

**COMPLEXITIES OF THE “TRANSACTIONAL SEX”  
MODEL: NON-PROVIDING MEN, SELF-PROVIDING  
WOMEN, AND HIV RISK IN RURAL MALAWI**

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*The “transactional sex” model, which is increasingly used to explain the continued spread of HIV throughout sub-Saharan Africa and consequently inform policy, overlooks certain important cultural and socioeconomic aspects of women’s sexual choices. This chapter is based on a one-year anthropological field study in rural Malawi on the impacts of improved economic security on women’s sexual choices. While confirming the widespread assumption that the direct need for material support plays a role in poor women’s decisions to readily accept sexual proposals from men, findings reveal that the depiction of women as powerless victims forced to transactional sex by acute destitution does not necessarily hold. It is argued that the model should be expanded to acknowledge women’s agency, and include less direct gains such as community membership and social security. [HIV prevention, transactional sex, female agency, Malawi]*

HIV prevention efforts in sub-Saharan Africa have conventionally focused mainly on informing the population about the existence of a new fatal virus, and ways to avoid infection. The message that is being transmitted is generally summarized as ABC, short for “Abstain, Be faithful, or use a Condom.” Apparently it is assumed that, first, lack of knowledge about HIV and AIDS is the main contributor to the continued spreading of the virus, and second, that people will automatically stop having unsafe sex once they understand the risks involved. Following these widespread behavior change campaigns, awareness on HIV and AIDS has increased significantly among the African population. Unfortunately, however, these campaigns have overall failed to actually change behavior as new infections continued to occur at large scale<sup>1</sup> (Nguyen and Stovel 2004). As a result, development professionals increasingly recognize that awareness alone will not suffice to halt the AIDS pandemic. The dynamics that inhibit people to live up to the propagated behavior changes must be identified, understood, and addressed.

To identify some of these dynamics that underlie the continued spread of HIV in sub-Saharan Africa, it is useful to assess the evolvement of the AIDS epidemics that ravage the region. Two main trends that can be discerned are the increasing number of infections among women and among the rural populations (Bryceson and Fonseca 2005, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2003; Müller 2005; UNAIDS 2010; UN Development Programme 2005). These trends are indicative of the links that studies in Eastern and Southern Africa have found between poverty, food

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insecurity, gender inequality, and HIV risk (Bryceson et al. 2004; Gillespie and Kadiyala 2005; Müller 2005; Parker et al. 2000). These links are multidirectional, constituting a downward spiral in which the epidemics are fueled by poverty, food insecurity and gender inequality, while at the same time exacerbating these.

Poverty, food insecurity, and gender inequality are assumed by many analysts to drive the AIDS pandemic through the practice of “transactional sex” (Poulin 2007; Swidler and Watkins 2007). Poverty and food insecurity, it is argued, push villagers to resort to survival strategies that increase their chances of contracting and spreading HIV (Collins and Rau 2001; Conroy et al. 2006; Masanjala 2007). These survival strategies, the literature reads, are of a gendered nature. Men, who are culturally less tied to the home, migrate in search of paid employment, leave behind their families for extended periods of time, and then often turn to casual sexual encounters and commercial sex workers (Collins and Rau 2001). When these migrants return home, many bring with them the deadly virus. Women are less likely than men to have any formal education and consequently less access to secure, well-paid jobs. Furthermore, women often have less entitlement to land, assets, or credits than do men. For many poor women, having little or no alternative sources of income, exchanging sexual favors for material support is found to serve as a basic survival strategy (Bryceson et al. 2004; Epstein 2002, Forster 2001; Miller et al. 2010; Schoepf 1988; Van den Borne 2005).

Culturally and economically dependent on men, destitute women are considered unable to implement or demand abstinence, faithfulness and condom use (Ackermann and De Klerk 2002; Conroy et al. 2006; Lawson 1999; Marcus 1993; Masanjala 2007; National AIDS Committee 2003; Schoepf 1988; Tallis 2002; Van den Borne 2005). As the ABC educational model fails to take account of such cultural and socioeconomic barriers, a new approach to HIV prevention is increasingly called for which addresses exactly these barriers to safer sexual behavior. Here, I will call this alternative approach the “transactional sex” model, as it is argued that poor women’s exchange of sex for material support is an important driver of the AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa and must therefore be at the center of HIV prevention efforts. Advocates of this model consider the improvement of women’s low socioeconomic status a prerequisite for halting the AIDS pandemic as this will diminish poor women’s need to resort to risky survival sex, and as such reduce HIV transmissions (e.g., Ackermann and de Klerk 2002; Ghosh and Kalipeni 2005; Gillespie and Kadiyala 2005; Kar et al. 2003; Kim and Watts 2005; Miller et al. 2010; Mutangadura 2005; Quisumbing and McClafferty 2006).

