempting their teachers, for example by wearing see-through skirts. This was a common opinion on the

³⁰ See Thomas, *Gendered Reproduction*, see note 11, 57.

³¹ See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London 1978, 5.

³² See Letters to the editor, in: *Speak Out!*, September/October 1988, 7.

³³ *Why Do Teachers Fall in Love with Their Students*, in: *Speak Out!*, September/October 1988, 3–4.

pages of “Speak Out!”.³⁴ According to Mponda, there existed a whole economy of exchange that built on hierarchies among the schoolgirls. He explained that schoolgirls’ power over teachers made the senior girls “pompous and demanding”, to the effect that teachers often chose junior girls. There was jealousy among students who competed for the same teacher “who had made promises of money to both of them”.³⁵ Mponda’s schoolgirls were powerful indeed.

Like Sikombe, Mponda linked the theme to larger anxieties about order. “I know of a certain school in which intimate relationships between teachers and students have become so common that the students no longer respect the male teachers, and the teachers have no control over the students.” Another consequence, according to Mponda, was the lowering of academic standards. The loss of respect and control and the “decline in discipline and cleanliness is due to the fact that the school is staffed by teachers who exploit their female students”. There also existed a practice that Mponda described as “bribery in their [the students’] ‘mother tongue’”, an expression suggesting that transactional sex comes to schoolgirls as naturally as their mother tongue. According to Mponda, this all stood for “injustice rather than for a just society. We know that to obtain good results the students must make an effort. But if the administration is corrupt what can you expect?”³⁶

Mponda saw the interplay between a corrupted system and anxious students who knew their future depended on their grades, and thus judged the girl students less harshly than Sikombe. Mponda presented schools’ declining academic excellence and a general lack of discipline and cleanliness as consequences of the illicit behaviour of teachers and of unruly feminine sexuality. The sugar daddy stories set in high schools are but a site on which order and disorder, corruption and bribery, are debated through feelings of jealousy, anxiety, and anger, suggesting the newly arisen need to structure and order town life in the midst of a neoliberal landscape in which disorder and a lack of discipline had become almost contagious.

It is crucial to note that most stories end badly for the girls involved – death and depression being the starkest consequences – while in reality, schoolgirls who engaged in sugar relations would potentially have had some power to ruin teachers by making the illicit affair public.

³⁴ See for example Letters to the Editor, in: *Speak Out!*, January/February 1989, 8.

³⁵ Why Do Teachers Fall in Love with Their Students, in: *Speak Out!*, September/October 1988, 3–4.

³⁶ Why Do Teachers Fall in Love with Their Students, in: *Speak Out!*, September/October 1988, 3–4.

Why, then, do the “Speak Out!” stories presented here have such dire endings for the girls in question? In my view, it is precisely the fear that the girls might capitalise on their sexuality and bring about the downfall of male teachers, or even headmasters (men who hold highly respectable positions in society), that makes the figure of the schoolgirl so unsettling. In fact, to prevent further destabilisation, the power of the girls involved had to be voided and the girls presented either as innocent victims or morally distasteful whores. Since the stories are moralistic tales of censure intended to influence young girls’ choices and actions, they must not reveal the power these girls may potentially hold.

4. The workplace

The workplace was another popular space for sugar daddy operations. The recurrent theme of these stories is that a young woman gets hired in return for offering her employer sex.

Whether the focus is on a woman who initiates such a deal herself or on an ‘innocent’ victim succumbing to the advances of the big boss, the outcome is the same. Both types of women end up in a liaison with a high-ranking big man, which is supposed to secure them a job. More often than not, these stories are told from the perspective of young men – fellow applicants for the job, or lovers who feel cheated and unable to compete with the sugar daddy.

