Balancing men, morals and money: Women’s agency between HIV and security in a Malawi village
Verheijen, J.P.E.

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The assumption that poverty and gender inequality push women to exchange sex for material support is increasingly used to explain the continued spread of HIV throughout sub-Saharan Africa and consequently to inform policy. Based on one year of anthropological field research, this case study from rural Malawi comes to a different conclusion. While the findings confirm that the sexual and relationship choices of village women put them at increased risk of contracting HIV, the study shows that their choices result from a careful balancing of personal wants and community rules, rather than from acute desperation. Among the factors that impact this ‘balancing act’ are the strict but not necessarily unequal division of gender roles, the vital importance of conforming to cultural norms, and suspicion towards women’s independence. Related factors are the patterns of matrilineal and matrilocal organization, the outmigration of men, the traditional valuation of sex, and fatalistic attitudes towards HIV and AIDS. In conclusion, this study argues that the ‘transactional sex paradigm’ fails to acknowledge the major role played by cultural conventions, the complexity of women’s economic survival strategies, and the agency that women exert in upholding the prevalent gender norms.

Janneke Verheijen

received her Master’s degree in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. As PhD student she was attached to the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (Aissr) at the University of Amsterdam, and the IS-Academy of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
Balancing men, morals and money
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Women’s agency between HIV and security in a Malawi village

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Janneke Pieteren Elisabeth Verheijen

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Promotiecommissie

Promotoren: Prof. dr. J.D.M. van der Geest

Prof. dr. A. Niehof

Overige Leden: Prof. dr. R.C. Pool

Prof. dr. A.P. Hardon

Prof. dr. S.C. Watkins

Dr. E.M. Moyer

Dr. D.F. Bryceson

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragswetenschappen
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Dedication:
To all Mudzi women
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Introduction:
The transactional sex paradigm

Aim and argument

The aim of this book is to test, through a Malawian case study, the hypothesis that improved livelihood security for women will lead them to make safer sexual choices. This hypothesis arises from the widespread assumption, especially prevalent in public health and development literature, that poverty and gender inequality push women to take sexual risks. Perceived as poor and marginalized, African women are often assumed to have few other means to survive than to exchange sexual favours for material support from men. This dependence on male support, the assertion goes, puts women in a disadvantaged position when it comes to negotiating safe sexual practices, while also pushing them to seek multiple sex partners – hence significantly increasing the risk of HIV transmission. To reverse the downward spiral of poverty and AIDS, many reports conclude, it is imperative to economically empower women so as to reduce their need to resort to risky ‘survival sex’. As this line of argument has become so commonplace, and goes uncontested in so much of the literature, I refer to it here as the ‘transactional sex paradigm’.

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Based on the insights gained through anthropological research I argue that this transactional sex paradigm, which is increasingly used to explain the continued spread of HIV throughout sub-Saharan Africa and to consequently inform policy, overlooks certain important cultural and socio-economic aspects of women’s sexual choices. While confirming the widespread assumption that the need for support plays a role in poor women’s decisions to readily accept sexual proposals from men, my data demonstrate that the interrelations between livelihood insecurity and risky sexual behaviour are more complex and less straightforward than usually presumed.

Rationale

Ever since HIV and AIDS were first discovered in the 1980s, their prevalence has been disproportionally high in sub-Saharan Africa. Although this region is inhabited by only 10 percent of the world population, over two-thirds of all HIV-infected people live here (UNAIDS 2010). Not only the scale of the pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa seems exceptional, so too do the key groups that are affected. On other continents, HIV was (and still is) largely transmitted through unprotected sex between men and the sharing of needles among intravenous drug users – thus mainly affecting particular minority groups of the population. In sub-Saharan Africa, HIV has spread and continues to spread predominantly through unprotected heterosexual intercourse, affecting both men and women in the general population. Furthermore, sub-Saharan Africa is the only continent where more women than men are infected with HIV.

Medical scientists initially sought out biological causes for these striking deviations (Hunt 1996), but have found no conclusive explanation. Social scientists then began their search for distinctive cultural traits that might be held responsible for the apparently divergent pattern of the African pandemic. Caldwell et al. (1989) in particular made a strong case for the uniqueness of “the African system” of marriage and sexuality, which they characterized as geared towards high levels of (lineage) reproduction. This, they argued, resulted in weak conjugal bonds, a general lack of moral boundaries regarding sexual permissiveness, and encouragement of sexual networking, thus greatly facilitating the spread of HIV on the continent. The recognition that sexual behaviour is not merely the result of individual decision making, but is to a large extent conditioned by one’s social environment, has been valuable and lauded (e.g. in Hunt 1996, Parker 2001). However, the Caldwells’ thesis, and consequently anything that reeks of it, has become discredited. The main critiques are directed at its perceived racism, sweeping generalizations, and the erroneous conclusion that a lack of a ‘Eurasian’ morality (emphasizing female chastity and monogamous conjugal bonds) implies that African cultural systems would have no sexual restrictions or guidelines at
This last point is refuted by our own data too, as I describe in Chapter 6. Our data confirm, however, some essential points of the Caldwells' argument, which I will elaborate upon in the Conclusion.

Meanwhile, national and international HIV-prevention strategies have focused particularly on informing the public about the existence of a new fatal virus and about ways to avoid infection. This focus on changing individual behaviour reveals the general perception that protection against HIV was first and foremost people's personal responsibility. The efforts had an impressive impact on the levels of AIDS awareness among all strata of the African population. This, however, did not lead to the expected behaviour change at any significant scale – which added to the puzzlement about the African AIDS pandemic.

Some scholars grew increasingly uncomfortable with the emphasis on individual responsibility for prevention, and on cultural factors as determinants of involvement in high-risk sex and as obstructions to safer sexual conduct. When AIDS epidemics in other ‘underdeveloped’ settings began to evolve towards a socio-epidemiological pattern similar to that of sub-Saharan Africa, which until then had been considered unique, discussions of structural vulnerabilities to HIV infection gained prominence. In these settings, as in sub-Saharan Africa, HIV prevalence rose particularly fast among women, even leading UNAIDS and others to speak of a “feminization of AIDS” (e.g. Akukwe 2005, Corby et al. 2007: 11, CHGA 2004: 11, Kaplan 1995, Rodrigo & Rajapakse 2010: 9). This rise could not sufficiently be explained by the fact that women are biologically more susceptible to HIV infection than men, as this goes for all women worldwide while the pandemic was feminizing only in certain – impoverished – settings. As a result of these dynamics, the combination of poverty and gender inequality entered the stage as the new main culprit of the AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa.

Medical anthropologist and physician Paul Farmer (1992, 1998, 1999, Farmer et al. 1993) in particular has been credited for drawing attention to the role of social inequalities in facilitating the spread of HIV, based on his observations in Haiti.

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3 Including poor inner-city neighbourhoods in the United States (e.g. Kaplan 1995, Sobo 1005)
4 Currently, roughly 60 percent of all people living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa are women. In the Caribbean this is estimated at 45 to 50 percent, in Asia and Latin America 30 to 40 percent, and in Central Asia and Eastern Europe about 30 percent (Rodrigo & Rajapakse 2010: 9).
5 Biologically, women are more susceptible to HIV infection as the female genital tissue is more easily damaged than that of male genitals, semen contains higher concentrations of the virus, and semen comes in larger quantities than vaginal secretions (Farmer et al. 1993: 387). Nicolosi et al. (1994) found that the risk of infection of male-to-female transmission was 2.3 times greater than that of female-to-male transmission.
6 But see also Bassett & Mhloyi (1991), Schoepf (1988, 1991), and Packard & Epstein (1991) for other early accounts of structural vulnerability to HIV.
pointed out the material obstructions to health faced by many marginalized people, and unravelled the historical economic and political processes that helped to shape these. He urged anthropologists to shift their focus from cultural particularities to the “mechanisms by which poverty puts young adults, and especially young women, at risk of HIV infection” (Farmer 1995: 13). Brooke Schoepf (1998: 230), based on research in what was then called Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), formulated the following answer to this call:

Most women, including faithful wives, are unable to negotiate safer sexual practices with partners whom they know or suspect have multiple partners. When men refuse condoms, women without independent incomes cannot refuse risky sex. Powerlessness in the face of a dreaded disease leads many women to deny their risk. In the presence of HIV, what was once a survival strategy for poor women [maintaining sexual relationships with men for support] leads to AIDS and death.

Amidst the continued biomedical focus on personal responsibility, and social scientists’ search for cultural vindications, linking exposure to HIV infection (and other diseases) with low socio-economic status was ground breaking. Many scholars and policy makers adopted these pioneers’ line of argument, and continue to subscribe to it.

The vulnerability (or ‘structural violence’) perspective seemingly solved the puzzlement about the consistently reported gap between increased HIV awareness and the lack of behaviour change throughout the African continent, and offered a welcome new entry point for addressing this problem. In this view, women do not demand or even suggest safer sexual practices. Indeed, women’s lack of control over their sexual lives, if not their entire lives, is central to most accounts of female vulnerability to the risk of HIV infection. Addressing this powerlessness, then, is held to be the pivotal means to reduce the incidence of HIV transmission and contain the pandemic. As Conroy & Whiteside (2006: 56-7) argued specifically for the case of Malawi:

Gender inequality is arguably the most significant driver of the AIDS pandemic in Malawi. It is inextricably linked to poverty. Women have less access to education, employment and

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8 Farmer et al. (2006: 1686) defines structural violence as: “[O]ne way of describing social arrangements that puts individuals and populations in harm’s way. … The arrangements are structural because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world; they are violent because they cause injury to people. … [N]either culture nor pure individual will is at fault; rather, historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces conspire to constrain individual agency.”
credit and are extremely vulnerable when their husbands die or if their marriages split up. Until women are given more opportunities to live independently of men (if this is their choice) or the power to negotiate their sexual relationships as equal partners with men, the spread of HIV in Malawi will not be halted.

Similar calls for women’s economic empowerment as key to halting the African AIDS pandemic gained strength throughout the international community.9

The ‘transactional sex paradigm’

Poverty drives the [AIDS] pandemic as poor women and children are forced into transactional sex in order to get money to survive. They are often fully aware of the risks but have no choice. The imperative for short-term survival in a desperately poor environment forces people into behaviours that place them at direct risk of infection (Conroy & Whiteside 2006: 66).

The link between HIV/AIDS and poverty … has a clearly gendered dimension. Many of the poorest in Africa are women who often head the poorest of households. Inevitably such women will often engage in commercial sexual transactions, sometimes as commercial sex workers, but more often on an occasional basis, as survival strategies for themselves and their dependents. The effects of these behaviours on HIV infection in women are only too evident, and in part account for the much higher infection rates in young women who are increasingly unable to sustain themselves by other work in either the formal or informal sectors (Freedman & Poku 2005: 679).

Women, in particular, often find themselves in situations where they are subject to greater HIV susceptibility, as a result of sexual violence, or economic hardship which forces them to trade sex for food (FAO 2003: 2).

Without adequate schooling, with limited skills, deprived of a social network and feeling isolated, adolescents in these situations risk growing into young women with no economic assets. Their bodies become their main asset and their only source of bargaining power or income (Urdang 2007: 7).

If the choice is between HIV/AIDS or starvation, HIV/AIDS or losing the farm, HIV/AIDS or no schooling for your children, many, if not most [poor African women], who no longer have assets to sell, sell sex (Bie 2007: 29).

The combination of poverty and gender inequality has come to be considered by many analysts a main driver of the AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa.10 As the above assembly of quotes illustrates, advocates of the vulnerability approach often point particularly to poor women’s involvement in sexual exchange relationships to

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typify how the forces of poverty and gender inequality combine to drive the spread of HIV (see also Figure 1.1). As noted, I refer to this widespread explanatory model for Africa’s high – and African women’s disproportionately high – HIV rates as the ‘transactional sex paradigm’. In an earlier publication on this topic (Verheijen 2011), I have called it the ‘transactional sex model’. I believe, however, that the word ‘paradigm’ is better suited than the more neutral term ‘model’ because it conveys the taken-for-granted, matter-of-fact nature of this particular explanatory model.

Figure 1.1: “The HIV/AIDS-food insecurity syndemic” from Himmelgreen et al. 2009: 402. Note that transactional sex is depicted as a significant link in the ‘syndemic’.

The taken-for-granted nature of the concept of ‘transactional sex’ appears not only from the fact that no attempt is made to formulate a universally agreed-upon definition, but, worse, that often no definition is formulated at all. In many reports, both scholarly and policy-oriented, the term (or similar denotations like ‘survival sex’) tends to be mentioned as a matter of fact.11 Only in some cases can the authors’ interpretations be discerned by reading between the lines. Doing so reveals that these interpretations actually vary widely, ranging from explicit commercial exchange of one specific sex act for an agreed-upon quantified reward (e.g. Robinson & Yeh 2011) to something that may in fact entail nothing more than the cultural custom of young men paying their date’s drink (e.g. Conroy & Whiteside 2006: 60). The concept of ‘transactional sex’ is thus used to cover a

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11 Notable exceptions are De Zalduondo 1991, Luke 2005b, and Nobelius et al. 2010 in which criteria for different types of sexual exchange are theorized upon.
range of sexual-economic exchanges, and many authors seem either unaware of this possible variation, uncertain where on the spectrum to locate what they see, or uncomfortable with calling it prostitution yet unable to conceptualize it otherwise. Most commonly, the terms do not refer to women who self-identify as sex workers, but to ordinary women receiving money, gifts, or favours in return for sexual relations (e.g. GoM 2011a: 181). Generally, such exchanges are straightforwardly interpreted as men’s exploitation of women’s sexuality. The grand scale at which material transactions in sexual relationships are found to occur in sub-Saharan Africa is taken as indication of the profundity of African women’s dependence on men, and the severity of their socio-cultural and consequently economic subordination.

Numerous studies have attempted to find evidence for the commonly assumed link between women’s low socio-economic status, transactional sex, and HIV risk. Notably, the findings of these studies vary widely. Scholars have found that material motivation for involvement in sexual relationships is mentioned by women all over the continent. Receipt of money or gifts within a relationship is furthermore often found to be associated with reduced negotiating power for women regarding the conditions of sex, and so with increased HIV risk. But the extent to which women’s involvement in such relationships is driven by social powerlessness and economic destitution is highly disputed. Of the certainly not comprehensive list of studies under review here (see Appendix 1 for overview), almost as many found (or assumed to find) a direct correlation between women’s low socio-economic position and their engagement in transactional sex as not. The methods of inquiry, research setting (specific country; urban or rural), age, and gender of informants vary more-or-less equally between the two groups of studies and can thus not help to explain their contradictory findings. I believe that the divergence indicates more than anything else the difficulties in studying, and particularly, interpreting the topic of ‘transactional sex’.

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Difficulties arise from the intimate and sensitive nature of sex in general, which inhibits participant observation\textsuperscript{15} while providing motivation and opportunity for misrepresentation by informants in their self-reports. By far most studies on transactional sex in sub-Saharan Africa necessarily base their conclusions on such self-reports, be it through survey questionnaires, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, life histories, or diaries. As a result, these studies’ findings are likely to represent dominant discourses or socially desirable responses rather than actual practice.\textsuperscript{16} Moore et al. (2007: 45) furthermore found that respondents’ answers to enquiries about transactional sex are highly sensitive to the exact formulation of the questions posed. One can imagine the miscommunication, and resultant misrepresentation and misinterpretation, when researcher and researched have different understandings of exactly where on the ‘spectrum’ the relationships at stake are positioned, as often seems to be the case (see Luke 2005b, and Tawfik & Watkins 2007 for elaboration).

Another characteristic of the body of literature on transactional sex in sub-Saharan Africa is the bias towards youngsters as the research population.\textsuperscript{17} This is not surprising, considering the fact that the disparity between numbers of male and female HIV infections has long been most significant among the younger sexually active age groups. In 2008, UNAIDS reported that in sub-Saharan Africa about 75 percent of all HIV infections in the age group 15 to 24 fell among women (UNAIDS 2008c: 1). Two additional factors may help to explain the widespread focus on youth in studies on transactional sex. Firstly, some researchers seem to assume that sexual-economic exchange relations are only engaged in prior to marriage, hence by premarital boys and girls (e.g. Moore et al. 2007: 48). Certain risk factors related to transactional sex – multiple sexual partners and high rates of partner change – also seem to be considered as primarily practiced by women before they properly settle down and marry. Secondly, an explicit or implicit association of transactional sex with the rise of capitalism, consumerism, and thus modernity seems to often underlie the choice of youth as research group, and, related to this, an urban setting as research location. Possibly, older age groups are considered more conservative and less induced to engage in such a presumably modern phenomenon as sexual-economic exchange. This corresponds to a theme that has


been common throughout the history of anthropology, namely the (presumed or anticipated) breakdown of traditional norms due to modern influences, particularly the introduction of money (Moore & Vaughan 1994: 156-62, Parry & Bloch 1989). In this view, sexual-economic exchange is essentially a new phenomenon, triggered by the destruction of age-old societal guidelines and a replacement by novel constructions of identity, desire, and success (e.g. in Adomako Ampofo 1997: 178, Barnett & Whiteside 2006: 91, De la Torre 2009: ix, Luke 2003: 77). Some scholars maintain that this social and economic upheaval has intensified women’s need for support and reduced their access to traditional safety nets such as a stable marriage, thus pushing them into informal prostitution. Many of the urban youth studies (and others) emphasize, however, that luxury commodities rather than basic resources for survival are the substance of exchange, and that women – rather than being victims – are often active agents in pursuit of material gain. Most studies point out that gifting is actually part and parcel of all (premarital) sexual relationships, and not related to a woman’s level of destitution. A number of authors see this as resonant with precapitalist partnering practices and argue that sexual-economic exchange is rather a continuation of age-old customs than (solely) the result of recent disruptions (e.g. Cornwall 2002, Helle-Valle 1999: 379-80, Leclerc-Madlala 2003: 32, Nobelius et al. 2010: 499, Van den Borne 2005a).