The “transactional sex” model is a step ahead from the ABC approach to HIV prevention. However, while claiming to be more sensitive to structural forces underlying HIV transmission, this model too falls short in sufficiently recognizing the various cultural and socioeconomic barriers at play. Based on a one-year anthropological study undertaken in rural Malawi this article provides some critical notes on the increasingly popular idea to halt the AIDS pandemic by addressing female livelihood insecurity. The ethnographic data indicate that the theory behind this new approach is based on an incomplete understanding of the links between poverty, gender inequality, and risky

sexual behavior. While the findings confirm that poverty plays an important role in women's decision to accept high-risk sexual relationships, the depiction of women as passive victims of their disadvantaged position and abusive men does not always hold. Furthermore, many cases were found that cannot be straightforwardly explained by the conventional "transactional sex" model. These cases concerned female informants who became or stayed involved in sexual relationships with men who did not provide any direct material gain, and women who earned an independent income yet became or stayed involved in sexual relationships with promiscuous or unfamiliar men—while well aware of the HIV risks at stake.

## RESEARCH SITE AND METHODOLOGY

Malawi is one of the poorest countries<sup>2</sup>, with levels of food insecurity<sup>3</sup> and HIV<sup>4</sup> that are among the highest worldwide. The country lacks mineral wealth and mainly depends on agriculture. However, because of overuse, monocropping of maize, and deforestation soils have become seriously depleted. Furthermore, the global demand for Malawi's main export product, tobacco, is diminishing. Of the largely rural population<sup>5</sup> at least one third faces food shortages each year during the so-called hunger season—when the previous harvest has been eaten and the next not harvested yet.

This article draws on ethnographic data that were collected between August 2008 and July 2009 in Mudzi,<sup>6</sup> a village in Malawi's southern district Balaka. The aim of this anthropological field study was to explore the relationship between rural poverty and high-risk sexual behavior. High-risk sexual behavior here refers to serial or concurrent multiple partner heterosexual relationships, as well as (faithful) relationships with a promiscuous partner or partner whose sexual history and behavior are unknown, without consequent condom use.<sup>7</sup> The study focused on rural women because HIV currently spreads most rapidly among women and rural populations. Instead of trying to determine a link between food insecurity and unsafe sexual behavior, I aimed to investigate whether the growing assumption that increased food security will lead to safer sexual choices is justified. I understood safer sexual behavior not only as the usual abstinence, faithfulness, and condom use, but to also include inquiring about the sexual and health history of a potential partner and divorcing a promiscuous partner (following Watkins's 2004 and Schatz's 2005 discussions of rural Malawian's strategies to reduce their exposure to HIV).

Most Mudzi villagers are of Yao origin. As the Yao are a matrilineally organized society, land is traditionally inherited from mother to daughters.<sup>8</sup> On marriage, men move to the village and compound of their wife and, ideally, help her to cultivate her field. Having their own land, most of my female informants were thus not completely dependent on men for their food supply, which allowed for an inquiry into the possible links between female food security and sexual behavior. Nonetheless, harsh ecological circumstances, combined with detrimental political interests and disinterests of the British colonial administration and subsequent Malawian presidents,<sup>9</sup> make it difficult for most villagers to grow sufficient maize to be food secure throughout the year. Access to money for fertilizer and extra food is thus essential. To compare different levels of food security I

followed both women who managed to earn an independent income—most of them by selling processed or unprocessed food at a nearby market, and women who did not.

Together with a female Malawian research assistant I settled in Mudzi for one year and collected data through formal interviews with all 90 adult women living in Mudzi, daily participant observation and many informal chats. During our first weeks in Mudzi my research assistant spent some late afternoon hours teaching me how to knit, in the shade behind our little house. As time passed, more and more women and girls joined us. First just to chat, later also to learn to knit and crochet, have their hair braided or play a local game called *bawo*. These unplanned gatherings, full of jokes, gossips, and personal laments, provided me many valuable insights in social Mudzi life. Furthermore, we interviewed 30 randomly selected small-scale businesswomen who were selling various types of merchandise on one of the three markets near the research village, and retrieved birth statistics from the two health clinics in the area.