The 1986 “Speak Out!” story “The Challenge” featured a conversation between two young men who discussed the difficulties of finding a job. In it, Phiri and John described the hardships of the job hunt for young graduates without previous work experience, despite their good grades and education. While the only option for young men to gain a foothold in the world of employment was bribery, “girls had a decided advantage because they didn’t even have to bring money. All they had to bring was themselves.” Phiri and John were critical of the young women who accepted such advances. They were “unfortunate girls, desperate to get a job”, and the employers were only “taking advantage” of them. John suggests employers “should be treated as sugar-daddies, too – even though they’re in high places”. Phiri and John looked down on both parties involved. In John’s view, the only solution was for the girls to report these shady proposals to the police. Phiri doubted this strategy. He countered that the young women had no stake to do so – “after all, she had a part to play in it too”. In the end, Phiri and John felt powerless. The only way to stop indecent advances by employers was to report them to the police, which in turn was unlikely to happen if the young women involved

agreed to or even initiated such liaisons. Still, John tried to be optimistic: “Let’s hope there are some good girls who are brave enough to do it.”³⁷

Contrary to the schoolgirl storyline, in the workplace narrative the outcome for the women involved was not tragic ruin. In fact, these women were successful in their endeavours. In the competition for the few jobs available, they emerged victorious, thanks to what “Speak Out!” observers would consider questionable means. The ambivalent status of such women was mirrored in the feelings they evoked in others. They caused anger and jealousy in their male peers, and sometimes pity, given their moral choices. But they were still seen as good matches. They did not spoil their reputation as future wives. “Any girl who would stoop to that doesn’t deserve to get a husband,” argued John. “Well, they do get husbands, because husbands like wives who have jobs,” was Phiri’s frank response.³⁸ This indicates that, when it came to the question of a good marriage, many young men hoped to find an educated and employed woman, a need that had arisen more sharply as a result of the trying economic situation and high youth unemployment. It was the lesser evil to marry a woman who had gained employment through a dubious liaison with her boss than one who would not be able to contribute to the household budget at all.

In fact, by the 1980s, youth unemployment had become a big threat. Work in the formal sector had shrunk drastically. In 1989, 73 percent of unemployed Zambians were males between 15 and 24 years of age, and youth unemployment constituted about 58 percent of the unemployed population total. The situation was especially grave in the urban centres, where school graduates competed for the very few white-collar jobs, but most did not find employment.³⁹ As a consequence, the male breadwinner ideal in Zambia was severely undermined.⁴⁰ Phiri and John’s conversation can be read in this vein. It demonstrates that although liaisons between young women and their employers were not approved of in the pages of “Speak Out!”, they were tolerated. In fact, they could actually be fortunate, not only for the women but also for young men who were hunting not just jobs, but wives too. Women engaging in such deals gained financial, and to a certain degree, social independence. They

³⁷ The Challenge, in: *Speak Out!*, July/August 1986, 11–12.

³⁸ The Challenge, in: *Speak Out!*, July/August 1986, 11–12.

³⁹ See L. K. Mwansa, P. Mufune and K. Osei-Hwedie, *Youth Policy and Programmes in the SADC Countries of Botswana, Swaziland and Zambia: A Comparative Assessment*, in: *International Social Work*, 37 (1994), 239–263, 256.

⁴⁰ See Karen Tranberg Hansen, *After Copper Town: The Past in the Present in Urban Zambia*, in: *The Journal of Anthropological Research*, 47, 4 (1991), 441–456, 451.

were cast as good matches for young educated men who lacked financial resources. Unlike the spoilt schoolgirl who had to discontinue or at least interrupt her education thanks to an unwanted pregnancy, the young women who secured work at the hands of a sugar-daddy employer were rendered wife material since they could bring economic prosperity to a marriage.

Like teachers and headmasters, sugar daddies in the workplace were also men who held highly respectable posts. One of the reasons why the genre of sugar stories exists is to castigate women engaged in such relations and to remind them how easily a woman's respectability is ruined. Men's respectability does not appear to be a theme in the stories. However, like the possibility of a headmaster losing his job at the hands of a seductive schoolgirl, there is also a fear hovering over the workplace stories that a respected manager may meet his downfall thanks to a public scandal about his illicit affair. Sugar relationships are popularly perceived to enhance masculinity and give men a platform to boast about their 'conquests'. The ideology of hegemonic masculinity in Zambia led many men to conform to the ideal of engaging in several sexual relationships at a time in order to demonstrate their manliness.⁴¹ But such sugar relationships also have a dangerous flip side which may lead to a respected manager or family man's moral ruin.