Recent quantitative and qualitative studies suggest that condom use among African youth is on the increase and HIV incidence on the decline (Hargreaves et al. 2007, Leclerc-Madlala 2002: 25, Pettifor et al. 2008: 1, UNAIDS 2008c: 3). In Malawi, HIV prevalence among young women aged 20 to 24 has even halved, from 13 percent to six percent between 2004 and 2010 (GoM 2012: 2). Prevalence continues to rise, however, among women aged 30 to 39. With rates already over 20 percent, by far most women living with the virus fall within this age group. Relatively little is known, however, about the sexual (exchange) choices of this group of prime-age women – presumably because many researchers consider them ‘off the hook’ once ‘properly’ married. The high level of HIV among these women tends to be explained as resulting from promiscuous husbands who transmit the virus to them. The transactional sex paradigm comes in to clarify why these women passively accept the risk posed by their husband despite their awareness of HIV and AIDS: they need his support for the survival of themselves and their children. No further inquiry seems needed.

Despite the substantial call for female economic empowerment in order to halt the AIDS pandemic, very few efforts have actually been made to realize this (Kim et al. 2008: 66, Piot et al. 2008: 845). The few that have entail microcredit schemes directed at vulnerable women (e.g. SHAZ in Zimbabwe, IMAGE in South Africa, TRY in Kenya; see Ashburn & Warner 2010, Kim et al. 2008, Lukas 2008, Wojcicki 2005, and Urdang 2007 for reviews), cash transfer programs (e.g. RESPECT in Tanzania, Zomba Cash Transfer Program in Malawi, and the Malawi
Incentives Project), and food aid targeted at “at-risk women and girls to help avoid survival sex” (C-SAFE). Some of these projects have managed to reduce poverty levels, food insecurity, and gender-based violence; improve women’s vocational capacities and overall nutritional levels; and increase school attendance and (self-reported) safer sexual behaviours. Notably, however, none of these projects seems to have led to actual, statistically significant reductions in HIV incidence among the women involved (Kohler & Thornton 2011: 12, Pronyk et al. 2006, Rodrigo & Rajapakse 2010: 9, Wojcicki 2005: 4, Lukas 2008: 7), although two of the cash transfer programs had at least a partial impact on reducing teenage pregnancies among school dropouts (Baird et al. 2010) and STIs (De Walque et al. 2012).

The field study

In this book I critically assess the transactional sex paradigm. Instead of merely trying to establish whether or not poverty promotes sexual risk taking, I turn the question around and assess whether the oft-made policy recommendation that economic empowerment will lead women to make safer sexual choices is justified. This reversal allows for a broader understanding of the multiple co-factors that encourage high-risk sex and inhibit behaviour change.

I build my argument on ethnographic data that I collected with the invaluable help of my research assistant Gertrude Finyiza, during a nearly one-year field study, lasting from August 2008 to July 2009. Obviously the study of one particular locality, as thorough as it may be, cannot be the basis on which to refute or confirm a global paradigm. Moreover, the specific site in which this study was conducted has some extraordinary features which make it unsuitable to even pretend to be representative, as we shall see further on. Instead of vainly attempting to find a research site that could, with some goodwill, be considered an ‘average’ village, be it Malawian or even African, I selected a site that is extreme in various ways, so hoping to amplify the dynamics under study. By assessing these amplified dynamics with an in-depth, up-close-and-personal focus, this study is intended to function as a magnifying glass. The details that are so revealed help to nuance and enrich our understanding of what at first sight tends to be called ‘transactional sex’.

Malawi is one of the least developed countries worldwide. Of all 187 countries on the Human Development Index, only 16 are calculated to be less developed than Malawi, and of these many are, unlike Malawi, involved in or recovering from conflict. Two-thirds of all Malawian households cannot produce nor purchase the minimum level of 2200 kilocalories per person per day (Sahley et al. 2005). Almost half of all children under age five in Malawi are stunted and 20 percent are severely stunted (GoM 2010a: 130), statistics which are considered clear indications of chronic malnutrition (Devereux et al. 2006b). Within Malawi, poverty and malnutrition are most severe in the rural areas (GoM 2010a: 22, 130, 148) and in the Southern Region (GoM/WB 2006: 4).
Ever since HIV prevalence became monitored, Malawi has been among the top ten countries with the highest infection rates. It is currently estimated that 11 per cent of the population between the ages 15 and 49 lives with the virus. As is the case throughout sub-Saharan Africa, infection rates are higher among women (13%) than among men (8%) (GoM 2012: 12). As in most of the world, prevalence is currently higher in the urban areas (17%) than in the rural areas (9%), but is increasing in rural areas while diminishing in urban areas (UNAIDS 2010: 18). HIV rates have always been substantially higher in the Southern Region (15%) than in the Central (8%) and Northern (7%) Regions (GoM 2012: 13). Although national HIV prevalence has slowly declined,18 HIV incidence19 remains highest in the Southern Region (ibid: 19).

Because, as noted, both poverty and HIV prevalence are extraordinarily high in Malawi, peaking in the Southern Region and on the rise in the rural areas, I estimated that a possible link between the two may be most pronounced and best discernible here. A village community in one of Malawi’s southern districts was therefore selected as research site for this study. To protect the privacy of my informants I do not disclose the village’s real name, but call it ‘Mudzi’. All adult Mudzi women were included in the research, but we focused particularly on those of prime-age: women who had a household to run and children to care for – hence those supposedly most in need of support.

Matrilineality
Intriguingly, most village communities in Malawi’s south are matrilineally and matrilocally20 organized. Descent and inheritance are traced through the female

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18 Estimates of HIV prevalence in Malawi peaked in 1999, when it was calculated to be 16.4 percent, after which it began to decline (GoM 2010b: 2). The downward adjustment of the prevalence estimates may, however, at least partly be attributable to more accurate calculation methods rather than an actual reduction of HIV transmission (UNAIDS 2006: 10).

19 While ‘HIV prevalence’ refers to the total number of people living with the virus, ‘HIV incidence’ refers to the number of new infections that occur within a certain period, in this case the year 2010. Incidence is generally considered a better epidemiological indicator, because prevalence also depends on mortality rates. Especially when effective treatment becomes available and accessible, as it has in Malawi, prevalence statistics may distort a good impression of the evolution of a local epidemic. Even if no new infections occur, the total number of people living with HIV will increase simply because the medication prolongs the lives of those who would otherwise have died. Incidence is, however, more difficult to measure, and often we need to depend on prevalence rates as an indicator.

20 Matrilocality refers to the marital residence pattern in which a man moves in with his wife’s family. In the literature on southern Malawi, usually this term is used, although some speak of ‘uxorilocality’. Uxorilocality refers to the cultural rule that a man after marriage moves to his wife’s residence. Both terms have some truth in them: in the matrilineally organized communities of southern Malawi, men live in their wife’s house, which is commonly next to the houses of her matrikin (mother, grandmother, sisters). In this study I will predominantly use the term ‘matrilocality’ to emphasize that women generally continue to live amongst their close relatives.
bloodline. It is the women who hold the rights\(^{21}\) to land and who remain resident near their (maternal) kin. Upon marriage a woman is joined by her husband, who is supposed to help cultivate her field and build a house that is hers to keep in case of divorce. Various studies found that, as a result, these women’s livelihoods are relatively secure compared to that of other rural Malawian women (Chimbuto 2011: 39-40, Davison 1997: 121, Mwambene 2005, Peters et al. 2007, Rensen 2007, Shah et al. 2002).

In other words, the very site that was selected because of its extremely high levels of both food insecurity and HIV prevalence – which, following the transactional sex paradigm, would suggest a low socio-economic status of women vis-à-vis men – seems a quite favourable one for women. Whereas women’s increased vulnerability to HIV has been associated with the “lack of ownership over land and other important resources, leading them to have scarce opportunities for an independent life” (Haram 1995: 34), this does not apply to my research population. Moreover, statistics on HIV prevalence among the different ethnic groups in Malawi reveal that the highest rates are found among matrilineal groups\(^{22}\) while the lowest rates are among patrilineal groups\(^{23}\) (GoM 2011: 198). Hence, when comparing women who hold the right over land and ownership of their house with women who do not, it is the former who are most likely to be or become infected with HIV. This seems to contradict the general assumption that it is disempowerment and destitution that put women at increased risk of HIV infection, thus testing the widespread belief that economic empowerment for women will reduce HIV transmission. Although the correlation between matrilineality and higher HIV risk need not be a causal relationship, matrilineal women’s comparatively good socio-economic position makes them interesting to study, as an analysis of their sexual choices may shed light on the hypothetical impact that female economic empowerment might have on HIV transmission.

Christine Saidi (2010) has recently argued, as George Murdock (1959) did earlier, that originally all Bantu people were organized matrilineally. Many of these groups have over time developed into patrilineal societies, as further described in Chapter 2. Nonetheless, a so-called ‘matrilineal Bantu belt’ continues to run from Namibia, Angola, and Congo, through Zambia, Tanzania, and Malawi to Mozambique. Within Malawi approximately 57 percent of the population adheres predominantly to matrilineal organizing principles (MHRC 2005: 31).

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\(^{21}\) This right is formally called ‘usufruct’ and refers to a right to decide about the use of a specific plot of land. Actual ownership of all land is perceived to be in the hands of a community’s paramount leader: historically the chief, later the national president. Nonetheless, these days at least, the usufruct right to land can be (informally) sold or rented out.

\(^{22}\) Lomwe at 17 percent, followed by the Nyanja and Mang’anja at 15 percent, and the Yao at 13 percent (GoM 2011: 198).

\(^{23}\) According to the 2010 national population census Chewa, Ndali, Nkhonde, and Tumbuka have the lowest prevalence compared with other ethnic groups, at 7 percent each (GoM 2011: 198).
Early anthropologists emphasized that women’s power and autonomy within a matrilineal system should not be overestimated. Instead of obeying their father and, later in life, their husband, these anthropologists claimed, women were expected to obey their mother’s brother and later their own brother(s) (Lawson 1949: 181, Mitchell 1962: 33, Richards 1950). The notion that men hold power over their sisters’ children rather than their own puzzled the famous anthropologist Audrey Richards and her followers (e.g. Douglas 1969, Lévi-Strauss 1949, Schneider & Gough 1961), who foresaw a “conflict between the legal duty to the maternal nephew, and a man’s natural desire to benefit his own sons” (in Peters 1997a: 128). Furthermore, men’s authority over their sisters and sisters’ children seemed difficult to reconcile with their residence in their wife’s village, which completed the so-called ‘matrilineal puzzle’. However, according to several authors, this puzzle is at least in the case of Malawi largely based on patriarchal misconceptions of matriliny (Mandala 1984, Morris 1998: 23, Peters 1997a). Regarding male dominance and female subordination as naturally given, early ethnographers tended to observe their study populations through a strongly male-focused lens. Their misperception may not only be attributable to these patriarchal presumptions, but also to the local men who were consulted, some of whom seem to have invented certain ‘age-old customs’ which served their personal ambitions rather than represented usual practice24 (Chanock 1985 in Kaler 2001: 545, Rogers 1980: 125-8, Moore & Vaughan 1994 in Saidi 2010: 17).

Since the 1970s, studies became more gender sensitive due to feminist influences, and indeed contradicted the earlier studies of matriliny. They showed that matrilineal women held considerable power, and that the matrilineal kinship system did not collapse under pressure as previously predicted (Brantley 1997, Davison 1997, Mandala 1984, Moore & Vaughan 1987, Phiri 1983, Peters 1997a, 1997b, Saidi 2010, Vaughan 1987). Although these studies do not deny that certain principles, norms, and practices of matriliny have been and still are changing in various ways among different groups, they indicate that overall matriliny has remained remarkably resilient to external patriarchal influences. The classic misconception of matrilineal societies as essentially patriarchal continues to prevail among some contemporary scholars of Malawi, however, leading to incorrect assumptions that land and power positions are inherited by men from their male matrikin (e.g.

24 For example, in a colonial attempt to document the inheritance law of the matrilineal Yao of southern Malawi, Ibib (1970) recorded that: “If, as is usual, land is allocated to a man in his wife’s village, all rights in respect of such land are exercisable only with the consent of the wife’s kholo [the oldest living ancestress of matrilineal relatives]” (Ibib 1970: 18, italics added). Although Ibib correctly noted the final authority of the wife’s matrikin over land, he seems ignorant of the fact that, as a rule, land among the Yao is inherited from mother to daughter.
Despite persistent erroneous presumptions by some, the ‘matrilineal puzzle’ has proven largely groundless as it was based on a misunderstanding of inheritance rules, an overestimation of male authority, and an ethnocentric interpretation of the sentiments felt for different categories of kin. From my data, however, something else emerges that does seem puzzling: the insistence of Mudzi women on their need for male support to survive – even though, as women, they have entitlement to land and thus primary access to food. In principle, men can only obtain a roof to sleep under and a field to eat from through marriage, which would theoretically put them at a disadvantaged position. Many of my informants explicitly subscribed to the transactional sex paradigm, emphasizing their dependence on men and the fact that poverty pushed them into sexual relationships in order to access support – despite cultural constructions suggesting otherwise. A quick-fix study based on these women’s self-reports, then, would confirm their general depiction as marginalized and in need of empowerment – which is, however, a far from complete representation of their daily life realities. Throughout this book I assess and combine bits and pieces of our field findings so as to eventually ‘solve’ this new ‘matrilineal puzzle’.

Research question and operationalization

Underlying most studies of transactional sex lingers the basic question of people’s motives for engaging in sexual practices that they know are risky in a context of high HIV prevalence. This study is no exception. During our fieldwork, I wanted to assess the actual riskiness of women’s relationship choices, to what extent these were spurred by a dependency on men, and what leeway women had to act otherwise. As noted, I wanted to find out in particular whether increased economic independence for women would lead them to make safer sexual choices; in other words, whether it is primarily the dependence on male support which keeps women from adopting safer sexual practices.

Several concepts need to be defined here in order to become applicable. In the previous paragraph the terms that call for further specification are ‘risky’ and ‘safer sex’. In the public health literature, HIV risk basically refers to “an observed characteristic which raises the odds of being infected” (Barnett & Whiteside 2006: 85). More specifically, these characteristics generally are related to the timing of sexual debut, the consistency of correct condom use, and the number and types of sexual partners (e.g. GoM 2010b: 37-39). In the context of Mudzi, as we shall see in further chapters, risky behaviours entail low condom use, frequent partner change, partner concurrency, remaining with an promiscuous partner, and low levels of inquiry into the marital and health history of a new partner – or, more generally, any sexual or relationship practice that increases exposure to HIV infection. The
term ‘safe sex’ would then be the opposite of ‘risky sex’, hence any sexual or relationship practice that limits exposure to HIV. In Chapter 6 on sex, HIV, and AIDS I delve deeper into these concepts.

The somewhat vague concept of ‘livelihood’ has already been mentioned and will resurface throughout this book; it requires clarification as well. Livelihood has been described as a combination of the resources used and the activities undertaken in order to make a living (DFID 2001). These resources may consist of individual skills and abilities (human capital), land, savings and equipment (natural, financial, and physical capital, respectively), and formal support groups or informal networks that assist in the activities being undertaken (social capital). This last term, ‘social capital’, will be discussed and described in depth in Chapter 7. When the resources and activities to make a living are sufficiently ensured, we can speak of ‘livelihood security’ – and, if this is not the case, of ‘livelihood insecurity’. I will sometimes use these terms more-or-less interchangeably with food (in)security, even though the term of livelihood (in)security has been deliberately introduced to acknowledge that there is more to a ‘good living’ than merely sufficient food (Baro & Deubel 2006: 528). Nonetheless, in a setting like Mudzi, livelihood security to a great extent coincides with and depends on food security. The common definition of ‘food security’ is having at all times physical and economic access to enough food for a healthy and active life (FAO 2006: 1). It has been pointed out, and will become clear throughout this book too, that food security is not only about food availability, but very much about safeguarding the entitlements required to access food (FAO 2006: 1, Mtika 2000: 346, Sen 1981: 2).

The term ‘household’, inconspicuous as it may seem, is another term that has received considerable theoretical attention. Use of the term has been criticized for its insinuation that members of a household form a homogenous entity committed to a common goal, hence obscuring competing intra-household interests, unequal power structures, and negotiation processes (Chant 2003: 18, Doss 1999, Manuh 1998, Mayoux 2006, Niehof 2010, Quisumbing & McClafferty 2006). I most certainly do not subscribe to the ‘homogenous entity’ thesis, as will become clear throughout this book. I furthermore do not consider Mudzi households to be static entities, but as changing in composition, especially since husbands frequently move in and out. The exact composition may be hard to define even at one specific moment because the status of an (ex-)husband may remain vague for periods of time. When I use the term ‘household’, I intend it to refer to the group of people who share a house, kitchen, bathing place, toilet, and granary (or whichever of these structures are at place). At the very least, a household in Mudzi contains one woman. She may share her household with a husband, (classificatory) children, (classificatory) grandchildren, and her (classificatory) brother and mother.

Related to the often indeterminate nature of households is the – probably surprising – need, at least in the context of Mudzi, to specify the use of the terms ‘husband’,
‘wife’, ‘married’, and ‘unmarried’. I will not do so here but in Chapter 5 on sexual relationships. For now I merely want to make a case against the presumption, common among many social researchers, policy makers, and development practitioners, that these concepts can be unproblematically transported to and from research populations. In particular, the assumption that such terms refer to a fixed and indisputable characteristic, rather than a dynamic, transitory, subjective, and value-loaded status proves misleading in the case of Mudzi.

In contrast, the specific understandings of the concept of ‘gender’ usually are reflected upon in research and policy publications. It is commonly pointed out that gender refers to socially and culturally constructed identities, rather than a biologically determined one – an understanding with which I concur. Gender norms prescribe what behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes are appropriate for and expected from men and women. A ‘gender contract’ refers to “the understood but invisible agreements which regulate relations between men and women” (Kimane & Ntima-Makara 1998: 124); this proves a fruitful notion in the analysis of sexual-economic exchanges in Mudzi. Although the term ‘contract’ may suggest that a process of overt negotiation and conscious approval from all parties preceded the establishing of clearly determined, static rules, this meaning is not intended here. Instead, gender norms and contracts tend to be tacit, and may differ by time and place – also within a particular cultural setting. They are processual in nature, as they are constantly reproduced and reconstructed by the people subject to them, although seldom in a discursive way. This interaction between human action and societal structures that both shape action and result from it leads us to one of the most fundamental theoretical debates in the social sciences and one that is central to this book, too: the structure-agency debate.