#### **GIFTING AND SEX: RELATED INDEED**

Ever since the British colonial regime introduced money in Malawi in 1893 men have been privileged in access to wage labor. Until recently this virtually gave them a monopoly over cash income (Bryceson et al. 2004; Kaler 2006). While men migrated to work on plantations and in mines, women were left to cultivate the fields that became severely depleted of nutrients because of population pressure.<sup>10</sup> Food security increasingly depends on a farmer's capacity to buy fertilizer and supplementary maize, which has resulted in a growing dependence of women on financial support from men.

Many of my female informants declared that they had accepted proposals from men to start a relationship because of pressing poverty, usually specifying this as a lack of food, soap, or clothes. Wisikesi's story is exemplary:

Wisikesi (45) says she married "very young" (at the age of fourteen), because of *mavuto* (problems): her father had died and her mother had difficulties taking care of her children alone. When a man proposed to Wisikesi, her mother encouraged her to accept so that she would have one less child to feed and dress. Wisikesi too hoped that this relationship would help her to get the things she had been lacking so often. Only days after their first child was born the man left, however, and never returned, "nor sent even one bar of soap," Wisikesi adds angrily. A year later an unfamiliar man asked her on the street whether she was married, and Wisikesi explained that her marriage had ended. He then asked her whether she had any children, Wisikesi answered she had one indeed. The man said he was willing to take care of the child if she would marry him. Wisikesi had been waiting for someone to propose to her ever since her first husband left, because, she states: "I was begging soap from my mother and wanted to find soap on my own." Without any further inquiries she gratefully accepted his offer.

Almost 30 years later the couple is still married, although Wisikesi fiercely complains about her husband's gambling and extramarital girlfriends. She accepts him nonetheless, saying that she would not know how else to manage taking care of the six children who still live at home. [P3 3851]

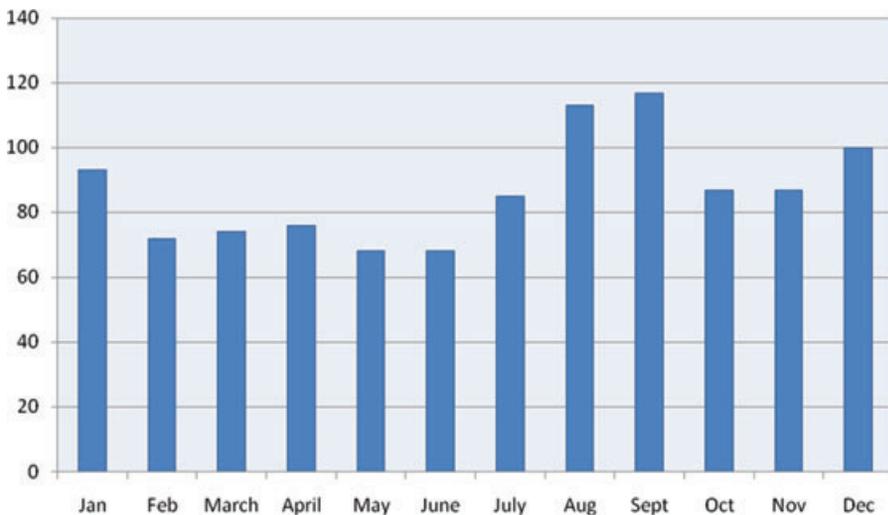
As hoped by the women accepting relationship proposals, men indeed often bring with them support. Their role as (future) provider entails that they supply their partner with gifts during the courting stage, and food or money during marriage. My informants sometimes referred to a sexual relationship between a man and woman by merely stating that “he took her to the market” [P3 1482, 1679]—equalizing gifting or providing with a sexual relationship, and vice versa. The direct association of income with men also shows from a joke made by one elderly Mudzi widow. Pointing to the basket full of groundnuts that she kept for sale, the woman commented that those were “her husband” now, as they helped her to get the things she wanted [P3 4018].

### PRESSING NEED?

The explicit claim of the majority of my female informants that poverty had pushed them to engage in sexual relationships is in line with the core assumption of the “transactional sex” model. This claim is backed by birth statistics that I retrieved from the two maternity wards<sup>11</sup> in the area. At both wards data could be recovered for (almost) each month of the past five years. Figure 1 shows the average number of births per month over these five years—as such giving an insight in the seasonal fluctuations.<sup>12</sup>

The figure shows a significantly higher number of childbirths in August and September. As this is nine months after the annual hunger season (ranging from November to January, depending on the weather), the peak indicates an increased incidence of unprotected sex during scarcity.