Emily Callaci has demonstrated that in post-independence Dar es Salaam, sugar daddy narratives represented very real intergenerational strife in a context where young men felt deprived of opportunities to build their future. In crime novellas from the city in the 1970s, the sugar daddy was a political villain figure who spoilt young women and deprived young men of their opportunities. He symbolised the "failures of an older generation to meet their obligations toward youth".⁴² Callaci argues that the question many young urban African women grappled with was whether they should seek belonging and security in urban social and sexual networks or from the meagre social services offered by the state.⁴³ In this context, the sugar daddy metaphor was used to "critique social conditions in postcolonial Africa in which traditional forms of social bonds and obligations were distorted in the context of mass

⁴¹ See Anthony Simpson, *Sons and Fathers/Boys to Men in the Time of AIDS: Learning Masculinity in Zambia*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31, 3 (2005), 569–586.

⁴² Emily Callaci, *Street Archives and City Life. Popular Intellectuals in Postcolonial Tanzania*, Durham 2017, 176.

⁴³ See Callaci, *Street Archives*, see note 42, 195.

urban migration”.⁴⁴ As my material suggests, in 1980s Zambia the pages of “Speak Out!” were a site to air fears about women preferring the urban social and sexual networks they had created to the very limited services the state could provide. That the women who chose to do so nevertheless could be desired matches in marriage complicated the issue further. These women could afford to invest in ambiguously dangerous sugar relationships because they had already achieved a certain economic and social standing. Unlike schoolgirls, they were in a position to negotiate for their own benefit. In contrast, schoolgirls were portrayed as being at a liminal stage in their lives. They might turn into successful working wives, but if they ruined their potential through an early pregnancy, they could suddenly fall into precarity.

In any case, the vast majority of women who engaged in sugar relationships never figured in “Speak Out!”. The women “Speak Out!” portrayed and policed were thoroughly middle-class young women formally educated and employed as secretaries or in other white-collar jobs, or schoolgirls whose families were able to invest in their education. Such middle-class women with aspirations to rise professionally and socially were figures that inspired both feelings of admiration and desire as well as those of threat and anxiety in “Speak Out!”. Despite the threat they posed to male peers for the few available job opportunities and to sugar daddies through their potential to produce a public scandal, the possibility that these women would become part of their personal or professional world probably inspired a less scandalous depiction. The perpetrators in the workplace stories from the 1980s were not the young women but the sugar daddies, and the stories therefore chiefly highlighted generational and class tensions, rather than ‘unruly’ feminine sexuality.

What had been portrayed in the 1980s as women’s successful attempts to gain material independence, albeit achieved with ambivalent means, turned in the early 2000s into a narrative of shaming women for allegedly being unable to ‘control’ their sexuality. In 2002, Mutale Kasonde from Chingola warned: “Young women, do not give in to such demands! What is a good job without your dignity, your virginity? It is better to be unemployed than having a job and dying of AIDS with shame written all over your face. It is difficult to resist temptations in a poor economic situation, but here self-control comes in. Keep on trying at other places. Patience pays. Let the will of God prevail for you to achieve your goals without regrets. Say NO! to sexual advances by would-be employers.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See Callaci, *Street Archives*, see note 42, 194.

⁴⁵ Letters to the editor, in: *Speak Out!*, 19, 5 (2002), 4.

Mutale presents the story as if the women were drawn to their employers, and as if they had a hard time hiding their attraction, an attraction that, as Mutale advises, could only be handled through self-control. This is an interesting twist in a narrative which usually confirms the opposite position – denying any feelings and desires the women may have harboured and insinuating that their only motive was sheer material greed. It seems that the use of the image of self-control stands in for something else. It is indeed indicative of young men’s feelings of having lost control; it represents generational and class anxieties in a time of profoundly uneven access to resources. The deepening public health crisis due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic functions as a container for these fears. Autonomous feminine sexuality came to represent moral corruption and the dangers of the modern day. Contrary to the workplace stories of the 1980s, the imagery of corruption and disorder returns in the wake of the public health crisis in the 2000s.