The theoretical concept ‘agency’ forms an important theme throughout this book. The concept refers to the human capacity to act and make choices, the capacity to accomplish desired goals. Niehof (2007: 189) has described agency as “conscious action aimed at achieving certain outcomes, with the actors concerned considering the efficacy and appropriateness of their behaviour in a given context that comprises the institutional and normative environment within which daily life is enacted.” These institutional and normative environments, both of which result from complex historical, cultural, and material interactions, may be described as the ‘structures’ that guide and restrict an actor’s agency. Poor African women are often compassionately depicted as lacking the opportunities to get a grip on their lives – to exert agency – because this is impeded by disempowering cultural norms and socio-economic marginalization (Higgins et al. 2010), hence by debilitating structural forces. The women I encountered in Mudzi seemed far removed from this stereotype. This is not to suggest that these women are the opposite – free agents who can and do act as they please. Within the social sciences, debates on agency versus structure, as related debates on empowerment versus disempowerment, have
often revolved around the question of which one prevails over the other, which one best represents reality. The ‘old’ wave of HIV-prevention efforts, still widely practiced, builds on the assumption that human behaviour results primarily from individual agency, and can thus be changed by merely informing individuals about risk and protection. In reaction, the now widely called-for ‘new’ wave stresses that external structural forces – particularly gender inequality and economic deprivation – constrain human agency beyond individual will and thus must be removed before behaviour change can occur.

Women’s use of their sexuality to reach certain goals is a particularly interesting theme for the structure-agency debate. The topic of sex exchange has long triggered discussions on whether it is a sign of women’s empowerment or disempowerment – in other words, whether women involved in such exchanges should be considered potent agents taking advantage of men’s sexual drives, or involuntary victims forced to risk their lives. Advocates of the transactional sex paradigm have a strong tendency to embrace the latter view. Moving away from applied science, policy making, and development practice into the theoretical realms of the social sciences, a more dual or interactive understanding of and approach to structure and agency prevails. Here, it has become increasingly recognized that structure and agency should not be considered mutually exclusive dichotomies, with one separate from and taking precedence over the other (Nguyen & Stovel 2004: 10). Giddens’ structuration theory (1984) has been principally influential by pointing out that human action and structural constraints are in fact inextricably interdependent, each one shaping the other. Structures guide action, but at the same exist only by virtue of human actions that produce and reproduce them.

The question to ask, then, is not which conceptualization is most ‘true’, but rather how agency and constraining structures interact (Dolfsma & Verburg 2005: 6), and how this interaction creates certain outcomes. The notion of ‘relational autonomy’ has been suggested to capture the social embeddedness of agency; employing this concept allows one to “explore the space between women’s victimization and oppression and women’s active response to these conditions, and in so doing helps to dislodge the victim/agent dichotomy” (Schneider 1993: 84). This is exactly what I try to do throughout this book. In the concluding chapter, I will return to the structure-agency debate and touch upon the bridging theoretical idea of ‘structural change’, as this may help us to think of new policy directions for addressing women’s sexual risk of HIV infection.

In his book *The practice of everyday life* (1984), Michel de Certeau pointed out that social scientists should – rather than studying a society’s institutions or ‘structures’ (e.g. traditions, language, discourse) – examine the ways in which

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these are practiced and reappropriated in everyday situations. What this theoretical framework adds to the structure-agency debate is the distinction he makes within the concept of agency between strategies and tactics. He restricts the concept ‘strategy’ to powerful agents in the position to develop and endorse society’s structures. Ordinary people, De Certeau argues, can only resort to ‘tactics’. Tactics merely entail a dealing with and responding to the existing structures. They pertain to the everyday practices in which society’s rules and products are recombined and subverted in ways that are influenced, but rarely pre-determined, by those very rules and products. Populations are thus not passive subjects of their culture’s structures, but may adjust these – within socially acceptable limits – to their wishes and needs through tactics. These tactics never overtly challenge a society’s structures, but rather function to create room for manoeuvre behind an appearance of conformity. Tactics allow actors to seize opportunities when they arise, but not structurally create them. Such tactical manoeuvring is at play in many of Mudzi’s women’s actions. I believe it may be too static, however, to assume that ordinary people’s tactics can never contribute to shifts in their culture’s structures. I return to this in the concluding chapter.

Although I use ‘agency’ to mean the capacity to make choices and act towards a certain outcome, this is not to suggest that Mudzi women make coherent choices within a clear and consistent vision about long-term goals they aim to achieve. Far from it. As just noted, their actions tend to be reactive rather than strategically planned. The outcomes they act towards at any one point in time tend to be multiple, often divergent, and at times contradictory. Under different circumstances they may well combine the various considerations at play in an alternative order, leading to other outcomes. These outcomes must then somehow be incorporated in their ‘walk of life’ as they go along, so that their actions often become justified at hindsight rather than beforehand. The concept of ‘judicious opportunism’ will prove enlightening for unravelling and understanding Mudzi women’s often pragmatically ad hoc livelihood strategies. This notion derives from the work of Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2005) on the marital and reproductive choices of young Cameroonian women, which challenges the common theorization of action as fulfilling a prior intention by discussing how her informants tend to move back and forth between multiple strategies in a fairly ad hoc manner and without a clear trajectory in mind. Recognizing the unpredictable nature of their fragile livelihoods, the women try to keep open as many alternatives as long as possible, to allow the seizing of a promising opportunity whenever and wherever it may arise.

Strongly related to the dual approach to structure and agency, and helpful for further understanding of how Mudzi women navigate sexual relationships, is the theory of social exchange (Blau 1964, Emerson 1962 in Hyden 2008). This theory asserts that power (commonly defined as the capacity to achieve impact, e.g.
Nyanzi et al. 2005: 14) is not absolute, but arises from mutual dependence. Each person in any type of relationship holds some degree of power over the other, and whoever is most dependent on the relationship at any particular moment is at that time the least powerful. As we shall see in the following chapters, this is highly applicable to sexual relationships in Mudzi.

Outline of book

In this first chapter I have laid out the research focus and the reasoning behind it. I have noted some of the theoretical debates for which my data may be of interest; these are interwoven throughout the analysis of my data rather than elaborated upon in one designated ‘theoretical’ chapter. The next chapter offers a historical background to the study, with a particular focus on the topics relevant for the overall research question: the evolution of gender relations, the underlying causes of today’s poverty, and the development of the AIDS epidemic in Malawi. This is not simply a pro forma background chapter, as the historical analysis reveals some important first hints towards answering the research question. In Chapter 3 I zoom in on Mudzi village and introduce its inhabitants. This chapter includes a ‘visual’ tour through the village, and a description of women’s daily lives and the high but varying degrees of livelihood insecurity that they face. Here I begin to assess how the historical processes described in Chapter 2 materialize in the lives of men and women today. I thus portray the research site prior to presenting the research methodology, because the community’s characteristics to a great extent conditioned the methods used for data collection. The efforts of my research assistant Gertrude and me to collect relevant data are described in Chapter 4. These are largely classical anthropological methods, but with an unconventional and perhaps controversial twist.

The second half of this book contains the main ethnographic chapters. Each addresses a different aspect of the overall research question: Is an independent income for poor women likely to affect their sexual choices? The first two ethnographic chapters revolve around these sexual choices, and the second two around money flows and income generation. In Chapter 5, I delve into the relationships choices of Mudzi villagers. My focus is on women’s considerations concerning their sexual relationships with men as culturally appointed providers of support, and as prerequisite for but also potential threat to their social status. I furthermore dissect women’s widespread resort to a discourse of poverty used to justify their involvement in (multiple) sexual relationships. The men’s side of the story is touched upon where relevant. In Chapter 6 the focus shifts towards women’s choices concerning actual sex acts. I assess how sexual ideologies shape sexual practice and vice versa. I also describe how HIV and AIDS are perceived and dealt with (or not). Chapter 7 turns to village economics, as I assess how
money comes into the community and subsequently flows through it. This analysis reveals the high value that villagers attach to social capital – the social relations that they can fall back upon in times of need. Sexual relationships are assessed from these insights into the need for social capital. Finally, in Chapter 8, I describe women’s options and their limitations in generating an independent income, the ambivalence with which this is surrounded, and the repercussions it may have on their access to other resources.

Combining the data presented in the preceding chapters, Chapter 9 aims to formulate an answer to the overall research question on the viability of reducing risky sexual behaviour by increasing women’s independent income. I discuss the implications that my analysis has for further research in this issue as well as for policy making.

Access to ‘raw’ data

‘Raw’ ethnographic data commonly consist of an abundance of qualitative fieldnotes. Throughout most of anthropology’s history, the generally bulky size of such data inhibited making them accessible for a wider public. Ethnographic output was necessarily limited to the arguments and conclusions deduced from the raw data, at best supported with carefully selected fragments of fieldnotes. Obviously, this has always curbed the extent to which fellow scientists and other interested parties could verify the claims, or make further use of the data. Nowadays, however, advancing digital technologies have opened up ways to make accessible large quantities of data, which allows us to enhance the transparency of ethnographic analyses. In this dissertation I experiment with some of these new possibilities.

Alongside many of the claims that I make throughout this book numerical references can be found within square brackets \([P_x\ xxxx]\). These codes refer to the specific paragraphs within our fieldnotes on which I built a particular claim. This allows interested readers to look up the sections concerned in our ‘raw’ data set and so gain a more thorough and more vivid sense of the real-life experiences that informed my thoughts and led to this study’s final conclusions. I am pleased that the many details that seemed lost in the synthesis are in this way not really lost. They still form part of the analyses, can be retrieved, returned to, and reassessed. Linking my claims to their origin serves as a means to ‘materialize’ and so validate my arguments. At the same time, however, it is also meant to offer readers the opportunity to form alternative interpretations.

*Please note that a digital version of this dissertation will be made available in which the codes are hyperlinked to our fieldnotes, so that interested readers only have to click on a code to see the related paragraph of our fieldnotes pop up.*
A history of gender roles, 
food insecurity and AIDS in Malawi

Introduction

Few scholars of AIDS in Africa make an effort to embed their current-day findings in a historical context. As such they miss important opportunities to deepen their understanding of and strengthen their grip on the problems and solutions they study. Unravelling how things came to be as they are should be an essential part of analysing contemporary dynamics. In this chapter I will therefore elaborate upon the historical background of Malawi, focusing on the topics relevant for this specific study: gender relations, poverty, and AIDS. Obviously one chapter does not do justice to the complex interactions that formed a nation and its people nor the variations within this nation and people. As is inherent to all social studies I have had to make choices on what to include and exclude, and how to present the multiple and at times diverging views and facts. The choices I made were to a large extent informed by the specific research questions and topics I explore in this study.

After giving a brief general impression of Malawi’s geographic and demographic characteristics, I attempt to reconstruct how power dynamics between men and women have evolved over time. As noted in Chapter 1, the majority of Mudzi villagers descends from a matrilineal Bantu group, mostly the Yao. Some

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2 Of all interviewed women, 58 percent are of Yao descent, 23 percent are from other predominantly matrilineal Bantu origin (16% Lomwe, 4% Nyanja, 3% Chewa), 12 percent descend from predominantly patrilineally organized groups (10% Ngoni, 2% Sena), and 7 percent are uncertain because their ancestors descend from different ethnic groups.
anthropological researchers of southern Malawi have chosen not to refer to the (mixed) ethnic designations of their study population but instead consider them a regional people who share language as well as many social and cultural characteristics (e.g. Peters 1997b). However, as the Yao stand out as the majority of Mudzi villagers, and by having a history distinctive from all other matrilineal groups in Malawi, I believe it is relevant to assess their specific ethnic background in more detail. In this chapter I therefore pay particular attention to the historical development of gender relations in Yao3 society. By following a conventional chronological order, this section provides a general overview of Malawi’s history, albeit with a perspective that focuses on gender.

Following this demographic overview, I describe the severe and deteriorating situation of poverty in Malawi. The Malawian population is largely rural and dependent on small-scale subsistence farming, conducted under adverse circumstances. The livelihood insecurity they deal with on a daily basis is situated at the barest level of finding enough food to eat, or not. The focus of this section therefore is the (under)development of the agricultural sector and the resultant fragility of most Malawians’ food security.

Lastly, I describe relevant aspects of the AIDS epidemic in Malawi – its evolution, its current status, the factors that are assumed to drive the continuing spread of HIV, and the national attempts that have been made to temper this spreading.

Geography and demography

Malawi is a relatively small but densely populated country, landlocked between Tanzania, Zambia, and Mozambique. It is globally one of the least developed nations, ranking number 171 of all 187 countries on the Human Development Index of 2011. Over three-quarters of the population live below the official international poverty line, meaning they have less than two US dollars per day to spend (UNDP 2005). Using a nationally calculated subsistence minimum, 52 percent of the population lives below this minimum (the “poor”), and 22 percent far below (the “ultra-poor”) (GoM 2005a). Over the past 30 years the average poverty level has remained virtually static (Chirwa et al. 2008: 21, Conroy 2006: 28), but wealth inequality has increased (Peters et al. 2007: 68-74). For the majority of Malawians, life has become progressively harsher (Frankenberger et al. 2003) due to a combination of factors to be described in this chapter.

As a stretched strip of land, Malawi is subdivided into a Northern, Central and Southern Region. This elongated shape is determined partly by the plateau of the

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3 For comparison, neighbouring Tanzania has an average population density of 53 inhabitants per square kilometre, Mozambique 30, and Zambia 19 (CIA Factbook 2012).
Great Rift Valley on which it is located and partly by British colonialist whim. One-fifth of the country is covered by fresh water, mainly that of the massive Lake Malawi on the eastern border. The climate is relatively moderate because of the country’s elevation on the plateau, but gets hot in the low-lying areas in the south. Savannah woodlands – a mixture of grass, thorn bushes, and scattered trees – cover most of Malawi. The mineral wealth of the country is negligible – which is arguably an advantage, considering the many violent conflicts over the ownership of lucrative minerals elsewhere in the world.

Malawi’s high population density can probably be explained by its once comparatively fertile soils, nourished by the lake and the perennial streams flowing to the lake, amidst a drought-prone region (Webster 1980). The size of the Malawian population remained relatively high but more-or-less stable until the British colonialists came. By putting an end to inter-tribal warfare and slave trade, and bringing with it Western medical knowledge, the colonial regime prevented many deaths and disappearances (Pike 1968: 23). Fertility rates remained equally high, however, and the population expanded drastically. Being one of the first inland areas to be colonized is thought to have spurred immigration as the Europeans offered protection against slave raiders, jobs at their plantations, and education at their mission posts (Debenham 1955: 145). More recently, civil war in Mozambique drove over a million refugees into Malawi. As a result of all of these factors the Malawian population has tripled since independence in 1964, and doubled in the past 25 years (GoM 2008b). In 2011, Malawi’s population size is estimated at 15.4 million inhabitants (on average 163 per square kilometre⁴), and its population growth rate (2010-2015) is estimated at 3.2 (UNFPA 2011: 118). In the few cities, men are overrepresented, while about 10 percent more women than men live in the rural areas (GoM 2008b: 29) – which will prove to be a relevant factor in answering my research question.

Life expectancy in Malawi has increased over the past decennia from 38 years in 1960 to 54 in 2010, remaining significantly lower than the world average of 70 years. Over 10 percent of all children born will not survive until their fifth birthday (GoM 2011a: 96). Like child mortality, maternal mortality in Malawi is among the highest in the world, but has improved over the past decade (HDI 2011). Per one million Malawians only 20 doctors are available (HDI 2011), which is by far the lowest rate in the region (Arrehag et al. 2006: 88). Since free primary education was introduced in 1994, literacy rates have increased steadily for both men and women, now reaching to 81 and 67 percent, respectively (GoM 2011: 30). Although enrolment increased significantly over the past 15 years, less than

⁴ For comparison, neighbouring Tanzania has an average population density of 53 inhabitants per square kilometre, Mozambique 30, and Zambia 19 (CIA Factbook 2012).
half of the children who start primary schooling actually make it to the last grade (Field 2009: 31). About half of all Malawian youth are currently enrolled in either primary or secondary education. Notably, these students consist of boys and girls equally (GoM 2009a: 47-8). A mere 8 percent of the population has managed to complete secondary school (GoM 2011a: 26-7).

Changing gender ideologies and realities

Political, religious, demographic, environmental, and economic factors have affected social relations in Malawi in varying ways and to varying degrees. Overall, these factors have been found to progressively erode women’s once relatively high status. Assessing, for example, how female leadership has changed over time gives an indication of women’s devaluation in the social hierarchy. Historical reconstructions suggest that the ancestors of most contemporary Malawians originally lived in clans led by female chiefs (Phiri 1988: 2). To this day, Malawian villages can be presided over by either a male or female head. As a matter of fact, of the six sub-villages that together comprise Mudzi, four are headed by a female chief, and as a whole Mudzi is presided over by a female Group Village Head. Notably, Malawi’s current paramount leader – the national president – is also a woman. Nonetheless, at present most leaders in the higher ranks of the traditional hierarchy are males. In 2001, of the total 205 Malawian ‘Traditional Authorities’ – the highest position for traditional leaders within the current legal-bureaucratic system – only five spots were occupied by women (Field 2009: 37). In the following sub-sections the dynamics that are likely to have contributed to these changes are assessed in chronological order. It will be concluded that despite some deterioration in relative status, not all is lost for women, particularly not for those living in communities that throughout time managed to retain a matrilineal kinship organization and matrilocal residence pattern.

**Pre-colonial era: 14th century – 1891**

[A typical Bantu legend] pictures the first men as living on one side of a great river and subsisting on game, while the first women keep to the other bank and live by gathering grass seeds. One day when the hunters could not cook their meat because their fires had gone out, one of them crossed the river and met a woman who took him to her hut, and gave him porridge made of grass seeds for the first time. He said it was very nice, and he further said “I will stay and sleep here.” His companions one by one followed his example, and the institution of marriage was thus founded by the recognized exchange of meat and cooked grain between men and women (Doman 1908: 79 in Richards 1932: 202-3).