Interestingly, however, the birth statistics also show a peak in December and January—nine months after harvest, when food is abundant and relatively large sums of money flow into the community because the main cash crop cotton is sold. Apparently the occurrence of (unprotected) sexual intercourse peaks both when the need for money or



**FIGURE 1.** Average number of births per month between 2004 and 2009 at the local health center and Balaka hospital.

food is highest and—albeit to a lesser extent—when the availability of money and food are highest. That the incidence of sexual relationships increases during harvest time also appears from comments we heard in Mudzi:

When a group of young women had gathered in the shade of our house at the research site (as they had come accustomed to do almost every afternoon), Livia (21, single mother of two) claimed that she did not want to get involved with men anymore. The other women laughed, and one forecasted: “Ah, we’ll see during the next cotton selling season, you’ll surely find yourself pregnant again then!” [P3 0507]

Lucia (18) one day while knitting commented: “Nthawi ya thonje anthu amasangalala, zibwenzi pali ponse chifukwa cha ndalama” [at the time of cotton people are happy, everywhere new relationships start because of the money]. [P2 1166]

When Venesi (35) passed by with a man while we were knitting one afternoon, Livia (21) speculated that they may soon get married, adding: “We are close to cotton season, a lot of marriages now.” [P2 1297]

Virtually all women grow their own maize, and several also grow and sell cotton. At least for the time being, their livelihoods are secured during harvest time. Nonetheless, the occurrence of sexual relationships seems to increase at this time of the year. Apparently, these women’s involvement in sexual relationships is not only motivated by acute and pressing destitution, as generally assumed by advocates of the “transactional sex” model. More accurately here, women seized the opportunity to access extra money—which men have full pockets of after selling their harvest.<sup>13</sup>

#### **VICTIMS OR AGENTS?**

Gifting and providing are considered part and parcel of sexual relationships in Mudzi, as it is found to be elsewhere in Malawi (Government of Malawi 2004; Munthali 2006; Poulin 2007) and southern Africa (Dunkle et al. 2004; Hallman 2004; Luke 2003). When getting involved with men, Mudzi women expected no less. Within the “transactional sex” model, poor women are usually depicted as passive victims of the cultural expectation that a supportive relationship entails sex. Instead, however, my fieldwork findings indicate that women can play an active, at times manipulative, role in enforcing that their sexual relationships entailed material benefit:

Jane (17) was proposed marriage by a vegetable seller passing through Mudzi. Later that day Jane told us that she had accepted his proposal “so that I can be eating vegetables often.” After accepting, the young man had indeed given her 70MK worth of vegetables. She had not expected him to be so serious about his proposal though, and the following days when he came to visit she hid herself. The grandmother with whom Jane lives liked the prospect of a vegetable supplying grandson-in-law and entertained the man while Jane was away. On one of these occasions Jane came to us and instructed her cousin Sofia, who was chatting at our verandah, to go to the man and tell him: “Jane is serious about the marriage, but first wants to make bricks to build her own house. She will marry you after four months.” Jane added that it was just a lie to make him give her vegetables, and money for soap and body lotion. After those four months she would temporarily run off to relatives in another

district, until the man would understand that he wasted his time and money. Sofia quickly disappeared to comply. [P2 1721, 1728; P3 2470]<sup>14</sup>

My research assistant and I regularly overheard boys and men in our research village complain about the fierceness and specificity with which their girlfriends ordered what to get in return for sex [P1 0095; P2 0492, 0633; P3 2138]. Telling us about ordinary village boys like himself who—contrary to businessmen from town—struggle to find a partner and keep her satisfied, Ethelo (23) explained:

“Some girls tell you exactly what they want, for example, they may have seen a certain jersey at the market or on a friend, or they will say they want such-and-such shoes in this-and-this size. Then you either have to give money or buy it for her. Other girls don’t ask for anything during the first year. But in the end it is mostly the girls who decide what they want rather than boys to decide what they will give.” [P3 2138]

A “love letter” written by one of our neighboring girls (16) read:

“Kukupeza ndi mkazi wina ndi ngozi. Ndalembe kalatayi kuti undigatile ndalama wamval Chifukwa Ziona chibwenzi chake chamupatsa MK200 ndipo wagula umbrella” [If you are found with another woman, there will be an accident. I write this letter so that you share some money with me, do you hear! Because Ziona’s boyfriend gave her 200MK and she bought an umbrella]. [P2 0776]

As appears from these and similar incidences we came across in Mudzi, women can and do exercise some level in agency in their (transactional) involvement with men. Furthermore it appears that men, often without real source of income, too can be victims of the reigning transactional expectations.