But Mutale chastised the men as well: “I want to air my views on managers. [...] Often a manager tells them that he will only give her a job if she sleeps with him. What can a desperate young woman do but give in for she probably has to fend for her parents, sisters and brothers who are also unemployed. Will this sexual harassment towards young women ever stop?”⁴⁶ Indeed, the literature discusses the network of dependants that women engaged in such relations undoubtedly had. James Ferguson understands sugar relationships as facilitating economic redistribution and highlights the economy that is attached to them – the “mistress’s network of dependents”.⁴⁷ Jennifer Cole and Laura Stark both illustrate that sometimes women engaged in sugar relations were married or had ‘love’ boyfriends who they supported with the income generated through having a sugar daddy.⁴⁸ This literature moves away from the motive of individual material greed, instead highlighting the social responsibilities and obligations the women had, as well as emotions of love and care. It also abandons the hysteria over feminine sexuality. Mutale’s letter, then, is a curious bricolage of old and new themes. It features the relational aspect which shows the redistribution networks and obligations many young women had to meet, as well as the drama over autonomous

⁴⁶ Letters to the editor, in: *Speak Out!*, 19, 5 (2002), 4.

⁴⁷ James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish. Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution*, Durham 2015, 111–113.

⁴⁸ See Laura Stark, *Cultural Politics of Love and Provision among Poor Youth in Urban Tanzania*, in: *Ethnos*, 82, 3 (2017), 569–591; Jennifer Cole, *Love, Money and Economies of Intimacy in Tamatave Madagascar*, in: *ibid.* and Lynn M. Thomas eds., *Love in Africa*, see note 10, 109–134.

feminine sexuality, feeding from century-old portrayals of Black women as sexually over-active, licentious and excessively fertile.⁴⁹

5. The national stage

The highly gendered generational and class tensions within Copperbelt society were not confined to the domestic realm. The national stage was a site where racial politics too were at play. The figure of the 'evil foreigner' was employed to cover up the government's failure to protect its citizens from economic precarity. Foreigners also presented a stage for public shaming strategies targeting feminine extravagance. 'Foreign' sugar daddies were seen as the epitome of evil because, unlike Zambian men, they were suspected of not being invested in the success of the Zambian nation, yet they were prospering thanks to Zambian wealth and Zambian women. In the Zambian context, as in eastern Africa generally, the African-born or more recently migrated minority from the Indian subcontinent is presented in a particularly negative light.⁵⁰ Thus, the figure of the 'Indian' sugar daddy performs political work, underscoring another deprivation for Zambian men (here presented as genuinely united, regardless of generation and class background) and demonstrating that women, rather than protecting the nation, were contributing to its selling-out.

Joyce Miauzi, a student at St Anne's Homecraft College in Chipata, wrote in 1988: "Many of our Zambian girls are going out with Indians. What do the Indians give them which pleases them so much? Is it something which Zambian boys cannot give them? If it means going out for picnics, getting expensive clothes and money, you are wasting your time, my friends. These Indians are just using you, and once you become pregnant they will leave you and go back to their own country. You will remain with a child who has no father. These same Indians say that Zambian girls are useless. Are you happy about that? It is only because you are not prepared to wait for the right guy that you say Zambian guys are not good and off you

⁴⁹ See Thomas, *Politics of the Womb*, see note 17, 11.

⁵⁰ Since the 1860s, Indian indentured labourers had been brought to South Africa to work on white settlers' plantations. More affluent and better educated Indians arrived on the same ships, eventually reaching Northern Rhodesia, today's Zambia in 1905. They were mostly Hindus from Gujarat. Their numbers remained very small, numbering only 60 in 1925. A new wave of Indian migrants were attracted by the mining boom of the 1940s. Immigration increased in the 1950s, but the Indian minority always remained marginalised by the colonial and post-independence state. The exact numbers of the Indian minority in Zambia is unknown, see Joan Haig, *From Kings Cross to Kew: Following the History of Zambia's Indian Community through British Imperial Archives*, in: *History in Africa*, 34, 55–66.

go with these Indians who have no respect for you at all. So, girls of Chipata, it's up to you now."⁵¹

The characteristics that Joyce Miauzi highlights here are not specific to 'Indian' men. Instead, they are generally true within the operating logics of sugar relations, no matter the nationality or origin of the men involved. Sugar daddies rarely take responsibility for pregnancies, even if they live in the same neighbourhood as their sugar babies, because they are usually married to another woman. Obviously they are also not expected to harbour the intention of marriage – although romantic language and practices such as gift-giving and dinners at expensive places play an important role in sugar relationships. Once a woman gets pregnant she is rendered 'useless', an expression we encountered earlier. From the woman's perspective within the logic of sugar relations, she is going to choose the man who is able to offer her the best deal, regardless of his nationality. Therefore, there is nothing outstanding in the relations described by Miauzi to distinguish it from other stories of the genre. It is what Miauzi chose to omit that causes the offence. Women engaging in such relations were seen as abandoning the national cause, that is, investing into the Zambian national family. The offspring of such unions were seen as a threat to the purity of the nation.