Throughout the history of modern-day social sciences, claims have been made about a matriarchal origin of human kind (Amadiume 1997, Bachofen 1861, Diop 1989 [1963], Engels 1884, Morgan 1877, Murdock 1959, Saidi 2010). African advocates of this thesis (and their followers) emphasize that matriarchy should not
be understood as an overall dominance of women over men, but rather as referring to a system with great gender equity in which the roles ascribed to women were considered most central to the social order (Saidi 2010: 18). These highly valued female roles related particularly to procreation, food production and preparation, and management of spiritual relations. Although the argument remains disputed in general, Christine Saidi (2010) has recently convincingly argued that at least throughout Bantu history women seem to have held strong social positions in domains that cut across private and public spheres.

Caldwell et al. (1989) have attempted to sketch a unique system of marriage and sexuality that distinguished African societies from others in the world. While their model, and their attempt as such, has been severely criticized and as a result become outmoded, I believe it deserves re-examination for it has great explanatory power.\(^5\) One characteristic that the authors consider typical of traditional African systems is a separation of the world of women from that of the world of men, with each sex reigning in its own sphere. Women as a group, it can be read between the lines, were thus not controlled by men (Arnfred 2004b). A great emphasis placed on fertility for lineage reproduction, furthermore, meant that women’s sexuality was not as restricted as it came to be in the Eurasian world. Rather, women were highly valued for their reproductive capacities and for the ritual powers associated with this. The emphasis on the lineage necessarily meant that less value was attached to the conjugal bond, which was generally weak as a result. The once-widespread custom of (extended periods of) post-partum abstinence was, according to Caldwell et al. (1989: 215), another distinguishing characteristic of the African system. This too may be interpreted as a sign of women’s relatively strong position in society, as it seems unlikely that men, who personally and directly suffered from this institution, would have been the ones to introduce and uphold it at such a large scale for such a long time.

Zooming in on the ancestors of most contemporary Malawians when these migrated into the Malawi area, historical reconstructions suggest that they lived in matrilineal clans led by female chiefs whose authority rested on their ritual powers, such as those related to rain making (Phiri 1988: 2, Saidi 2010: 85). Pushed by wars and diseases these iron-working Bantus had started their southward migration from Central Africa about 2000 years ago, driving the Khoisan hunter-gatherers who first inhabited the area into the Kalahari desert. By the 14th century various Bantu groups had settled on the comparatively fertile soils around Lake Malawi. A clear ‘gender contract’ divided tasks between the sexes. Women mono-polized the ancient craft of pottery and dominated in ritual activities (Richards 1982 [1956]: 38-9, Saidi 2010: 18), while men performed most physically heavy tasks like

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\(^5\) I return to this point in the concluding chapter.
hunting and clearing the fields of bushes and trees (Mandala 1984: 141-4, Richards 1939, Saidi 2010: 128). As ‘holders’ of the fields, women controlled the production and preparation of food (Koopman 1995: 4, Saidi 2010: 139), while men built and maintained the huts. Both were involved in cloth, iron, and salt making, although each had separate tasks (Mandala 1984: 141-4).

Agriculturalists in an area with enough land for all, the early Bantu-clans were a non-martial people. By the end of the 15th century a new flow of Bantu migrants managed to incorporate the small chiefdoms – which had little military power – into one federation, similar to the governing structure they had known in their original Congo region (Encyclopedia Britannica 2009). By the 17th century this so-called Maravi empire spread from the Mozambican coast to eastern Zambia and included much of current-day Malawi (Mchombo nd).

Conquered chiefs were left in charge of their clans, as long as they paid tribute in kind or labour (Mitchell 1961: 32, Rangeley 2000[1948]: 9, 58). Besides ritual specialists, chiefs now increasingly needed to become political strategists too. Those who had the military skills and resources to protect their subjects attracted most followers and so increased their strength and dominion (Phiri 1988: 15). This political military power largely became a male affair, while spiritual guidance continued to be in female hands (Mandala 1984: 143, Pike 2000: 92, Schoenbrun 1998: 91-2).

As time went by, various sub-chiefs within the Maravi empire managed to strengthen their position independent of the central authority of the paramount chief, and as a result the empire’s unity slowly began to crumble. The final deathblow to the empire was given by the attacks from two other tribes fighting their way into the southern region of Malawi in the 18th century. The warrior tribe Ngoni came from the south, fleeing Shaka Zulu. The Yao – the first tribe in the region to possess firearms – came from the east, fleeing famine and attacks from surrounding tribes that had become envious of the wealth they had managed to accumulate through trading with the Arabs and Portuguese (Rangeley 1963: 10). The Maravi

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6 Spiritual power was first and foremost derived from and directed at appeasing the spirits of deceased ancestors. These spirits were believed to mediate between the living and a Supreme Being who controls all natural forces. It is this belief in the existence of one supreme being that distinguishes Bantu cosmology from many others in Africa. This god is considered remote and impersonal, with little interest in the daily affairs of human beings. The ancestral spirits are, however, assumed to be very concerned with the behaviour of their living descendants, watching them closely and not hesitating to interfere when necessary. Defiance in observing time-honoured traditions or neglecting or insulting the conservative ancestor spirits in other ways would be punished by disease, death, and other disasters, it was believed (Mitchell 1961: 58-61, Van Breugel 2001: 260). This belief in the power of ancestral spirits continues to be strong throughout Malawi (Harries et al. 2002: 72; Morris 2000: 221-54, Van Breugel 2001: 73-96), although it is now commonly mixed with Christian or Islamic religious beliefs (Forster 1998).

7 See Aguilar & Birch de Aguilar (1993) for a current-day account of the complementarity and equality of these male and female chieftainship powers.
federation broke into autonomous chiefdom clans, each fighting independently against incorporation by the invaders, with varying degrees of success. These autonomous clans to this day share oral traditions and several cultural practices, although some of their dialects have over time developed into mutually unintelligible languages (Lwanda 2004: 29, Mitchell 1956: 17). The contemporary ethnic groups Chewa and Senga (predominant in the Central Region), Nyanja, and Sena (in the Southern Region) all descend from the matrilineal Maravi people and form the majority of Malawi’s population. The invading groups were also Bantu descendants, the patrilineal Ngoni settling in the Northern and Central Regions, the matrilineal Yao in the south. The Maravi groups conquered by the Ngoni over time adopted many of their invaders’ customs, including patrilineal organization (Phiri 1988: 21).

Mandala (1984: 139) argues that the position of men in the matrilineal societies became strengthened when women began to need physical protection from their male relatives against slave raiders. This argument does not hold for the Yao, however. More than any tribe in the Maravi empire, the Yao were deeply involved in trading with the Arabs and Portuguese (Phiri 2004: 73). At least since 1730 they had travelled to the East African coast to exchange iron, ivory, and tobacco for cotton cloth, beads, and salt (Pike 1968: 69, Rangeley 1963: 9). They then travelled back inland to trade these exhilarating new commodities for more ivory, cattle, and, increasingly, slaves (Rangeley 1963: 14). Initially, the people sold as slaves were the unwanted of the villages – those convicted of a crime and the impotent who would normally have been killed or banished from their communities (Abdallah 1973 [1919]: 12, Rangeley 1963: 14). However, as the demand for slaves increased dramatically at the coast, the Yao ceased being peaceful traders and instead began raiding their neighbours to capture enough men, women, and children to satisfy this demand. Their initial monopoly over firearms and gunpowder, resulting from their early trades with Arabs and Europeans, greatly enhanced their efficacy to extort slaves by force. Only at the height of the slave-trade era, just before the Brits managed to put an end to it, did the Yao begin to raid amongst themselves (Pike 1968: 60). Yao women had thus, during much of the slave-trade era, not been overly dependent on male protection – in contrast to women from the surrounding ethnic groups.

Nonetheless, the thriving slave trade probably did improve Yao males’ relative economic status in society as only they undertook the lucrative journeys to the coast to sell slaves and return with firearms and luxuries. Some resorted to marrying slave women to gain authority and avoid moving away to a wife’s compound and “being treated as a work-horse” on their in-laws’ fields (Mitchell 1956: 412, Phiri 1983), which arguably undermined the bargaining position of free women. Van

8 The Nyanja are also called Mang’anja (Mchombo nd).
den Borne (2005a: 143) speculates that the consequent competition between free and slave wives may have marked the beginning of women seeing men as their livelihood, which, in turn, instigated jealousy among women.

After two centuries of contact with Arab traders the Yao suddenly and massively converted to their allies’ religion. The first to convert were several highly placed Yao chiefs – those who hosted at their houses the Arab visitors, who had ventured inland since 1810 to trade (Bone 2000: 13, Phiri 1988: 22). After these chiefs adopted the Islamic religion, the other Yao were quick to follow. One assumed reason for these voluntary conversions is the economic advantage of strengthening the ties and being associated with the prestigious, well-to-do trading partners (Sicard 2000: 297). The Islamic cosmology could, furthermore, be easily integrated into traditional Yao beliefs and customs, as both systems recognize one supreme being and observe transitory rituals such as those at puberty, marriage, and death (Alpers 2000 [1972], Bone 2000, Sicard 2000). As long as Allah’s power was accepted as absolute, Islamic doctrine tolerated new adherents’ belief in other mystical forces, such as the Yao worship of ancestral spirits (Alpers 2000 [1972]: 29). However, for over two centuries of contact with Islamic trading partners these considerations had not prompted any Yao to adopt the foreign religion. Alpers (2000 [1972]: 43-50) argues that the specific timing of mass conversion – towards the end of the 19th century – is likely to be related to the advent of the British colonialists. This stirred political unrest, creating opportunities to seize power. Some chiefs employed the new form of more-or-less direct contact with the supreme being to legitimize their authority over other chiefs.

By 1921, a British census reports that “every Yao village has a mosque” (Sicard 2000: 297). It is added, however, that generally, the Yao were “not very strict Mohammedans, only using the mosque during the Fast of Ramadan” (ibid). Elsewhere on the African continent conversion to Islam often meant adopting an ideology of female domesticity, and thus tends to be associated with negative empowerment indicators for women (Njoh & Akiwumi 2011). This seems not to have been the case among the Yao Muslims, who only adopted symbolic elements of Islam that did not clash with their own customs (Bone 2000: 18, Pike 1968: 69, Rangeley 1963: 25, Sicard 2000: 297). Traditional initiation rites, for example, have been renamed after Islamic initiation rites, but the content remained largely unaltered (Msiska 1995: 70). Boys’ circumcision had been customary among the

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9 Compared to the European expeditions and the spread of Christianity, little is known about the history of Arabs and spread of Islam in Southern Africa (Bone 2000: 7, Phiri 2004: 194). Although Arab trading caravans always travelled with a secretary (Sicard 2000: 296) – someone who mastered the art of writing and must have kept records – historians have predominantly relied on the writings of the British explorers and missionaries. This one-sided reconstruction of history corresponds with Eric Wolf’s observation, described in his book Europe and the people without history (1982), that the analyses of global history often have a strong Eurocentric inclination.
Yao long before they came in contact with Arabs (Rangeley 1963: 18), and continues to be performed. Girls’ clitoridectomy was practiced among the Yao for a brief period after conversion to Islam, but ceased when it led to many deaths (Tew 1950: 20). Although the Qur’an prescribes 40 days of post-partum abstinence, the Yao continue to practice this for an average of six months (GoM 2011a: 84, Zulu 2001: 475). According to Rangeley (1963: 25), who speaks of a “thin layer of [Islamic] veneer … plastered on the normal matrilineal custom of the tribe”, the only radical alterations that resulted from the adoption of Islam are an abhorrence of pigs and the necessity to cut the throat of any warm-blooded animal before it can be eaten. Pig meat is indeed not consumed by Mudzi villagers, although a few women (some of them Muslim) breed pigs for sale after a development organization had initiated this for them – their ‘abhorrence’ was thus not insurmountable. Mice are also not eaten by the Mudzi Muslims because of their religion. Alcohol consumption does not seem to be a taboo. The mosque is fairly well attended on Friday afternoons, during which time some women wear a headscarf. Fasting during Ramadan is practiced by all adult Mudzi Muslims, which one of them said to be a good preparation for the upcoming hunger season.

After David Livingstone, the first European explorer of the area, reached Lake Malawi in 1859, he was soon followed by Christian missionaries from various denominations. On the eve of colonization one of these first missionaries living in southern Malawi noted that the status of women “was in no way inferior to that of the man. … Frequently … the position of the woman seemed superior to that of the man” (Rowley 1867: 208, cited in Mandala 1984: 143). Apparently, at this stage in history the esteemed position of women in matrilineal Malawi had not been severely affected by potentially undermining forces from within or outside their communities.

Colonial era: 1891 – 1963

The first European missionaries in Malawi were quickly joined by white settlers looking for fertile lands, export crops, and easy money (Davison 1997: 99). When Portuguese military expeditions started to venture into the area from the African east coast, the British decided to formally claim the territory as their Protectorate in 1891 (Mitchell 1956: 28), stating that they were asked to do so by missionaries who were attacked by hostile slave traders (Davison 1997: 98). The British called their territory Nyasaland, after the Yao word for ‘lake’. The official and explicit policy of the Protectorate was to stamp out slavery, in which the Brits were quick to succeed.10 Domestic slavery and trading slaves to the coast was prohibited, and fined by surrendering of guns (Mitchell 1956: 39). The various Yao chiefs, who

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10 Whites in Malawi thus are not associated with their role in expanding and professionalizing the slave trade, but rather with rescuing the Malawian population from it.
had started raiding each other to meet the increasing demand for slaves (Pike 1968: 60), did not unite against their common enemy. They were gradually disarmed and within a few years of violent clashes had to acknowledge the British military superiority (Mitchell 1956: 38).

The European invasion altered gender relations especially in the matrilineal groups of Malawi (Davison 1997: 96, Hirschmann & Vaughan 1984: 2-3). Many of those who sought protection at the mission posts against slave raids eventually adopted the white man’s religion and related patriarchal notions (Bennesch 2011, Phiri 1983). The missionaries generally believed no good could come from the matrilineal customs they encountered, and actively attempted to eradicate these (Bennesch 2011: 40). In a review of these missionaries’ impacts, Bennesch (2011) lists that men were granted land ownership and wives were encouraged to join their husbands on his land. Initiation rites instructing on traditional norms and values were replaced by Christian-oriented ceremonies, during which men were no longer tutored to respect women while women were still told to obey men. Overall, conjugal unions (with male household heads) were lauded at the expense of lineage bonds. Where possible, female chiefs were dethroned, and newly appointed chiefs were invariably male. Bennesch (2011) concludes that the adoption of Christian ideologies and practices severely corroded women’s once strong social position (see also Phiri 1983). Nevertheless, in many parts of Malawi, matrilineal and matrilocal organizing structures continue to exist side by side with Christian doctrine (e.g. Benson 2002: 63, Peters 1997b, Morris 1998: 44)

Meanwhile, the abolition of slavery put an end to what was a highly lucrative business for Yao communities. They lost their weapons, their wealth, and the slaves that cultivated their fields and carried out household chores. Yao men lost the source of their increasing economic and marital independence. Not surprisingly, animosity towards the colonialists was deeper among the Yao than among other groups. When the British began to offer (Christian) education, the (by then Islamic) Yao refused to participate, which later led them to be sidelined in the white-collar wage-earning sector (Bone 2000: 20, Lwanda 2004: 31, Njoh & Akiwumi 2011: 5). Until this day the Yao within Malawi have a reputation for not caring about education, instead preferring to marry off their children early (pers. obs.) [also P3 0238, 2344, 3870].

Not only the slave trade withered. As manufactured products penetrated rural markets, so too did the local pottery, salt, cloth, and iron industries which had involved both men and women producers and traders (Mandala 1982: 30). Local economies were increasingly trimmed down to mere subsistence farming.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to create a productive labour force out of the ‘natives’, the colonial regime introduced money and demanded each household to pay a ‘hut tax’ (Phiri 1983: 270). Commonly, the patriarchal presumptions and ideologies of missionaries and colonial administrators are assumed to have
instigated a shift in the gendered power balance by privileging men’s access to education and waged employment (e.g. Davison 1997: 95, Morris 1998: 44, Saidi 2010: 92). Indeed, on the emergent estates within Nyasaland and industries in South Africa and Rhodesia, and in the colonial military exclusively men\(^\text{11}\) were recruited (Davison 1993, Hirschmann & Vaughan 1984, Mandala 1982). Women, perceived by Western employers as destined for child caring and housekeeping, were almost entirely excluded from the colonial and post-colonial wage economy (Bryceson et al. 2004: 11, Kaler 2006: 339). In some cases, unmarried women were even prohibited from migrating to labour centres, in an attempt by the colonial administration to avoid loose morals and prostitution (Davison 1997: 126, 133, White 1990: 4). Nevertheless, it would be incomplete to only assess the impact of Western androcentric capitalism here, and inaccurate to assume that this actually triggered a ‘turn-around’ of gender power relations. The fact that mainly men went to work for money fits in neatly with the traditional gendered labour division. While women concerned themselves with the vital task of food production, men had always ventured out to cover extra household needs. Most likely, it was locally considered merely logical that generating money for tax became a male task (Tew 1950: 13).

Payments were slightly better in labour centres abroad (Davison 1997: 109), and many men left their homes and families to seek employment there. By 1956 as much as one-third of the adult male population of Nyasaland was employed outside their home country (Mitchell 1961: 77), and in some localities the level of male absence reached 75 percent (Coleman 1974: 87). As most ethnic groups had long histories of men leaving their homes and families for extended periods of time – to join trading, hunting, or raiding expeditions (Alpers 1975: 18, Morris 1998: 26) – taking up temporary labour contracts abroad was not out of the ordinary. Abdallah (1973 [1919]: 28-9) writes that in the pre-colonial era Yao men who had participated in the trading caravans to the coast were highly regarded within their community for having seen other places and for being adventurous and courageous, while those who had never left their home area were ridiculed for not being a real man. The same prestige now lured those crossing national borders to find wage employment (Chirwa 1997: 7, Kaler 2003: 360). Men from matrilineal groups in particular had much to gain and little to lose from migrating to find wage labour. They owned no land or other property that they could lose entitlement to during their absence. Describing the situation of young men in 1940, Audrey Richards wrote: “Nowadays they often use the opportunity of wage-labour for Europeans as a means of escape from the domination of the wife’s people” (1969 [1940]: 38).