#### **SELF-PROVIDING WOMEN, NON-PROVIDING MEN**

So far, the ethnographic data discussed has nuanced the widespread assumption about the interrelatedness of poverty, gender inequality, and HIV risk by adding that it is not necessarily acute destitution that drives women and girls, nor are they merely passive victims. Notwithstanding these adjustments, the material support offered by men continues to go a long way in explaining women’s engagement in sexual relationships—as assumed in the “transactional sex” model. The model fails to explain, however, all relationships that we encountered in Mudzi. Patricia (36), for example, earned a substantial income with her cloth business, yet stayed with a husband whom she described as lazy and promiscuous [P3 0707]. Rosemary (49) accepted to marry the village drunkard, of whom she could be sure that he would not contribute to the household income—more likely misuse her money for his drinking habit [P3 3957]. Dora (42) gladly welcomed back the man who had abandoned her and their children during the hunger season, leaving her to find food and cultivate the fields alone, only to show up again when Dora’s storage was full of maize [P3 1729]. As can be gathered from the following excerpts, it was fairly common in Mudzi that men, like Dora’s husband, came to propose precisely when women had food or money in abundance.

When Venesi (35) passed by with a certain man, Livia (21) started laughing and said that: “Amuna akumudzi ndi choncho. Amenewo ndi chibwenzi cha Venesi akufuna adye nawo chimanga cha m’unda. Kenako banja kapena chibwenzi chithe” [This is how village men are. The one who is in relationship with Venesi wants to eat the maize that will come from her field. After that their relationship will end] [P2 1058]. Some weeks later, another Mudzi woman commented about Venesi’s new relationship: “Venesi wants to get married now! But after cotton season they will divorce. That is what most of the men use to do.” [P2 1398]

When my research assistant Gertrude was fetching water at the borehole, a man passed by whom she had not seen before. One of the women explained that it was the second ex-husband of Sikali, adding that he still comes to see their children every now and then—especially when he hears that Sikali’s brother, who works in South Africa, has sent her some money. [P2 1626]

During one of our formal interviews, Belita (46) claimed: “Men deliberately look for richer women, with iron sheet roof, so he can just be eating.” [P3 3608]

As appears from the above fragments, not only women were looking for (complementary) resources, some men too perceived the season of abundance as an opportunity to increase their access to food and money by entering into new (sometimes polygynous) relationships or reuniting with exes. The earlier noted peak in sexual relationships around harvest time may thus stem not only from higher rates of acceptance by women but also increased numbers of proposals by men. Rather than benefitting materially, the women who accepted proposals from these men sacrificed part of their harvest and income to be in a relationship.

Hence, while in self-reports the majority of women claimed that acute poverty had pushed them into sexual relationships with men, the material support they retrieved from men at times entailed luxuries rather than basic necessities, and was nonexistent at other times. The following section will shed light on the complementary and alternative motivations for women to get involved with men besides accessing material support.

## **CONVENTION AND COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP**

Although material gain is an important motive for women to get involved in sexual relationships with men—as assumed in the conventional theoretical understanding of the linkages between poverty and HIV risk, it is not necessarily the only or most imperative reason. Sociocultural approaches to HIV prevention, with the “transactional sex” model at their center, have often overlooked the power of convention, and the wish to conform to it. Mapping the marital and childbearing history of small-scale business women<sup>15</sup> at my research site revealed that their sexual behavior had not become necessarily safer after they began generating an independent income. Many of them continued giving birth to children of different fathers, hoping the latest man would stay with them—which often he did not (see also Van den Borne 2005). Throughout our conversations it became clear that many of these businesswomen did not necessarily want to marry for financial support, but rather to be a respected member of their community: to follow conventional

female behavior, to not risk being portrayed or perceived as a prostitute nor as a threat to married women in the community:

One of the most successful women at the markets that we frequented was Patricia (36), who ran a thriving business of *chitenje*—the colorful cloth wrap that many women wear over their skirt and tie their babies in on their backs. Patricia complained that her husband did not help her in any way in her business, and that he had extra-marital relationships. The reason she mentioned for staying with him was to keep people from assuming that she gained her wealth through prostitution. When married, people could at least think that she received money and gifts from her husband—even though in reality she earned it all through her own business. [P3 0707]

Avoiding the gossip triggered by being single also turned out to be an important motive for women without an independent income.