The emergence of racial politics can be linked to the national crisis of the 1980s. Miauzi's letter from 1988 appeared during the first structural adjustment program, which was accompanied by violent food riots and rolling strikes in the late 1980s.⁵² As opportunities for Zambians dwindled, shaming women who dated and loved outside the box and insisting on a supposed national exclusivity when it came to Zambian women's sexual relations became a strategy to deal with anxieties about social decline.

Some fifteen years later, the 'Indian' sugar daddy still served as a foil for national purity, but certain nuances in the discourse had changed. In the 2000s, the impending privatisation of the copper mines fuelled fears about foreign meddling in Zambia's copper wealth. Opposition leader and later president of Zambia, Michael Sata's populist resource nationalism ("Zambia for Zambians") and hostility towards Chinese investors openly expressed sentiments and xenophobic tendencies that were popular in the wider society.⁵³ In short, racial politics were

⁵¹ Letters to the editor, in: *Speak Out!*, January/February 1988, 6.

⁵² See Larmer, *Mineworkers in Zambia*, see note 6, 149–150.

⁵³ See Ching Kwan Lee, *The Specter of Global China. Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa*, Chicago 2017, 18.

strengthened as the economic crisis peaked. In this context, sugar daddy stories sought to turn feminine bodies into symbols of Zambia's collective honour. Drawing on notions of impure love to show feminine and foreign defectiveness, these stories barely concealed the anxieties and fears associated with the crisis in the foreign dominated mining sector.

In 2004, a story entitled "Shattered Dream" appeared in "Speak Out!", written by Elemiya Phiri from Lusaka.⁵⁴ It is a classic story of a young and poor but promising woman who loses everything after she enters into a sugar relationship. The young woman, Rosemary Tembo, "had exceptional intellectual abilities". She was the last born in a family of six and her father died when she was five years old, leaving her mother to sell vegetables. Because of her good grades, "Rosemary was the hope of the family." Despite her underprivileged background, she managed to secure a place in the school of Natural Sciences at UNZA, Zambia's flagship institution of higher learning. She also managed to get one of the rare bursaries. To be sure, Rosemary was aware of the dangers of intimacy in the times of AIDS, which her mother had warned her about before she left for Lusaka. But Rosemary did not listen. She began a relationship with "an Indian, Mr. Vandrahema Patel, who was in his late 40s. He had a potbelly, a bald head and was driving a Mercedes Benz. Furthermore, he was one of the notable figures around Lusaka in terms of car, cash and cell phone commonly referred to as the 3Cs. Often money and other gifts found their way into the hands of Rosemary.[...] He said: 'My friend, I can solve any problem. I have got money.'"⁵⁵ After a brief period together, Mr. Patel abandoned Rosemary. Our tragic heroine Rosemary fell ill shortly after his disappearance. In quick succession, she was diagnosed with the virus and died.

Similar to the schoolgirl story about Lassy and characteristic of the 2000s, the major issue in this narrative is not a pregnancy but AIDS. The proposed solution – to abstain from sex altogether – had become the central message from the church about how to deal with the public health crisis. It is no coincidence that the 'notable figure' who passed the illness to Rosemary belonged to the aforementioned Indian minority. He was a typical villain figure – disguising his real intentions with sweet talk, money and other goods. Eventually it turned out that he had simply used Rosemary and was never prepared to take responsibility for her. But Rosemary also played her part in the story. She was stubborn and had to hold herself to blame for what happened. Her mother had warned her about the dangers of sex (note, not the

⁵⁴ Shattered Dream, in: Speak Out!, 21, 1 (2004), 3.

⁵⁵ Shattered Dream, in: Speak Out!, 21, 1 (2004), 3.

dangers of unprotected sex specifically) but Rosemary did not listen, thus becoming a disappointment to her family, wasting her extraordinary potential.