\(^{11}\) Particularly young men were recruited, altering not only gender relations, but also relations between generations (Mandala 1982).
Labour migration offered Yao young men a new means to attain status and achieve relative independence.

During the colonial era scholars (e.g. Richards 1939: 23) and administrators believed that the outflow of able-bodied young men would have disastrous impacts on food security as the main source of labour disappeared, leaving ‘the weak’ – women and the elderly – to do all the rural work (also in Minton 2008: 32-3, Phiri 1983: 271-2). Coleman (1974) however argues that this seemed not to be the case. Women had always formed an important part of the agricultural labour force (see also Alpers 1975: 12, 16, Morris 1998: 26), so that the drain of young men actually made little difference. Furthermore, few children went to school, and they may have helped on the fields too. Specific male tasks like building or repairing houses and granaries only needed to be carried out occasionally, and, as most men returned every two years, these tasks were not necessarily affected by the temporary absences. Some scholars argue, furthermore, that the absence of men and the remittances they sent benefitted women’s autonomy (Cohen & Atieno-Odhiambo 1989, Harries 1994, Mayer 1980).

Ever since money had been introduced in 1893, the need and desire for it intensified. It was not only needed to pay hut tax, and to acquire new consumer goods like paraffin, matches, and sugar, but also, increasingly, to supplement declining yields. The yields declined because both the quantity and quality of land available to the local population diminished (for reasons discussed in the following section Food Insecurity). As land size, soil fertility, and yields decreased, so did women’s productive autonomy and relative position of power (Berheide & Segal 1994, Davison 1993: 406, Hirschmann & Vaughan 1984, Vaughan 1987: 128). Food security increasingly depended on the ability to purchase fertilizer and supplementary food, which intensified households’ reliance on men’s income for financial support.12

Matrilineal women’s control over fields and food is often argued to have further declined due to the patriarchal presumptions of missionaries, commercial settlers, and colonial officials (e.g. Davison 1997: 101, 134, Mayoux 2002: 14, Potash 1995, Phiri 1983: 268-9, White 1987). These either assumed that men were households, or felt they should be. Therefore, when allocating land to locals they tended to grant it all to men – irrespective of traditional ownership and inheritance

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12 For several decades a thriving export of Malawian cotton assured female farmers financial independence, but during the global economic depression of the 1930s revenues dropped to a bare minimum. Colonial officers lamented the plight of the many unmarried women farmers, whose diligence had impressed them earlier, and planned to temporarily exempt these women from paying taxes. Local male authorities objected, however, claiming it unjust to reward women for remaining unmarried and arguing that it would further encourage female looseness. They arranged that instead the colonial administration taxed each man for only one hut, no matter how many wives (and thus huts) he had – so pushing the previously independent women farmers into (polygynous) marriage (Mandala 1982: 37).
regulations (e.g. Moore & Vaughan 1987: 530-4). As discussed, however, the Yao, due to their Islamic orientation and larger aversion towards the colonial regime, are likely to have been less involved with patriarchal Westerners and may therefore have been less affected by this than most other groups in Malawi.

In sum, men’s control over material resources increased while that of women diminished. Men’s privileged access to education and wage labour gave them a virtual monopoly on cash, on which women increasingly depended. As a result, men’s independence from and authority over women is generally said to have increased\(^\text{13}\) (Davison 1993, Hirschmann & Vaughan 1984, Mandala 1982, Semu 2002). In 1962, Mitchell wrote that through marriage Yao women acquired the “right to support” (Mitchell 1962: 37). This could suggest that that by the end of the colonial era, Yao women’s position had declined from being equal to and relatively autonomous from men, to needing (entitlement to) support. But Mitchell’s comment can also be read to indicate that women, through marriage, found a way to harness men’s access to money. Based on my empirical data from Mudzi, which will be discussed in the following chapters, I believe it is these two readings combined that seems to reflect most accurately women’s current-day agency within a resource-limited environment.

**Post-colonial era: 1963 – 2012**

As profits failed to materialize, Britain’s overseas territories came to be seen as a drain of money and were thus ordered to cover their own costs. Supporting issues related to education, health, and agriculture was left to missionaries, and economic development to commercial plantation owners (Pike 1968: 95). Taxes were raised even when the country faced famine (Conroy 2006: 15). While the Nyasaland population felt increasingly exploited and discriminated against, the British felt increasingly uncomfortable with their colonies. Eventually, the British parliament planned to rid itself from its colonial responsibilities by handing over the country to the European estate owners who had settled on Nyasaland’s most fertile grounds (Pike 1968: 108).

However, due to missionary support the group of Nyasaland men with Western training had grown substantially by the mid-20th century. This group objected strongly to the British plans, foreseeing an apartheid regime like those in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia (Pike 1968: 110-4). As elsewhere in the African

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\(^\text{13}\) Interestingly, Silberschmidt (2004) and Nguthi (2007) argue that the reverse happened in some patrilineal societies. They found that in rural Kenya, men’s labor wages are often insufficient to maintain a family, which forces women to find their own means of generating an income. Unable to live up to their responsibility as breadwinner, men lose (self)respect. Although men own the land, women cultivate it. Managing both food and cash crops, women have become crucial for the survival of the household. As a result the power balance between men and women has shifted towards the latter.
colonies, demands for independence gained strength. Initially, protesters were killed or imprisoned, but this only stirred the disapproval of colonization on the British mainland. When in 1959 a handful of young locals were permitted to sit in the Nyasaland parliament – a decision that the colonial administration hoped would soothe the escalating situation and silence the opposition – these men instead grabbed every opportunity to publicly question and criticize the racist colonial regime (Pike 1968: 136). There was no way back and Britain eventually agreed to gradually release their grip on Nyasaland, which culminated in full independence in 1964.14

Most Nyasaland nationals involved in the independence movement were youngsters. They needed a leader that radiated authority, and asked the senior Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda to be their representative and symbolic father figure, a role which the youngsters intended to be largely ceremonial (Pike 1968: 139). Running his own medical practice in London15 – a position unequalled by any other Nyasaland national – Banda was a highly esteemed local hero and therefore perfectly suited for the job. He accepted, but only on the condition of a life-long chairmanship.

Soon after being installed as president, Banda made sure his most outspoken collaborators within the movement were removed from the political scene and even expelled from the country (Pike 1968: 168). Banda renamed the country after the pre-colonial Maravi empire, established himself as supreme chief, and founded a repressive one-party political system that lasted for 30 years. Not much changed for the rural masses: Banda privileged the small, local, Western-oriented upper class, much like the British had advantaged the whites (Lwanda 2004: 32). He imposed his own mother tongue ChiChewa as the national language (since taught at all primary schools), together with English (the lingua franca at all higher levels of education and the national newspapers).

Banda reigned like a traditional chief. Surrounding himself with symbols customarily associated with chiefs and radiating the autocratic authority assigned

14 Between the 1950s and 1970s virtually all colonies in Africa went through similar decolonization processes.

15 As a youngster, Banda allegedly walked from Nyasaland to South Africa, longing for further education. Working in the mines during the daytime and studying in the evening hours, he eventually managed to obtain an education in the United States where he studied philosophy and medicine. To be able to work as a medical doctor in his home country, as he wished, he had to obtain a British medical degree and therefore continued his studies in Scotland. World War II prevented him from obtaining the necessary permits, and to kill time he opened a – successful – medical practice in one of London’s suburbs. Having personally experienced the racism in South Africa and the southern US, he strongly objected to Britain’s plan to hand over Nyasaland to the European estate owners in the country (Pike 1968: 108). From England, Banda became increasingly involved in the struggle for independence both morally and financially, mediating between the nationalists and the colonial office in London. When he returned to his home country to be installed as leader of the national party, he had not been there for 45 years (Wolf & Pendergast nd).
to the paramount chief, he became quickly recognized and accepted as such throughout Malawi (Pike 1968: 170). In his hands he had a country lacking mineral resources, capital, skilled labour, industries, and domestic markets of any significance. Banda decided to focus on developing an agricultural export-oriented economy, in which the Malawian masses would generate income by working on large modern estates (Blackie & Conroy 2006: 93). To create such estates many villagers were forced to abandon their home and gardens and move elsewhere. A former Malawian colleague of mine was one of these villagers. When I asked him about the issue, he answered that Banda had given no compensation and the villagers had not protested. Moreover, he seemed to feel that Banda had had no reason to compensate, nor had he and his family had any reason to protest, because, he explained, Banda was the owner of Malawi, and could possess all lands as he wished. Apparently, the people of Malawi generally granted their president the same rights and power as they had to their traditional paramount chiefs. Banda’s authority was based both on hegemonic consensus and approval (Chirambo 2004: 147, Forster 1994), and excessive violent repression. During his many speeches Banda openly threatened to make crocodile meat of anyone daring to counter him – a comment which made it to the Guinness book of records as the most inhuman and dangerous statement made by a state president (Mkamanga 2000: 101).

Banda imposed upon the arbitrarily unified people of Malawi an invented but supposedly shared ideology with a strong normative gender component. It was based on his personal matrilineal background, but interlarded with patriarchal Western and Christian gender norms that reflected his 28 years in the US and England (Segal 2008). Women were explicitly granted a central position in his pursuit for modernization, but particularly as supporters and facilitators of husbands who were to do the real work. Women were glorified as embodiments of the traditional African ways, while men, like himself, represented Western progress (Gilman 2009: 65-6). During his 30-year reign, Banda continuously asserted that Malawian women had been oppressed and pitiable before he came to their rescue16 (Gilman 2004: 39-40). In practice, this ‘rescue’ existed mainly of educating women in typically Western housewives’ chores such as cooking, sewing, hygiene, and house decoration (Semu 2002: 84). Hence, while rhetorically claiming to empower women, Banda actually confined their role to the private sphere. Largely rural and uneducated, the Malawian masses were susceptible to Banda’s dictatorial

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16 In 1958 for example, Banda stated that: “Women were trampled down by everybody ... everybody. ... Nobody thought about women except to make them cook for them. That’s all. ... So, I made up my mind even before I came that I was going to do something about my women. Therefore when I see my women happy and singing and dancing with their heads high, their necks bent with pride like that ... it makes me happy, very happy.” (in Gilman 2004: 39-40).
manipulation of culture and history (Forster 1994, Semu 2002: 80), and it is likely that the impact of his ideology is still discernible in people’s minds. Banda’s persuasive and long-lasting influence on gender ideology is missed by many other historical accounts on changing gender relations in Malawi (e.g. Bennesch 2011, Davison 1993, Hirschmann & Vaughan 1984, Phiri 1983). It was pointed out to me by Mudzi’s Group Village Headwoman (aged 61), who remarked that ever since Banda’s reign, women can no longer tell their husbands how to behave [P3 2542].

Despite the apparent violations of human rights, Banda was generally treated favourably by Western governments because of his strong anti-communist stance. When the Cold War ended in the 1990s, however, the West had no reason to ignore Malawi’s horrific human rights record any longer (Conroy 2006: 20). With backing from the international community and missionaries within Malawi, national protests increased. In 1993 Banda succumbed to allowing a referendum, in which Malawians – much to Banda’s surprise – opted for a multi-party democratic system. The country has since been prone to discord among the various political parties.17

During and after Banda’s reign, Western development programs too have unwittingly undermined women’s position in Malawi, as they have elsewhere in Africa. Based on Western household models and gender stereotypes, productive interventions were, and often still are, directed at men as the presumed household heads and main food producers (Boserup 1970, Baerends 1994, Doss 1999, Ferguson 1994, Quisumbing & Meinzen-Dick 2001, Rogers 1980). Men received information on new agricultural technologies and the tools to apply these, while women – responsible for most farming activities but considered mere housewives – were excluded. Besides this material privileging of men at the expense of women, the tendency of development agencies to see and treat African women as subordinate to men and in need of empowerment may have further degraded the female (self-)image (Arnfred 2004a: 12). As we shall see in Chapter 8, however,

17 As an update to the most recent political situation: The president who reigned in Malawi during the fieldwork for this study, Bingu wa Mutharika, was appreciated by the international donor community for his anti-corruption policies and his efforts to address other issues high on international development agendas. Indeed, many development indicators have improved under his presidency (2004-2012). The share of the population living in poverty declined; infant, child and maternal mortality decreased; and literacy and gender parity in education increased (GoM 2010a: xi). Unfortunately, since 2008, the impacts of the global economic crisis became felt in Malawi too, driving up prices and unemployment. As popular discontent proliferated, Mutharika became repressive. This eventually led to violent clashes between protesters and the national police, and to major international donors suspending their financial aid to the country. In April 2012, Mutharika died abruptly of a heart attack. After some turmoil, he was succeeded by vice-president Joyce Banda – whom he had earlier expelled from his party as she had refused to accept the nomination of his brother as his future successor. Joyce Banda is Malawi’s first and Africa’s second female president. Soon after installation she sold the private jet and the fleet of 60 Mercedes cars that came with the job, a deed considered “iconic for an African leader” (UK Secretary for International Development Andrew Mitchell, quoted in the UK Telegraph June 1, 2012). Relations with the international donor community were soon restored.
the actual effect (positive or negative) of external development aid on community levels seems quite minimal – at least for the case of Mudzi.

Besides the various advances of men’s position vis-à-vis women, it should also be mentioned that meanwhile, some of the arguably most masculine traditional tasks have become decimated or annihilated due to external circumstances. Conquering new fields from nature is no longer necessary as almost all land has been cleared (Mandala 1982: 30), hunting for large mammals is impossible as the few that are left reside in protected wildlife reserves, raiding for slaves has been prohibited since the colonial era, and adventurous long-distance trading journeys ceased as a result. While the tasks through which women can confirm their gender identity continue to be diverse – cultivating fields, preparing food, bearing and caring for children, and housekeeping – those for men can have increasingly narrowed down to the provision of money.

It appears, in conclusion, that men’s contemporary role as provider was not produced by colonialist and capitalist influences, as assumed by many gender analysts, but is rather a continuation of far older local norms and customs. Nonetheless, a number of factors, which partly result from colonialism and capitalism, have over time led to a concentration on monetary provision as the measurement of a man’s worth.

In recent years, however, monetary provision has become increasingly difficult to achieve. The international economic crisis (beginning in 2007) is being felt severely in Malawi, as both prices and unemployment rise. Even prior to the global crisis, Malawian men’s access to relatively well-paid jobs in the better endowed countries of Southern Africa has declined drastically – due to technical improvements that reduced the demand for manual labour, the Zimbabwean economic collapse, the decision of the South African government to deport all Malawians (arguing that they brought HIV into the country18), and the recent violent outbursts against migrants in South Africa. Nevertheless, during my fieldwork period male labour migration to South Africa remained an important, albeit less profitable and less easy, source of income for many households in Mudzi.

Food insecurity

The colonial government allowed in their towns only locals who worked there. To avoid having poor, unemployed, urban masses who might demand social support from their government, the colonial administration deemed it better for all if migrants returned to their rural place of origin as soon as they became unemployed. Permanent urban settlement was thus strongly opposed (Mitchell 1961: 84). Banda

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18 Lwanda (2004: 38-9) argues however that it is more likely that Malawians brought HIV into Malawi after having worked in South Africa. See the next session for further elaboration.
too forced much of the Malawian population to remain in their villages as subsistence farmers, arguing that “cities breed poverty”, and presumably hoping to prevent the organization of political opposition. As a result, Malawi is one of the least urbanized countries worldwide, with almost 80 percent of the population residing in rural areas (GoM 2011b: 25). Not surprisingly then, Malawi has a predominantly agricultural economy. About 90 percent of the Malawian households grow crops (GoM 2006a); 80 percent of the population are small-scale subsistence farmers (GoM 2005a), thus depending largely on their own agricultural produce to survive.

Compared to some other countries in the region, Malawi’s agricultural production levels are extremely low. The value of net agricultural output per hectare in Malawi is on average only one-fifth of that achieved in Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya, with the gap worsening for lower-income households (Ellis & Freeman 2005). While East African farmers can harvest their fields twice per year because of two rainy seasons, Malawi has rains only once a year. Expansive growth of the Malawian population increased the need for land to cultivate as well as fuel wood to cook with, which has led to extreme deforestation and degradation of soils. Global climate change, furthermore, has increased the incidence of drought as well as flooding, severely affecting yields throughout the country.

But ecological factors only partly explain Malawi’s low agricultural productivity. Both the British and Banda’s regime have to some extent purposefully neglected developing the rural areas (Conroy 2006: 17-8, Ellis et al. 2003: 33), prioritizing the development of a small elite instead. Estate agriculture was rapidly expanded at the expense of smallholder agriculture through easy acquisition of land, and smallholder agriculture was taxed to develop the estates (Chirwa et al. 2008: 5). Furthermore, smallholders were prohibited from growing certain cash crops so that estate owners could monopolize them (Conroy 2006: 18, Frankenberger et al. 2003: 2). To the elite a hungry peasantry had its advantages, as it facilitated the recruitment of cheap labour on commercial estates (Mandala 2005). Uneducated, isolated, and preoccupied with day-to-day survival, the rural masses were, furthermore, less likely to oppose the abusive regimes. 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 & Fonseca 2006). The most fertile lands have been granted to the commercial estates where export crops are grown, occupying over 40 percent of all arable land in Malawi (Arrehag et al. 2006: 65, Sahley et al. 2005: 13). Smallholder farming households have a median land size of 0.6 hectares to cultivate (Chinsinga 2008: 8) – which is far below the estimated 1.5 hectares needed to feed a family for a full year (Kamwendo 2006: 5). If the crops are not affected by dry spells, floods, or pests, an average Malawian household can harvest just enough to feed itself for six to seven months (Chirwa et al. 2008: 15). Buying sufficient food in the remaining months is difficult for many as income-generating opportunities are
limited and prices are high at this time due to scarcity and huge demand – leading to an annually recurring ‘hunger season’.

Although reduced land availability due to population pressure is usually mentioned as a reason for the small plot sizes, dependence on manual labour too plays a restraining role (Madzonga, pers. comm., Hyden 1980: 152, Moore & Vaughan 1987: 538, Phiri 1983: 263). As few Malawian smallholder farmers own animal draft power – let alone mechanized power – cultivation is mainly dependent on human labour. During the exhausting heat that precedes the rainy season, the fields must be cleared and ploughed using a handheld hoe. Sowing, weeding, and harvesting are all done manually as well. Having depleted the stores of their previous harvest before the next harvest is due, many villagers survive by doing ganyu: in exchange for some money or food they work on the fields of wealthier farmers, which are usually those who receive remittances from husbands or relatives working in town or in South Africa.