Chikondi (28) recently married a man at the very same day that they had first met on the way to the market. This man tends to disappear to his home village during the day, only showing up in the evenings to eat and sleep. He does not support Chikondi and her children in any substantial way—only sporadically does he bring a bar of soap or some vegetables. When I asked Chikondi why she had agreed to marry this man, she explained that other women had stopped talking to her at the borehole after her first husband had left her, because they suspected her of receiving their husbands in her house. This had been the only way for her to stop these gossips, she felt. She now has an extra mouth to feed, but at least is accepted again by her fellow village women. [P3 3889]

Rosemary (49) received repetitive proposals from the village chief, which led the wife of this chief to stop talking to her, and other village women to follow the chief's wife's example. When Rosemary received another marriage proposal, from one of the village drunkards, she was relieved and gratefully accepted. Ever since, she and the chief's wife were on speaking terms again. [P3 3957]

As experienced by Chikondi, single women in the sexual active age group are looked on with suspicion [P2 1534; P3 0913, 2337–8, 2979, 3056, 3149, 3272–3, 3492–3] (see also Schatz 2005). Especially when she has young children it is assumed that an unmarried woman must be in need of a partner to help her take care of them [P3 0699, 3127–8]. Reversely, men who want to “taste” a new woman are believed to hunt especially on such single mothers as these presumably want support and are therefore quick to succumb [P3 2458, 3607, 3650]. As such, single women pose a—real or imagined—threat to their married fellow village women [P3 3606]. Consequentially, when widowed Evelyn (29) wore a new *chitenje* [P 2295] or the abandoned Jeneti (37) ate dried fish for lunch one day, the figurative alarm bells went off throughout the village and gossips abounded about how the women may have obtained these [also P3 2850, 3041]. Several singles found their house intruded by married fellow village women whose husband had not returned home at his usual time, to check if he had been “stolen” [P3 0608, 3606, 4018].

Ideally, a woman has a husband to provide for her and their children. Conforming to this ideal brings respect, while defiance brings about suspicion and disrespect. Numerous women referred to such community respect, or disrespect, as reason for (quickly)

accepting a marriage proposal, or staying with their (unsatisfying) husband [P3 0417, 2730, 2979, 3115, 3293, 3308–9, 3437, 3493–4, 3580, 3608, 3900, 3923].

In line with these arguments about conforming to the prevailing gender norms, was the rationalization from some women who had accepted proposals from unfamiliar men simply because “a woman should have a husband, just like a man should have a wife” [e.g., P3 3900, 4018]. Others explained they had become involved or stayed with a man who does not support them or their household because they believe they need men to perform certain household tasks [eg P3 3829, 3939]. Particularly, they referred to building and maintaining a house and its grass roof, kitchen, pit latrine, and bathing area.

## LOVE AND LUST

Although most sexual relationships have a strongly pragmatic character, some women mentioned that they accepted a proposal or stayed with a partner because they liked or even loved him [P3 3915, 3833, 3998, 4007]. Elube (24), for example, agreed to be in a relationship with a young man whom she had never seen before, because she felt that their “blood was matching, which makes people attracted to each other” [P3 0530]. *Chikondi* (love) is longed for in a relationship [P3 1280, 4127] and considered an important ingredient for a long-lasting, stable marriage [P2 1605, P3 0824]. It is, however, not considered a prerequisite for accepting a relationship proposal—as apparent from the previous sections. Rather, love is assumed to grow when staying well together [P3 2507]. In this sense, it is strongly related to and measured by a man’s willingness to provide support:

While knitting one afternoon Tumanene (26) told us about her husband who works in South Africa: “When I got married to my husband people were saying that he likes women. He married for several times, but when I asked him he said that he married three times with women from other villages, not here. But the problem was that all the three women were *olongolola* (talkative), just quarrelling all the time. That’s why he decided to marry me because I stay very far from this village.” Livia (21) then added: “Your husband loves you, because he was buying some hair extensions for you, and now that he is in South Africa he sends money to you.” Tumanene smiled, and said: “Yes, it is true.” [P2 1518]. Later, Makuta (31), whose husband also migrated to South Africa, complained: “Please listen to me, I miss my husband!” Tumanene replied: “Even myself, every night I look at his pictures and some tears come out when I remember his face and the way that he was loving me, buying everything that I wanted and working on the field together” [P2 1553]

The man who had abandoned Sofia (25) and their four children to marry another woman, started to make advances towards Sofia again. He gave her a big basin of beans to sell or exchange for maize. When we visited Sofia while she was busy selling and exchanging her beans, she remarked: “Ndasangalala! Masiku ano bola amuna anga akundikonda, akundipatsa zomwe ndikufuna” [I am happy! At least my husband is now loving me, providing everything that I want] [P2 1704].