The moralistic message of the story is quite clear. Rosemary's premature death was caused by her lack of restraint in sexual matters and her materialistic greed. To make things worse, her downfall involved a foreign man. As in the letter above, feminine respectability became a question of national interest. By succumbing to the lure of materialism, delivered to her by a foreigner, Rosemary betrayed her people. Not only did she deprive Zambian men by taking a foreign lover and failed her national duty to procreate, but she also failed her family, who had spent their hard-earned money on her schooling. Rosemary, like Lassy, was not portrayed as a powerless victim. For both women, their expected agency lay in exercising moral restraint. Unlike the workplace, the national stage was a site where sugar relations invited solely negative feelings. Shame for Rosemary and her family and impotent fury against internationals or foreigners were the emotions such stories employed to cover up strong feelings of anxiety and uncertainty in the face of economic liberalisation.

6. Conclusion

It is not important to know whether the letter writers and commentators were real characters or whether the letters and stories were 'placed' by editors. It is also unimportant to know if Mutale or other contributors with unisex Bemba names, if indeed real persons, were men or women. Instead, such letters, fictitious or factual, represent the fantasies, aspirations and obsessions of "Speak Out!'s" Zambian clientele. Questions of true or faked love and romance, and sugar daddy stories in particular, reveal fluid feelings associated with urban life, and a precarious one at that. Through the lens of sugar love, we learn more about anxiety, jealousy, shame and anger than about love and bliss. The ambivalence and fluidity of the emotional responses to the women involved is indicative of the specific perspective from which they were told, as well as from the place in which they unfolded.

Sugar daddy stories show the changing mores of feminine respectability and male exuberance. What may be rendered respectable within certain conditions, was certainly unacceptable in others. Consenting to an employer's advances in order to land a good job (and as a consequence, become an attractive marriage partner or gain the social independence to head one's own household and resist marriage), was a desirable option. The same action was seen outright as a morally wrong choice when taken by a schoolgirl who ended up getting

pregnant, thus souring a family investment. Depictions of sugar relations in the workplace placed the women involved in a better position. To their male peers, they could be both beloved future wives and their competition for jobs, as well as their fathers' lovers. Sugar stories about the workplace thus reveal generational anxieties as much as anxieties about class. In contrast, in the sugar stories that unfold on the national stage, Zambian men are presented as a homogenous entity. Incited by racial politics, foreign men engaging with Zambian women are seen as a threat to a unified nation of Zambian men, who are ruined at the hands of cruel foreigners and their own womenfolk.

As both the economic and the public health crisis deepened in the 2000s, the leverage women were accorded in sugar stories began to wane. This is most starkly visible in the case of Lassy, who commits suicide after discovering that her teacher has infected her with HIV and in the tragic tale of Rosemary, who was abandoned by her foreign sugar daddy only to discover that she is HIV-positive and to die shortly after.

The general sense of corruption and disorder – corrupted teachers and schoolgirls; the loss of discipline, cleanliness, and academic standards; exploitative managers and unruly sexuality in the workplace, as well as liaisons with ‘foreigners’ – expressed the fear of losing out and anxieties about uneven competition for scarce resources. The corruption and disorder narrative was also a response to the elusive power women could hold over men. The Zambian girls and women whose fates were debated on the pages of “Speak Out!” had the power to cause the downfall of a respectable headmaster or manager-cum-family man by making public his illicit affair, although this went unmentioned in the Catholic youth magazine.

The benefits of sugar relations for women were summed up quite aptly in a 2017 article in the Zambian Lusaka Star, in which a woman involved in a blesser relationship is reported saying that “a man puts bread on the table, a blesser brings you the bakery”.⁵⁶ The difficulty for a young unmarried man to get himself into a position to provide for a future wife, in combination with the power girls and young women could wield over adult men, was at the heart of turbulent feelings about sugar relationships in general and women in particular. The fluidity and ambivalence in the fantasies about sugar relationships demonstrates the

⁵⁶ Blesser–Blessee: New Name, Old Reality, in: Lusaka Star, 2 February 2017, at: <https://lusakastar.com/columns/blesser-blessee-new-name-old-reality>; access: 7 December 2020, 10 paragraphs.

importance of emotions in order to understand gendered and generational dynamics of social hierarchies and racial politics.