Malawi’s main food crop is maize, grown by 97 percent of the farmers (GoM 2005a), and contributing to 80 percent of daily calorie intake for most Malawians (Blackie & Conroy 2006: 87). It is primarily used for making nsima, a thick porridge that is the basis of the Malawian diet, usually accompanied by a small side dish to dip into the nsima. For these side dishes, seasonal vegetables or legumes are generally used, such as pumpkin leaves, beans, or okra. When the budget allows, tiny dried fish may be bought to accompany the nsima; meat is a luxury that is rarely eaten. Malawians commonly say that without some heavy nsima in their stomach, they feel they have not properly eaten. Maize is not indigenous to the region, but was imported from the Americas by the Portuguese in the 17th century and quickly adopted because of several advantages over local crops like sorghum and millet: higher yields, quicker maturing, better taste, and grains that are protected from birds by sheaths (Carr 2004, McCann 2001). To make most of the little land available to them, farmers grow maize on it almost exclusively. This monocropping has led to the depletion of soil nutrients, and the one-sided diet to the severe malnourishment of the rural population. Agricultural research institutes have developed higher yielding maize varieties, but most smallholder farmers continue to rely on local varieties, because hybrid maize needs costly fertilizer input, is more prone to pests, and cannot be used for replanting the following season.21

19 Besides a general lack of capital to invest in cattle, the long dry season in Southern Africa makes the region less suitable for big livestock, which need year-round grasslands to graze, compared to Eastern Africa with its two annual rainy seasons (Blackie & Conroy 2006: 101).

20 Malawi has one of the highest prevalence of protein-energy undernutrition in the world. Furthermore, iron, zinc, vitamin A, and iodine deficiencies are high (Maleta 2006).

21 “Farming”, a Malawian colleague once said to me, “is actually for rich people: only those who can afford improved seeds, fertilizer, and ganyu labourers can benefit.”
The colonial presence had a drastic impact on traditional farming practices. Following the halting of intertribal wars and slave raids, and the availability of Western medicine the local population increased to such an extent that fallow periods had to be shortened. As a result productivity diminished. Before peasants could adequately adapt to this new situation, however, the colonial regime intervened aggressively. They set out to change local agricultural practices by force, penalizing peasants who did not take up the new, more labour-intensive methods (Davison 1997: 106, Pike 1968: 159). Believing they must always respect the ways of their ancestors to assure survival in their highly precarious environment, farmers were averse to the new practices forced onto them by the foreigners. At independence, Malawians widely hoped they could return to their traditional cultivation practices, and were upset when Banda continued to push for agricultural reform (Pike 1968: 162).

Seasonality is key to understanding the daily lives of smallholder farmers in Malawi (see Figure 2.1 for a timeline). Just like each year brings a season of hunger, so too it brings a season of plenty. After harvesting, villagers eat big plates of nsima several times a day, and regularly sell some of their maize to buy ‘luxury’ products like meat, oil, tea, sugar, or clothes. At other times of the year, their diet almost exclusively exists of what the land has to offer at that specific time, be it mangoes, pumpkin leaves, or cassava. Whenever a farmer has any crop in abundance and can sell some surplus, prices hit bottom, because all farmers in the area have plenty of that same crop at that same time. Food prices thus also fluctuate throughout the year: low just after harvest and high during the hunger season. Daily activities too depend on the season. Before the rainy season commences the fields have to be cleared from weeds and ploughed. When the first rains fall the seeds must be planted. Later weeds must be removed and – if available – fertilizer applied. After harvest the maize kernels are ripped off the cobs and stored. Ceremonies such as initiation rites or tombstone revealings often take place soon after harvest, when the food required for such celebrations is readily available.

Figure 2.1: Timeline of the agricultural seasons in Malawi
Source: USAID/FEWS NET 2012

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22 Some trading is done between regions, as ecologies and timing of the rainy season differ, and therefore also the availability of crops. However, transport costs are an impeding factor.

23 Deceased persons are usually buried soon after death, either the same day or the next. The grave remains without a tombstone until the family manages to gather enough money for it – which may never happen at all. But if it happens, the placing of the stone is accompanied by a lavish celebration.
Approximately one-third of Malawi’s smallholders cultivate cash crops in addition to food crops (Conroy 2006a: 24). Malawi’s main export crop is tobacco, grown by several large estates as well as many small-scale farmers – but sales continue to steadily diminish due to the global decline in smoking. Other export crops include tea, sugar, cotton, coffee, and groundnuts. Contrary to free-market-proponents’ belief, smallholder cash-crop growers in Malawi are not in the position to negotiate reasonable minimum prices for their produce. In dire need for some money to buy the next meal they simply have to accept whatever price is offered to them (pers. obs., Bryceson & Fonseca 2005). Without direct access to the sea, transportation costs for export are relatively high, making it difficult to compete with other countries, further squeezing the prices offered by traders to the absolute minimum. The domestic market to sell produce and products is small because of the low level of urbanization, the small number of people living above the poverty line, and the negligible size of the tourist industry.

Over the past century, it must be noted, Malawi’s smallholder agricultural sector has not been fully self-sustaining. As mentioned, large numbers of men migrated to better-endowed countries in the region in search for work, sending some of their earnings to their families in Malawi (Bryceson et al. 2004: 11-2). Vaughan (1987) describes how these remittances kept many from starvation during the severe famine of 1949. Besides being used to buy supplemental food, money remains particularly needed to purchase agricultural inputs like chemical fertilizer and pesticides. At a large scale it is also used to hire extra labour to meet the need for manual labour power. As mentioned, however, income opportunities, both abroad and within Malawi, have declined over the past decades.

The governments that succeeded Banda’s regime made some efforts to reduce rural food insecurity by investing in education, irrigation, roads, communication, and market infrastructure. But international donors have long considered investing in agricultural development outdated (Conroy & Blackie 2006: 6). Instead, they urged that government expenses – which were to be minimized in the first place to pay off foreign debts – should focus on market liberalization and commercial export (Sahley et al. 2005). Only recently did the international aid community revalue agricultural development as vital for poverty reduction in low-income countries like Malawi (the World Bank’s 2008 World Development Report titled *Agriculture for Development* exemplifies this paradigm shift).

Resulting from the combination of factors described in this section, the majority of Malawians suffer from chronic food insecurity and malnutrition (see Chapter

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24 Since 1990 Banda allowed also smallholder farmers to grow this cash crop, under pressure from the World Bank (Blackie & Conroy 2006: 95).

25 As a comparison, Carr (2004: 16) describes a thriving market for high-value horticulture in Kenya due to the large urban population of several million topped up by the million tourists that visit annually. For South Africa these numbers are even higher.
1). Hunger, it must be emphasized, is not simply one of many forms of poverty. It is the deepest, most basic form of poverty. Not having sufficient food also means not having anything else, as most other items will have been exchanged for food. Surplus for investment in agricultural, educational, or any other kind of development is structurally lacking at the household level because food remains the main concern. For almost two decades now, malnutrition levels have remained virtually unchanged in Malawi (Field 2009), with detrimental impacts on the mental and physical development of individuals (Maleta 2006: 18-20), and consequently on the development of the entire nation. The recurring hunger seasons that rural Malawians have to deal with each year are not the exceptional famines that reach our television screens and trigger big fundraising events. Instead they remain unnoticed and disregarded by most of the world’s population.

HIV and AIDS

History and statistics
HIV is generally assumed to have originated in west-central African chimpanzees and transferred to human beings in the early 20th century (Worobey et al. 2008). When US scientists first identified AIDS and HIV in the early 1980s, the virus must already have been rampant in southern Africa. In 1986 the first HIV tests were carried out in Malawi, and almost half of the tested urban sex workers were found positive (Chiphangwi et al. 1987). As with other issues troubling his nation (such as food shortages – Mandala 2005: 23), Banda enforced silence and denial by prohibiting medics from keeping records of the disease and journalists from reporting on it (Lwanda 2004: 35). By the end of his regime, HIV prevalence among urban sex workers had increased to 70 percent (UNAIDS/WHO 2004). It was estimated that over the same ten-year period infection rates among the general population rose explosively, from 2 to 33 percent (Geubbels & Bowie 2006: 31). This estimation was based on HIV prevalence among pregnant women attending urban antenatal clinics, as these were assumed to roughly represent the general population. When it was later realized that there were substantial differences between urban and rural infection rates and between prevalence among men and women, calculation methods and national estimates were revised (GoM 2008a).

Currently, it is estimated that in Malawi 11 percent of the population between 15 and 49 is HIV positive (GoM 2011a) – the majority unaware of their status. This number has remained stable over the past decade, partly because the spread of the

26 Not only Malawians face an annual hunger season, rural populations of the other countries in Southern Africa do too (Lambrechts & Barry 2003).
27 This percentage does not include the estimated 20,000 babies that are born with HIV annually (Whiteside & Conroy 2006: 76).
virus has slowed down in the urban areas, but also as a result of increased death rates (Conroy & Whiteside 2006: 50) prior to the introduction of antiretroviral treatment. As elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, AIDS started out as mainly striking urban, educated men – those who travelled and could afford extramarital relationships. Infection rates have remained highest in the urban areas, while the spread of HIV accelerates in the rural areas (GoM 2006b, UNAIDS 2008). Urban HIV prevalence is currently estimated at 17 percent, and rural prevalence at 9 percent (GoM 2011a). In absolute numbers, due to its low level of urbanization, Malawi has over twice as many rural infected as urban infected (GoM 20012: 2).

As is the case throughout sub-Saharan Africa, more women than men live with the virus (13% versus 8%). As a result of these disproportionate infection rates, women currently represent almost 60 percent of all infected Malawians (UNAIDS 2008). Throughout the continent women are especially overrepresented among the younger generations. The latest statistics from Malawi show that infection rates among women aged 15 to 39 are significantly higher than those among their male peers. Young women between the ages 15 to 19 are four times more likely to be infected than their male peers (4% versus 1%), and those aged 20 to 34 are infected roughly twice as often (14% versus 7%) (GoM 2011a: 196). Comparing the data with those from earlier national surveys, however, some hopeful signs can be discerned (see Figure 2.2). In the age group 20 to 34, HIV prevalence dropped for both men and women. Among women aged 20 to 24 and men aged 30 to 34, the rates even dropped by almost half (for women from 13% to 6%, for men from 20% to 11%). It appears that women currently in the age group 20 to 24 (born between 1986 and 1990) have been best able to reduce their risk of infection. Meanwhile, however, HIV prevalence continues to rise among the group of women that is currently aged 30 to 39 (born between 1971 and 1980).

Figure 2.2: HIV prevalence in age and sex groups
Source: GoM 2012: 2
For both men and women, infection rates are highest among the wealthiest quintiles of the population, roughly double that of the lowest quintile (for men 11% versus 6%, for women 20% versus 9%). The level of education seems unrelated to men’s or women’s likeliness of being infected. Being employed does make a difference, for both men and women, but particularly for men: 2 percent of unemployed men are HIV infected, compared with 9 percent of employed men. Among women, 9 percent of the unemployed and 14 percent of the employed live with the virus (GoM 2011a: 198).

Ever since the monitoring of HIV prevalence started towards the end of Banda’s regime, infection rates have been substantially higher in the Southern Region (15%) than in the Central (8%) and Northern (7%) Region (GoM 2012: 13). A number of interrelated factors may help to explain the disproportionately high HIV rates in the Southern Region. Labour migration has been most substantial from this region (Bryceson et al. 2004: 27) and is found to be a major risk factor for HIV infection, as will be discussed in the following sub-section. This migratory pattern may in turn be related to higher levels of poverty and population density in the Southern Region, as well as the predominantly matrilineal organization of society, as argued earlier. The relatively high population density is a likely result of the comparatively fertile soils, which both attracted more Bantu settlers during pre-colonial periods and led to a concentration of commercial estates during the colonial period and beyond (Conroy 2006a: 16). These estates attracted labour migrants from the Northern and Central Regions, where the population size decreased as a result (Pike 1968: 24). A massive influx of refugees fleeing the Mozambican civil war further added to the population pressure in the south. The expansive population growth and expropriation of the best lands for commercial plantations (Sahley et al. 2005: 13) intensified food insecurity, which pushed men to search for alternative sources of livelihood security and thus into labour migration.

**Drivers of the Malawian epidemic**

In Malawi and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, HIV is predominantly transmitted through unprotected heterosexual intercourse, and to a far lesser extent from mother to baby (GoM 2012, UNAIDS 2008). It seems reasonable, therefore, to consider risky sex as central to the AIDS epidemics of sub-Saharan Africa (De Walque et al. 2012: 4). Here I describe the dynamics that are generally considered to underlie the (sexual) transmission of HIV in Malawi.

It is assumed that HIV first entered Malawi via migrants who worked abroad (Lwanda 2004: 35). In 1993 it was estimated that nearly half of the Malawian mine workers returning to their rural home areas from South Africa brought with them the deadly virus (Gould 1993 in Kalipeni et al. 2004: 60). The links between mobility and HIV transmission have been well documented (see Collins & Rau 2001: 8-12 for a review). Long-distance labour contracts often mean that workers...
leave their families behind for extended periods of time. Their loneliness and cash
to spend, combined with lower levels of social control than in their home villages,
lead many migrant workers to engage in casual sexual encounters and to turn
to commercial sex workers for their satisfaction (Ahlburg & Jensen 1998: 148,
Chirwa 1997). Both these men and their sex partners often have multiple partners,
enhancing the risk of HIV transmission. It has been convincingly argued that the
particular colonial history of eastern and southern Africa28, which generated an
exceptionally extensive migrant labour system, played a decisive role in shaping
the current geographical pattern of the continent’s AIDS pandemic (Hunt 1996:
1294-5, Yeboah 2007: 1136). Mobility continues to be an important risk factor for
HIV infection in southern Africa in general, as well as Mudzi in particular, as here
too labour migration is a common strategy for men to try improve their livelihood
security.

Another factor increasingly pointed to as underlying the high levels of HIV
transmission in sub-Saharan Africa is the high incidence of concurrent partnerships
(Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009, GoM 2010b: 36, Epstein & Morris 2011, Nattrass
2009, Shelton et al. 2005, Uchudi et al. 2012). HIV is one of the least contagious
viruses around. Under normal circumstances29 the probability of contracting HIV
during unprotected sex with an infected partner is estimated to be as low as one
in one thousand30 (Gray et al. 2001). In a context with high rates of untreated
sexually transmitted infections (STIs), like rural Malawi, chances may increase
to three in one thousand (Watkins 2004: 683). Only in the early and late stages of
infection, when the viral load peaks, is the likelihood of transmission relatively
high (Pilcher et al. 2004). Unprotected sex with a new partner soon after infection
thus significantly increases the risk of HIV spreading. Simultaneous sexual
partnerships increase the likeliness of this occurring. Reliable quantitative data
on overlapping sexual relationships are difficult to obtain, as reporting bias tends
to be high in surveys on respondents’ intimate sex lives (Clark 2010, Helleringer
et al. 2011) – a topic generally considered inappropriate to openly discuss with
strangers. Sexual concurrency may be particularly underreported by women, for
whom it is socially disapproved of, and overstated by men, from whom sexual

28 Europeans settled in Eastern and Southern Africa rather than West Africa because of the relatively
favourable climate. Valuable minerals, which were extracted with African labour, were found particularly
in Southern Africa, leading to concentrations and flows of migrant workers in this region (Yeboah 2007:
1137).

29 ‘Normal’ here means heterosexual vaginal intercourse, in which the vagina is sufficiently lubricated,
and the partners are free of genital ulcers. Anal intercourse, dry sex, and genital ulcers significantly
increase probability of transmission.

30 This figure is based on studies in Europe, the US, Thailand, and Uganda among heterosexual couples
of whom only one partner was HIV positive. The deliberate selection of such discordant couples may
have biased the findings though, as the uninfected partner possibly escaped infection because of a partial
immunity or selective resistance against HIV.
prowess is expected (Nnko et al. 2004). Of the few Malawian men and women who reported having had at least two sexual partners in the year prior to the national Demographic and Health Survey, 46 percent of women and 80 percent of men said the relationships had been overlapping (GoM 2011a: 178, 180). A unique study on sexual networking conducted among the rural population on an island in Lake Malawi revealed a large web in which half of all sexually active respondents were linked in one enormous network, and more than a quarter were connected through multiple chains of sexual relationships (Helleringer & Kohler 2007). Wealth inequalities are believed to play an important role in the establishment of such sexual networks, linking those with assets to those in need through the practice of transactional sex (Shelton et al. 2005: 1058).

As mentioned, only in sub-Saharan Africa are more women than men infected with HIV. While all women are biologically more susceptible to HIV infection than men (see Chapter 1), their predicament becomes particularly problematic when combined with severe gender inequality, as this inhibits them from negotiating the conditions under which sex occurs. For one, when a woman has to engage in sexual intercourse without being aroused, the risk of tissue tearing and thus infection becomes much higher. Secondly, it is often argued, unfavourable gender constructs render women subordinate and secondary to men, make them culturally and economically dependent on men, and so withhold them from abstaining from sex, demanding faithfulness, or insisting on condom use. Furthermore, malnutrition, which is widespread throughout Malawi and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa and which generally affects women more than men due to social inequalities, weakens the immune system and slows down the healing of genital ulcers, increasing the risk of HIV infection (Collins & Rau 2001, Gillespie & Kadiyala 2005, Stillwaggon 2006a).

Crosscutting these factors that are considered important drivers of the spread of HIV in Malawi (and beyond), many reports emphasize, are the structural inequalities and insecure livelihoods that the general population faces on a day-to-day basis. Such structural inequalities, as already discussed in Chapter 1, predispose marginalized people to higher health risks while hampering their access to health care. Malnutrition has just been mentioned; suboptimal, unhygienic living and working circumstances are another result of marginalisation that is likely to affect people’s health. Poverty is furthermore assumed to push men to migration and women to survival sex, and so too increase their risk of HIV infection (see Chapter 1). Gender inequality and low family incomes may curtail access to

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education, particularly for girls, which some studies have found to be associated with higher HIV risk (Krishnan et al. 2008: 103, Rodrigo & Rajapakse 2010: 12, but see also Baird et al. 2009: 5). Taken together, these interrelated factors form what is called an HIV ‘risk environment’ (Barnett & Whiteside 2006: 86) – the recognition of which is, as discussed in Chapter 1, an important step ahead from the earlier focus (and consequent blame) on individual sexual decision-making. However, as I will argue throughout this book, the acknowledgement of structural disadvantageous factors should not override our perceptiveness to other, less direct or more voluntary, factors that entice men and women to ignore safe-sex recommendations.