As appears from the above examples, material support is considered an expression of love, and a sign of appreciation (see also Poulin 2007). Such intertwining of material

benefit with love is unaccounted for in the conventional “transactional sex” model. Furthermore, a partner may also be wanted to satisfy sexual lusts [e.g., P2 1600, P3 0790, 3322–3] and produce children [P3 3207, 3861]. These aspects too are generally overlooked in analyses of risky sexual behavior in underdeveloped settings like rural Malawi, where the focus quickly turns to economic motives. Although not always prominent, ignoring such (universal) facets of sexual relationships leads to an unbalanced understanding of poor women’s choices and so to potentially ineffective HIV prevention efforts.

#### **CLOSING THE CIRCLE: LIVELIHOOD INSECURITY REMAINS ROOT PROBLEM**

Formal safety nets such as government support to the ill or disabled are virtually nonexistent in rural Malawi. Therefore, the most important asset available to the marginalized villagers of this study is their social network on which they can rely in times of need: a fellow villager to fetch them water when they are ill, share maize when their stocks get depleted, assist at a funeral, et cetera. To safeguard future survival, being an accepted and appreciated member of the community is of vital importance. Not following conventions potentially makes one an outcast, as happened to Chikondi and Rosemary. To avoid suspicion and consequent exclusion, single women eagerly accept proposals—even from men they do not know or who are unlikely to contribute to the household income. When proposed a relationship, many dare not delay too long—for example to inquire about the history, behavior, financial or marital status of their proposer—for he could lose interest and take his offer to someone else. As such, women may easily end up with a man who has neither money or maize, nor a wish to support their household.

Direct material gain is thus not always what drives women to engage in sexual relationships. Rather, women at times accept proposals to avoid suspicion and consequent exclusion, hence to be an accepted member of the village community. In essence, however, this necessity of community inclusion derives from severe livelihood insecurity. Thus, even though sexual relationships with men not always function as a direct cure for poverty, indirectly they can serve to improve or safeguard a certain level of livelihood security.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The “transactional sex” model, which is increasingly used to explain the continued spread of HIV throughout sub-Saharan Africa and consequently inform policy, overlooks certain important cultural and socioeconomic aspects of women’s sexual choices. The model is based on a depiction of women as vulnerable, passive victims of their disadvantaged position vis-à-vis men, whose acute destitution forces them to resort to exchanging sex for direct material support. The data presented in this article indicate, however, that women sometimes play an active role in sustaining and shaping the exchange system. Furthermore, not only acute destitution drives men and women to engage in transactional sexual relationships, as appeared from the fact that the incidence of sexual

relationships also peaked when food and money were widely available in the research community.

Women's survival strategies are not as straightforward as generally assumed within the "transactional sex" model. They do not only entail exchanges of sex for direct economic support, but often also a need to conform to the ideal of a married woman so as to safeguard one's entitlement to community support. With the threat of hunger and destitution always present, having multiple sources of support to turn to in case of emergencies is an important aspect of survival in rural Malawi. For such a social safety network to stay intact it is crucial to remain a respected community member. Because single women face the danger of exclusion, easily accepting proposals from men functions as an indirect survival mechanism, *even* when these men are unlikely to provide support.

Rather than dismissing the "transactional sex" model, I argue that it should be expanded. The levels of agency granted to women and men involved in transactional relationships must be adjusted, and less direct gains such as community membership and social security must be included. Underlying these various additional aspects remains the inextricable role played by the persistent livelihood insecurity of many rural women. Although probably still undesirable, social exclusion is less life threatening when other safety nets besides one's direct social network are in place, or when one's livelihood insecurity is less severe in general. Furthermore, risky sexual relationships at times of temporary abundance are partly an anticipation of the ever-returning times of shortages (see also Swidler and Watkins 2007). The findings presented in this article do therefore not eradicate the need to reduce rural women's livelihood insecurity. To the contrary, as an HIV prevention focus it remains highly valid and important.

## NOTES

1. In some countries in sub-Saharan Africa the number of new infections seems to be diminishing, but this is at least partly a result of more accurate estimation methods rather than an actual reduction (UNAIDS 2009). In other countries the incidence of new infections seems to be stabilizing, but at unacceptably high levels, especially in southern Africa, where national HIV prevalence estimates range from 11 percent to 26 percent of the population (UNAIDS 2010).