Preventive interventions

Official HIV prevention in Africa has focused by and large on informing the population about the existence of the new fatal virus and ways to avoid infection. The message that has been most widely promoted is usually summarized as ABC, short for Abstain, Be faithful or use a Condom33 (Barden-O’Fallon et al. 2004: 131, GoM 2010b: 64, Mbugua 2009). Especially the first recommendation, to completely abstain from sex, has been overemphasized in Malawi, at the cost of promoting condom use and partner reduction (Hardee et al. 2008: 3, GoM 2006b). This official emphasis on abstinence may have resulted from a strong, conservatively religious lobby within Malawi but also because large US donor agencies34 have objected against condom promotion because this is believed to encourage promiscuity. In the current national response to HIV and AIDS, however, condoms are explicitly recognized as an important prevention tool against HIV infection (GoM 2012: 31). Behaviour change campaigns are no longer concerned only with prevention messages, but increasingly also with treatment, care, support, and crosscutting issues like gender equality and human rights (ibid: 27). Print media, radio, television, band performances, drama shows, and interactive community sessions are used extensively by the Malawian government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to transmit the various HIV and AIDS messages, leading Bryceson et al. (2004: 24) to speak of a “bombardment of educational information”.

33 More precisely, UNAIDS defines ABC as standing for “Abstinence (not engaging in sex or delaying first sex), Being safer by being faithful to one’s partners or reducing the number of sexual partners, and Correct and consistent use of condoms” (UNAIDS 2004: 6). The ABC slogan was first coined in 1992 by the Filipino Secretary of Health, and subsequently picked up by major players in the field of HIV prevention, e.g. WHO, UNAIDS, USAID, and PEPFAR (Hardee et al. 2008). However, even before this specific slogan became en vogue, the international response to the spread of HIV largely revolved around the ABC recommendations, albeit under different formulations and in varying combinations (ibid).

34 Soon after his installation in 2009, US president Obama dismantled the law against the funding of agencies that promote condom use.
As a result of the focus on raising awareness, knowledge of *Edzi* – as AIDS is locally called – is nearly universal in Malawi (GoM 2011a: 166), and has been so for many years. In 1993 a survey undertaken in rural Southern Malawi found that virtually all respondents, male and female, already knew that the new disease was sexually transmitted and could not be cured. Most also knew that a healthy-looking person can be infectious, and infection can be prevented (Tavrow 1994 in Watkins 2004: 679, see also Foster 1998: 537). The most recent national Demographic and Health Survey indicates that almost 80 percent of all Malawians know that abstinence, monogamy, or condom use can reduce the risk of HIV transmission (GoM 2011a: 167). Equally high percentages know that HIV can be transmitted through breastfeeding, that mother-to-child transmission can be reduced through medication (GoM 2011a: 170), and that the virus cannot be transmitted through mosquito bites, the sharing of food, or supernatural means (GoM 2011a: 168). About half of the Malawian population answered all questions about HIV and AIDS correctly. Such comprehensive knowledge is highest among younger adults, and found to increase with wealth and education level. UNAIDS found that Botswana and Malawi scored best on knowledge of HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa (in Arrehag et al. 2006: 17).

Knowledge about HIV and AIDS is thus impressively accurate, considering the fact that education levels in Malawi are extremely low, only half of the households own a radio, and a mere 6 percent possess a television (GoM 2006a: 80). However, despite consistently correct answers to most survey questions concerning HIV
and AIDS, and a steady increase in respondents that affirm an intent to change behaviour and go for testing in the future, no actual, large-scale change in behaviours regarding the ABC recommendations has yet been observed (GoM 2012: 27, Peters et al. 2007: 94). Watkins (2004) has argued that this should not necessarily be taken to mean that Malawians do not respond to the threat of AIDS at all, pointing to several locally developed and applied strategies of prevention that fit better within the daily lives of rural Malawians than the ABC formula. These include reducing the number of partners, selecting partners more carefully, using condoms with partners considered particularly risky, persuading unfaithful partners to adopt safer practices or otherwise divorce, and seeking support for resisting temptations in religion (see also Forster 2001: 251, Kaler 2004a: 292-6, Peters et al. 2007: 43, Schatz 2005, Smith & Watkins 2005: 655).  

Besides awareness raising and behaviour change campaigns, HIV-prevention efforts in Malawi also entail biomedical interventions. These include STI diagnosis and treatment, HIV testing and counselling, prevention of mother-to-child transmission, male circumcision, post-exposure prophylaxis, and prevention of blood transmission of HIV (GoM 2012: vi). Antiretroviral treatment (ART) also reduces transmission risk, and is therefore also mentioned here. ART has in Malawi been accessible free of cost since 2003, initially distributed at nine urban sites. By the end of 2009 the number of distribution sites had increased to 337 (a minority of these are private health centres that charge money for treatment) (GoM 2009b: 8, GoM 2010b: 69). It is estimated that 65 percent of Malawian adults and children with advanced HIV infection received antiretroviral treatment in 2009 (GoM 2010b: 19).

Conclusion

In 1932 the British missionary Alexander Hetherwick working in Nyasaland wrote that “Africa stood still while the great human world outside was generation upon generation developing” (Chanock 1971: 434). His evolutionary view was shared by most other missionaries and colonial administrators. One such administrator wrote that the task of the colonial rulers was to “deliberately raise the races of our backward fellow men out of the Stone Age into the Age of Steel” (ibid: 435) – apparently unaware that the Bantus of Nyasaland had mastered the skill of melting iron into hoes, spears, and knives centuries ago. The so-called backward natives were, as a matter of fact, far from ‘untouched’ by time or change. When Livingstone arrived in the Lake Malawian area, signs of contact with outsiders were found everywhere. The people he ‘discovered’ were growing maize brought from

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35 In Chapter 6 on sex, HIV, and AIDS I discuss the extent to which these alternative prevention strategies are practiced in Mudzi.
the Americas via the Portuguese, dressed in brightly coloured cotton cloths woven in Europe, and adorned with beads from Asia. The houses were built in an Arab style and the landscape was scattered with mango trees and coconut palms brought home after travels to the coast. An extensive tributary empire had risen and fallen, and the farming population had developed adequate means to grow sufficient food within a fragile ecology.

With a second agenda of self-advancement, the colonialists set out to ‘develop’ the ‘backward fellow men’ they encountered in Africa. After Independence until this day these international development efforts intensified, partly fed by a feeling of guilt about the preceding era of colonization. Nonetheless, as described in this chapter, for the majority of Malawians life has become harsher over the past 150 years. Their livelihoods have crumbled due to exploitative policies during the colonial era and Banda’s regime, corruption and disastrous donor policies during succeeding governments, diminishing land-holding sizes, severe soil degradation, climate change, high morbidity and mortality rates due to AIDS, and reduced employment opportunities abroad. Only recently has some progress become discernible, but this is now seriously jeopardized by the 2007 global economic crisis.

The various historic processes have over time had varying impacts on the matrilineal groups in Malawi, leading to different blends of matrilineal and patrilineal principles. The Chewa, for example, who were conquered by the patrilineal Ngoni and later sought refuge from slave traders at the Christian missions, have gradually transformed from a matrilineal into a more patrilineal organized society, exemplified by a shift towards virilocal settlement patterns, (occasional) payments of bride-wealth, and greater authority for husbands (Phiri 1983, Mair 1951b, Mtika & Doctor 2002). Several facets of Yao history, including their sufficient military power which allowed them to avert conquest by patrilineal groups and their conversion to the more eclectic Islam, allowed for the endurance of their essentially matrilineal organization in an increasingly patriarchal world – proving wrong the consensus among early anthropologists about matriliny’s unsustainability in modern times (e.g. Douglas 1969, Levi-Strauss 1969 [1949], Richards 1950, Schneider & Gough 1961).

This is not to say that Yao women’s social position has remained unaltered. A mix of material and socio-ideological factors has affected the power dynamics between Yao women and men. When reconstructing the historical development of Yao gender relations, several possible explanations emerge for the apparent paradox between women’s control over food and shelter, and their expressed need for male support. Firstly, the dwindling of plot sizes and soil fertility reduced the quantity of food under women’s control, and generated a need for purchasing power to supplement their own production. The job opportunities created by white settlers and the colonial regime were granted almost exclusively to men – who,
moreover, had long been responsible for extra-agricultural food supplementation (hunting) and wealth generation (long-distance trading). With more economic opportunities accessible to them, and the appropriate socio-cultural position to draw upon these, men’s position vis-à-vis women improved. Women’s control base diminished, while men’s increased. Subsequently, the charismatic and brutal ‘president-for-life’ Kamuzu Banda imposed upon Malawians his invented gender ideology which glorified women, but mainly as housekeepers for men who were to do the ‘real work’ of developing the economy. The perception of women as essentially inferior to men has then been reproduced by international development programs that commonly portray women as victims in need of empowerment.

These multiple historical factors seem to have led to a socio-ideologically advancement of men over women. However, as also noted in this chapter, actual fulfilment of the male role has become increasingly difficult in recent times. In the following chapter I will focus on one particular village community in Malawi – the fieldwork site which I call Mudzi – to assess how the processes described in this chapter materialize in the daily lives of contemporary men and women.
Moving to Mudzi: 
An introduction to the research site

Introduction

In this chapter I introduce Mudzi, the southern Malawian village where the fieldwork for this study was conducted. I explain how the specific community was selected, and describe the site in demographic, environmental, and socio-economic detail. I portray the research site prior to presenting the research methodology (Chapter 4), because the community’s characteristics to some extent conditioned the methods used for data collection.

This general background includes a ‘visual’ tour through the village, a description of women’s daily lives, and an impression of the severe poverty they face. In the previous chapter I elaborated upon the ambiguous position of women vis-à-vis men in southern Malawi. In this chapter I begin to assess how this ambiguity materializes in the lived experiences of Mudzi women and men. This detailed portrayal of Mudzi and its inhabitants provides a basis for situating the ethnographic analyses presented in the chapters that follow.

Site selection

The village that I selected for the field study of this book is located in southern Malawi, because both food insecurity and HIV prevalence are substantially higher here than in the other regions (Devereux et al. 2006b: 21). As noted in Chapter 1, I assumed that a possible link between poverty and risky transactional sex may be most pronounced and best discernible here. The interrelated factors that are likely to underlie these disproportionately high levels have been discussed in Chapter 2.
Within the Southern Region, I opted for a village in Balaka district (Figure 3.1) because this allowed me to build upon an extensive range of relevant studies that arose from the Malawi Longitudinal Study of Families and Health (MLSFH). This longitudinal research project, undertaken by the University of Pennsylvania in collaboration with the University of Malawi, has assessed how rural Malawians are affected by and deal with HIV and AIDS since 1998. The MLSFH data consist of both quantitative survey data from one district per region including Balaka, as well as an unique qualitative data set in the form of locally written diaries, from Balaka only (see Watkins et al. 2003 for further elaboration).

Some of the criteria for the selection of the research village were set by the institute at which I worked. For safety reasons it had to be accessible even during the rainy season, and there had to be a mobile phone network. Within this setting, which was characterized by high levels of food insecurity and HIV prevalence, and the predominantly matrilineal and matrilocal social organization of the villages, I wanted to select as much as possible an ‘average’ village with regard to population size, proportion of female-headed households, and proximity to a main road or trading centre. The site I eventually selected had a geography and demography more-or-less average for Balaka district, as well as a mobile phone network. To safeguard the privacy of my informants I name this village Mudzi, which in ChiChewa means nothing more than ‘village’.

Locality and demography
Balaka district is located in the north-central part of the southern region. It has one of the highest levels of food insecurity within Malawi (AAH 2007). This is in part a result of the unfavourable climate, as Balaka is one of the hottest, driest districts of Malawi. It therefore remained sparsely populated until population pressure and Banda’s land confiscations for estate development pushed families to move here in the 1970s. The estimated HIV prevalence in Balaka of 18 percent is significantly higher than the national average of 11 percent.

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1 Over the past century, the area currently called Balaka has been part of districts called Kasupe, Mangochi, and Machinga, according to the different political and administrative regimes (Kaler 2001: 551). It also falls under the area referred to as the ‘upper Shire’, indicating its location relative to the Shire (or Tchiri) River (Mandala 2005: 25).

2 Until 2012, this research project was called the Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (MDICP).

3 Prior to and partly during this PhD study I was employed as social scientist at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics in Malawi. See Chapter 4 for further elaboration on my personal background.
Balaka is a predominantly rural district. It is inhabited by little over 300,000 people, and has a population density (145 persons per square kilometre) similar to Malawi’s average at the time of the research (139 persons per square kilometre) (MPHC 2008: 9, 22). The terrain is relatively flat, the elevation level low, the climate hot and dry.

Only one conglomeration of buildings can be called a town. This boma – as district capitals are called – exists of one tarmac road which connects the district hospital, bus station, open market, police station, government extension offices, field offices of a number of NGOs, cotton and maize warehouses, small supermarkets, beer halls, several cheap hotels and cheaper rest houses, and restaurants that serve nsima or rice with chicken, fish, or beef stew. Balaka town is home to approximately 22,000 inhabitants (GoM 2008b: 29).

Mudzi village is located thirteen kilometre down a dirt road from Balaka town, a good two-hour bike ride away. Public transport does not travel here – only by foot, cycling, bike taxi, or private car can Mudzi be reached. There is a small weekly market at about two kilometres distance, and a trading centre five kilometres away. This latter place contains a government shop for maize and subsidized fertilizer, as well as a small hospital. Another clinic is located approximately four kilometres in the opposite direction, about an hour’s walk. This clinic only attends to maternal and child health issues, but also started to offer counselling and testing services for HIV and AIDS at the time of this study. Another village, at about half an hour’s walk, houses a fuel-generated mill, where women can have their maize ground into flour. The nearest primary school is located approximately two kilometres away, next to a Roman Catholic church. Churches from other denominations are located at further distances. A small mosque is found in Mudzi itself, in front of the compound of the (Yao and Islamic) Group Village Headwoman.

Photo 3.1: The village mosque

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4 Unless stated otherwise, the photographs in this book were taken by me.
On the official household list that I received from the district government staff, Mudzi village numbered 72 households, of which 48 were headed by an unmarried woman, the others consisting of a couple with their dependents. When I started to visit each household, however, I soon found that these numbers were far from correct. Many married couples had been enlisted as two separate households, while other persons on the list had died or moved elsewhere. During my stay some new households were founded while others dissolved, but at any time the total number of households remained between 35 and 40. This number was thus almost half the number of households that I had anticipated to live amidst and study.

Meanwhile, I found that my research community shared both its water pump and graveyard with the adjacent village community. A seemingly arbitrary line divided the scattered houses into two villages. I soon heard that until recently the communities had actually been parts of the same village. Only in 1996 did the village headwoman subdivide her community into six smaller units (the four other newly found villages are located at a farther distance and do not share a water pump with Mudzi), each headed by its own village leader, but still presided over by herself as Group Village Headwoman. Registering as separate villages was most likely a pragmatic response to the policy of many development schemes (both governmental and non-governmental) to target villages as the smallest administrative unit. Handouts, such as coupons for subsidized fertilizer, are usually distributed to village heads. Assuming this will increase the number of beneficiaries, many communities split up to register as separate villages (Harry Msere pers. comm., Chinsinga 2008: 17). For this same reason, presumably, the official household lists are populated with many ‘ghost’ households.

The adjacent community had an approximately equal population size (also nearly half the number of households that were officially registered). It felt only natural to include this community into my research sample. Doing so enlarged the number of households under study to (the more-or-less projected) 84, and the number of women to 90 (six households contained two generations of adult

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5 In conventional demographic terms a household that exists of a couple is per definition ‘male-headed’, and only households run by unmarried women are considered ‘female-headed’. As will become clear throughout this book, this terminology is misleading in the case of Mudzi, and probably for matri- and uxorilocal households in general. Women and the children they care for form the core of such households, while husbands tend to come and go, remaining outsiders in many ways. I furthermore deliberately refrain from using the commonly used term ‘single women’ to denote women who are not in a conjugal relationship. In this, I follow Oyewùmí (2002), who states that from an African perspective the term ‘single mother’ is a contradicio in terminis. She argues that in much of Africa a woman’s identity is first and foremost defined by motherhood, not by a sexual relationship with a man. Mothers, she writes, can by definition never be single, as they have children (ibid). Because most (married and unmarried) Mudzi women are mothers, referring to those without husband as ‘single’ does not feel right.

6 This is the total number of households in the two adjacent communities, excluding a small number of bachelors’ houses, which are inhabited by young men who live alone but are often still fed by their mothers.
women, who form the target group of this study). In this study I use the term ‘Mudzi’ to refer to the community of the two officially separate villages, and only differentiate by calling them ‘Mudzi A’ (the initially selected site) or ‘Mudzi B’ (the adjacent community) when this is relevant.

Only the Group Village Headwoman says she was born in Mudzi; all the other elderly women moved here from overpopulated areas, following their maternal uncles who had gone to find new lands for his family to cultivate and settle on. Although for many it was difficult to remember the exact year, it seems most moved to Mudzi between the 1950s and 1970s. The new settlers received land from the chief – ancestors of the current Group Village Head, and subdivided it among their daughters or sister’s daughters when they went on to found their own families.