2. Of all 182 countries on the Human Development Index, only 22 were in 2009 calculated to be less developed than Malawi, and of these many were involved in or recovering from conflict.

3. Two-thirds of all Malawian households cannot produce nor purchase the minimum requirement of 2200 kilocalories per person per day (Sahley et al. 2005). Half of all children in Malawi are stunted and 22 percent are severely stunted (Government of Malawi 2004; WHO 2005)—clear indications of chronic malnutrition (Devereux et al. 2006).

4. Currently estimated at 11 percent of the population aged 15–49 (UNAIDS 2010). Since the beginning of the global AIDS pandemic Malawi has been in the top ten list of countries with the highest HIV prevalence worldwide.

5. With 85 percent of the population residing in rural areas (Government of Malawi 2008), Malawi is one of the least urbanized countries worldwide.

6. To safeguard the privacy of the study population, the names of research sites and informants have been changed in this article.

7. Condoms were seldom used by my informants. It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on the general reluctance against condoms use. Reasons behind this include a reduced pleasurable feeling (Tavory and Swidler 2009) and its association with prostitution, sinfulness and distrust (Chimbiri 2007).

8. Because of mingling with patrilineal ethnic groups (Phiri 1983), colonial and post-colonial Western influences (Davison 1997; Hirschmann and Vaughan 1984; Quisumbing and Meinzen-Dick 2001), and the patriarchal gender ideology propagated during the 30 years reign of Malawi's first president Kamuzu Banda (Segal 2008), men increasingly own land too. Of the married couples in my research site 27 percent both owned land, in 54 percent of the cases only the wife owned land and in 14 percent only the husband, 5 percent of the couples did not own land at all but rented.

9. Both the British colonialists and Banda's regime have to some extent purposefully neglected to develop the rural masses (Conroy et al. 2006; Ellis et al. 2003), prioritizing instead the development of a small elite. Estate agriculture was rapidly expanded at the expense of smallholder agriculture through easy acquisition of land for estate holders, and smallholder agriculture was taxed to develop the estates (Chirwa et al. 2008). Smallholders were prohibited to grow certain cash crops so that the estates could monopolize these (Conroy et al. 2006; Frankenberger et al. 2003). To the elite a hungry peasantry even had its advantages, as it facilitated the recruitment of cheap labor on commercial estates (Mandala 2005). The legacy of this neglect is a rural population that, in comparison to surrounding countries, is markedly deprived of infrastructural, educational, agricultural and health services (Bryceson and Fonseca 2006). The most fertile lands have been dedicated to the commercial estates where export crops are grown, occupying almost 40 percent of all arable land in Malawi (Arrehag et al. 2006; Sahley et al. 2005). Smallholder farming households have a median land size of 0.6 hectare to cultivate (Chinsinga 2008)—which is far below the estimated 1.5 hectares needed to feed a family for a full year (Kamwendo 2006). An average Malawian household can—if the crops are not affected by dry spells, floods, or pests—harvest just enough to feed itself for six to seven months (Chirwa et al. 2008).

10. To fully recover from two or three seasons of cultivation, most fields in Malawi need to be left fallow for approximately 20 years (Pike 1968:192), which has become impossible since the Malawian population size tripled over the past 50 years. This massive population growth also led to intensified deforestation and monocropping because of small plot sizes, which all contributed to further deterioration of soil fertility.

11. One maternity ward located in the small clinic at the nearest trading center at approximately five kilometers (or one hour walking) distance, and the other in the district hospital at Balaka town at approximately 13 kilometers (or two hours on bicycle) distance.

12. Individual years show greater disparities in number of births per month. However, as the exact timing and length of the (peak of the) annual hunger season differ per year, so too do the peaks in childbirths. Hence, when calculating the average over several years, the individual peaks are leveled off.

13. Even though only a minority of the men own land, those who do can use all of it to grow cash crops as it is their wives' obligation to feed them.

14. Seventy Malawi Kwacha was worth approximately \$0.50 at the time of the research.

15. These mainly concerned women selling some hips of tomatoes, other vegetables, or dried fish that they piled on a piece of cloth on the ground, or prepared foodstuff like *mandasi*, *zitumbuwa*, or *kanyenya*. Their profits covered ordinary daily expenses such as relish, soap, body lotion, paraffin—but little more than that. For some this business was only temporary—having harvested a surplus, or acquired a one-time lump sum of investment money. Most, however, managed to keep some of their profit apart to reinvest and keep their business going.

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