Of the total 90 women I interviewed (practically all the adult women of Mudzi A and B) 59 percent are of Yao descent, 16 percent are Lomwe, 10 percent are Ngoni, 4 percent Nyanja, 3 percent Chewa, 2 percent Sena and 6 percent uncertain. Of all the interviewed women, 59 percent identifies as Muslim, 14 percent as Roman Catholic, 10 percent Presbyterian, 6 percent Zambezi, 5 percent African Continent, 3 percent Seventh Day Adventist, 2 percent Jehovah’s Witness, and 1 percent Anglican. Religious affiliation, it must be noted, is not a given. Worshiping a god is considered a self-evident part of life, but the particular form of this devotion is of minor importance. Whether villagers referred to the god of their traditional Bantu cosmology, or that of the Christian or Islamic doctrine, they always used the word ‘Mulungu’ – indicating that these gods are considered one and the same. Followers of different denominations live together peacefully, sometimes even within one household. While funeral ceremonies differ according to the religious affiliation of the deceased, all corpses are buried at the same graveyard and funerals are in principle attended by all villagers alike. Switching religious affiliation (whether

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7 This number includes the one seventeen-year-old girl who had started a family in a household separate from her care-givers, and excludes one woman whose old age had affected her ability to sufficiently understand our questions.

8 President-for-life Kamuzu Banda actively propagated a shared national identity as Malawians rather than ethnic distinctiveness (Short 1974: 251–82 in Forster 2001: 255). Although it is usually considered easier to marry within one’s own ethnic group because of matching traditional customs regarding, among other things, location of settlement after marriage and allocation of children after divorce, intermarriage between ethnic groups, as with religious denominations, is not uncommon. Furthermore, during the pre-colonial era various ethnic groups had allowed marriage with war captives and slaves, which also facilitated the merging of ethnic lineages (Lamba 1985: 73, Pike 1968: 53). The history of interethnic marriages and Banda’s emphasis on a national identity has downplayed the social significance of ethnic affiliation. When I asked my informants about their mtundu [which broadly means ‘kind’, ‘type’, and ‘colour’, and is also used to refer to ethnic affiliation], a number of them took some time to think, had to ask a nearby family member, or answered that their ancestors were from different tribes, wondering out loud what this meant for their own mtundu. This is not to say, however, that traditional ethnic practices such as initiation rites are no longer valued and performed, as will be elaborated upon in Chapter 6. Most of these practices, notably, can be traced back to Bantu origins (see Saidi 2010), hence stemming from a history that is communally shared by most of Malawi’s current inhabitants.
between Christian denominations or Christianity and Islam), for pragmatic reasons such as joining a spouse or vicinity of a particular house of prayer, is common and not considered problematic [e.g. P2 0548, 0664, 1455, 1692; P3 0220, 1911, 2000, 2712, 3795]. In sum, the population of Mudzi is mixed, both in ethnic and religious denomination, but the majority is Yao and Muslim.\(^9\) Notably, the women about whom we gained most detailed information, because they lived nearest to our house in Mudzi and we interacted most intensively with them, were by and large Muslim Yao. A mixture of languages is spoken, but most conversations are held in Malawi’s official language ChiChewa.

The mean age of the interviewed women is 38, ranging from 17 to (an estimated) 88. Almost one-fourth of all village women never attended school, over half of them (57%) dropped out of primary school, and one-fifth finished primary school of whom half (N=10) continued on to secondary school, which none of them managed to finish. Financial problems and pregnancy were the main reasons mentioned for dropping out of primary and secondary school. The average household size is 4.3, ranging from one to nine members. At the time of the first interview 62 percent considered themselves married, and 38 percent were divorced, abandoned, or widowed (as we shall see later on in this book, these are all very transitory stages). Of the married women (N=56), eight lived without husband, as he was either imprisoned (N=1) or working in South Africa (N=7). In at least 18 households, the husband was only around on a temporary basis – surely or possibly dividing his time between multiple wives. Except for some adolescent bachelors who moved to a private hut near their mothers (who to some extent still catered to them), there were no households in Mudzi that were run by an unmarried man. In other words, the adult male population of Mudzi existed solely of men married to and living with their Mudzi wife. Occasionally a recently divorced man would temporarily seek refuge at his sister’s or mother’s house in Mudzi, but most of them found a new wife within days, in Mudzi or elsewhere. As we shall see in Chapter 5 on sexual relationships, the exact size of this married male population is instable due to frequent divorce (generally leading to a departure from the village) and remarriage.

Superfluous as it may be, I feel it is necessary to point out in this introduction of the Mudzi population that all villagers have their own personal character. People may be more or less proactive, abiding, serious-minded, light-hearted, buoyant, timid, assertive, persevering, et cetera. The choices that men and women make do not only depend on their socialization and material circumstances, but to a great extent also on their individual history and personality (see also Nooteboom 2003, Turner 1987). Although this study focuses particularly on the interactions between

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\(^9\) Nine of the 54 Yao women are not Islamic but followers of a Christian denomination (Zambezi Evangelical Church, Roman Catholic, CCAP, Jehovah’s Witness), and of the 53 Islamic women eight are not from Yao descent but Lomwe, Nyanja, and Ngoni.
historical, cultural, and material factors that shape people’s choices, it must be recognized and kept in mind that these alone do not explain all. Personality is always at play too in guiding people’s behaviour.

Mudzi daily life

A ‘visual’ tour
Comparing what I have seen of Mudzi life to the description of an average Yao village in the same region over half a century prior to my field study is both disturbing and revealing. James Clyde Mitchell (1956: 20) writes:

Most young men wear European-type clothing and shoes. Many own bicycles and sewing machines. Many houses have glass windows and panelled doors and most of them are furnished with some rough furniture which has been bought from local craftsmen. Many have beds and mosquito nets. Few women cannot boast enamel dishes to replace their clay pottery or china cups to replace drinking gourds. The food habits of the peoples too have broadened. Most households use sugar these days, and many people drink tea.

More than any of the statistics on the deepening poverty in Malawi, this account strikingly visualizes today’s impoverishment by exhibiting how prosperous Malawian villagers apparently once were. None of the current houses in Mudzi have glass windows, although some do have an iron-sheeted roof. Very few houses contain a bed or any other type of furniture. Most villagers sleep on a mat on the floor, and some do not even have that. Sugar and tea are rare luxuries. Most villagers go barefoot, and while all still wear European-type clothes, these are most often in rags.

Although in a distant past Yao houses had been round structures, since the trading expeditions to Arab settlements Yao builders began to copy the Arabic rectangular house shape that is still in vogue today. Walls consist of bricks that are homemade from the local soil and either burnt or sundried. Most houses have a gable, grass-thatched roof that usually leaks by the end of the rainy season and needs replacement every year. Some houses are merely one room, others are a bit bigger and have two or three rooms. One of these rooms may be used to keep the goats at night, so as to protect them against hyenas and thieves. Most houses, even the smallest, have a veranda, where one can shelter from the rain or sun without having to go inside where darkness prevails even during the day. Some women cook on this veranda – on an open fire with three stones to put the pot on, while others have a separate little structure for this near their house.

10 Mitchell undertook his study throughout the whole area of Nyasaland where the colonial administration had recognized Yao chiefs as ‘Native Authorities’ (as opposed to chiefs with other ethnic backgrounds), which overlaps with (parts of) the current-day districts Mangochi, Machinga, Zomba, and Balaka, and includes the area where Mudzi is located.

11 As explained in the previous chapter, the Yao were fervent traders, a activity which during the pre-colonial era brought them wealth and power. Later, during the colonial period, waged labour opportunities abroad in particular brought some temporary prosperity.
A number of compounds have a pit-latrine at some distance from the house. The families that do not dig such a pit simply relieve themselves in the bushes or their neighbours’ pit-latrine. A screen of grasses called *bafa* is erected to take a bath out of sight of fellow villagers. Standing on a stone to avoid mud on the cleansed feet, villagers wash themselves by scooping water from a bucket over their body. Finally, one last structure found at many of the compounds is a granary for maize storage.

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12 I retrieved permission to use photographs from those depicted. However, as will be further discussed in Chapter 4, I doubt whether those concerned could understand exactly what they consented to. Therefore I have chosen not to link names (pseudonyms) to the pictures.
A small number of houses have a roof of corrugated iron sheets, and some even have concrete floors or concrete plaster on the walls. These are by and large paid for with money sent by husbands or sons working in town or South Africa. An iron roof is prestigious: It does not leak nor require annual replacement, but it does increase the temperature inside the house during the hot season.

Except for the concrete and iron-sheeted houses, most structures in the village need regular maintenance as long as they remain in use. When no longer maintained, they are soon overtaken by the elements. At the time of our arrival in Mudzi, a small house stood next to ours. The young man who used to live there had recently moved back to his grandparents’ because his grandmother was too busy taking
care of her chronically ill husband to bring the young man, a bachelor, cooked meals several times a day. The wind blew off most of the grass roof, the rains that followed washed away half of the sundried bricks that were now no longer protected by a roof. What was left was soon overgrown by bush and so further destroyed. By the next planting season, Gertrude and I planted sweet potatoes where less than a year before a house had still been inhabited.

In between the houses and outside the village borders lie the agricultural fields, and depending on the season the scenery looks dusty and barren or lush and green. Virtually the only trees that have not been cut down for firewood or construction material are mango trees – which provide an abundance of fruit just at the time that maize stores tend to run out.

Photos 3.6: The same locations in Mudzi before and during the rainy season

Daily life
A Mudzi woman commonly gets up before dawn, before her husband and children. Outside her house, either in a small kitchen or out in the open air, she makes a fire and puts on some water – if there is anything to prepare for breakfast, such as porridge, sweet potatoes, or tea. She then sweeps the sandy surroundings of her house with a short broom. Subsequently, she carries her tin or plastic bucket to the water pump to fetch water. Depending on where exactly she lives in Mudzi, this stroll takes a few minutes to almost half an hour. As most women follow this same routine, a large group amasses, and our average woman must queue to wait
her turn. Unsurprisingly, the water pump is the ultimate spot for social interaction. Whenever Gertrude heard of a new rumour, she would quickly grab a bucket and run off to the pump to find out all about it.

Photo 3.7: Women at Mudzi’s water pump

The main meal of the day is served at noon, and takes some preparation. Let us assume that on this average day our average woman already has some maize ground into flour, as she walked to the mill kilometres away with a bag full of dried maize kernels on her head some days before. Now she must sift the flour so as to avoid clumping. To make *nsima*, the thick maize porridge that forms the mainstay of each warm meal, the flour must bit by bit be added to boiling water, while stirring forcefully. *Nsima* is eaten from a shared plate, with the fingers of the right hand – which has been washed in a bowl of water prior to the meal. Each lump of *nsima* is dipped in a side dish to give it some taste. This side dish may consist of boiled green leaves, cabbage, chickpeas, okra, insects, or, when able to splurge, dried fish or even chicken, goat, or beef – depending on what is in season or what can be purchased. In the case of green leaves – the most common side dish – these must be looked for in the fields in or around the village (although they are sometimes bought from a passing-by vendor or at the nearest marketplace) and made edible by removing the many veins. When owning just one pot, the side dish and the *nsima* must be cooked successively. After the meal, the bowl of water is passed on again so all can wash their hands. Our woman then starts to clean the pots and plates, bending down deep, using water and sand to minutely scour all remains of food and char. If there is enough maize for another round of *nsima* that day, the same is done all over again just before dusk. Usually, fetching water is done several times a day – especially if the household does not own any other storage vessel for water than the one bucket in which it is fetched. Either in the early morning or late afternoon, the woman puts the bucket with water at the
bathing space and, while squatting down, tells her husband that he can go wash himself. After that she and her children wash their bodies behind the grass screen.

Other, non-daily tasks performed on a regular basis by women (and to some extent children) include collecting firewood, re-mudding the floor of their house, bringing maize to the mill for grinding, and washing the clothes and blankets (if owned) of all household members. The last two activities are, however, only carried out when money is available, to pay the grinder or buy soap.

If the fields need attending, this is mostly done in the early morning hours, before the heat sets in. The land must first be cleared of the bushes that grew since the last harvest – a task generally performed by men, sometimes by simply burning the bushes. Afterwards, ridges must be hacked in the dry, hardened soil. This is a physically demanding work that is ideally performed by men and women together. Choosing the right moment for planting seeds is tricky. The seeds need as much rain as possible, especially with the rainy season becoming gradually shorter each year. They should, however, not be planted too early as they will be wasted if the rains do not come through. After planting, the fields must be weeded every now and then – both of which are performed mainly by women and children.

Mudzi’s women predominantly grow maize (only when actively probed did the interviewed women mention the other crops that they grow, in between their maize plants, such as pumpkins, beans, chickpeas, and millet, revealing the minor importance attached to these). The majority of women also attributed a part of their plot to cotton (59 of the 88 households), some to cassava, rice, or tomatoes, and one to tobacco. When maize has matured and dried, it must be harvested and stored, either in the house or in the granary. Increasingly, Mudzi villagers prefer to keep their maize inside, afraid of thieves emptying their granary at night. The grains are manually removed from the cobs – a women’s (and children’s) job, which can be conveniently combined with sitting and chatting together with other women. If money is available, chemicals are bought to apply to the maize that is to be stored, to prevent loss to mice, weevils, or mould. This application is considered a male task. Having no man in our household, Gertrude – who without blinking would perform taxing physical tasks such as carrying heavy loads of water on her head, ploughing the dried soil, or chopping big logs of wood – asked the adolescent boy from next door to do this for us. It simply did not cross her mind to do it herself. The boy’s response showed neither surprise nor reluctance. A tacit understanding between the two about specifically designated gender roles led to the boy picking up the bottle of chemicals, sprinkling the content over our maize, and departing. I will return to the strict division of gender roles later on in this chapter.

During several brief periods over the year Mudzi women were kept busy performing these agricultural duties. Most other days, however, they had plenty of leisure time in between the performance of their duties in and around the house. This time was used to rest in the shade, visit each other to chat, braid each other’s
hair, or play *bawo* or cards (except for the hair braiding, men spend their leisure time likewise, complemented by some with drinking locally brewed beer or spirit). The abundance of leisure time goes against a common assumption in development circles that women’s failure to generate an independent income stems from a heavy domestic workload which leaves them too little time for additional activities\(^\text{13}\) (e.g. Booth 2000, FAO 2011, OECD 2012, UNDP 2009). Although indeed Mudzi women spend much more time per day on typical women’s tasks than men seem to do on typical male tasks (as found to be the case throughout rural Malawi, see Mathiassen et al. 2007: 37), this does not mean that women have no free time. In Chapter 8 I will discuss several other factors that in Mudzi seemed to underlie women’s reluctance to engage in making money.

Most likely, during at least some of the above-mentioned activities, whether duty or pleasure, the average woman carried her youngest child on her back, swinging it to the front every now and then to breastfeed. Most likely too, she is helped with her chores by one or more of her daughters. When daughters are not available, or when boys are considered more appropriate, for example to cycle to the maize mill, sons are at times ordered to help out too.

### Poverty levels

*Food insecurity*

Hunger is not just one of the many faces of poverty – it is the ultimate sign of it. Having no food also means having nothing else but a few bare necessities. Embarrassingly, this struck me as a new realization when I looked for toilet paper while squatting above a hole in the floor of a tiny mud hut at my first study site. It took some time before it hit me how terribly naïve it was to expect a luxury thing like toilet paper in a place where people cannot even manage to supply their body with its minimal daily energy requirements. Not having food means not having soap to wash one’s body or clothes, no blanket to protect against cold nights, and no candle to dispel the darkness after 6 p.m.

In his classic book, *The moral economy of the peasant* (1976: 34), James Scott rightfully argues that the question to ask is not how poor peasants are, but how precarious their livelihood is. Living near subsistence level but feeling secure enough never to fall below it – because of some reliable form of insurance against it – is an essentially different situation from living at times in abundance but with the persistent threat of hunger and possibly starvation. As Scott argues, these contrasting situations trigger significantly different technical, social, and

\(^{13}\) Childcare does not seem to prevent women from going around doing what they want either. The youngest are taken along tied on their mother’s back, while the others are often simply left playing around the compound [e.g. P3 1314].
moral arrangements in a society. Food or livelihood insecurity is thus of central importance to understanding the daily life experiences of Mudzi men and women.

As already hinted at earlier, and analysed at a national level in Chapter 2, food security in Mudzi is highly fragile. Periods of scarcity and abundance alternate with periods in which there is just enough to get by. For some time after the harvest, varying from weeks to a full year, villagers can eat their own produce – depending on the size of their harvest and their ability to hold on to it. When a family’s stored maize is nearing its end, economizing starts [P3 3961, 4083, 4101]. Nsima is then eaten only once a day instead of twice, and becomes increasingly diluted each day until only a liquid porridge (phala) remains [P2 0442, 0665, 0698-701, 0752, 0762, 0878, 0885, 1037, 1043, 1129, 1200-2, 1223, 1264; P3 1063, 3799, 4097, 4099]. Maize meals are skipped or substituted with boiled green leaves or mangoes (boiled too, if still green), which grow in abundance during part of the rainy season [P2 0567, 0762, 1129, 1176, 1182, 1200, 1214, 1216, 1221, 1236; P3 0720, 0761, 1023, 1063, 1094-6, 1122, 14076]. As long as there is enough maize, the grains are peeled for softer flour and finer nsima [P2 1702]. When little maize is at hand, however, the grains are left unpeeled so as to increase the volume of the flour, at the expense of taste [P2 1079, 1185].

Eventually, when all the maize is finished, the skins that were removed earlier and have not been used as fodder or for beer brewing are pounded to make (a bitter-tasting) flour [P2 0878; P3 1539-41, 1753, 2860]. When possible, social relations who have maize are begged to share some of it [P2 0701-2, 0724, 1185, 1229, 1232, 1282, 1334, 1424, 1446, 1508; P8 0006]. As the stores get depleted, money must be found to buy (usually small quantities of) maize – which is exorbitantly expensive during this time of overall scarcity [P3 1630]. Alternatively, other types of food that are considered inferior to maize, such as cassava, are also bought at relatively high prices [P2 1086, 1094, 1096, 1101]. To find money for these foods, livestock is sold (at desperately low prices), piece-work sought, business profits consumed instead of reinvested, and cash or maize borrowed at high pay-back rates [P2 0477, 0719-20, 0920, 0922, 1103, 1056, 1067, 1093-4, 1103, 1161, 1176, 1182, 1216, 1358, 1526, 1568, 1612, 1870; P3 1021, 1023, 1175, 1553, 1559, 3770, 4097]. Many villagers go days without any maize meal, eating bits of whatever other food they can get, and in the worst cases nothing at all [P2 0698-701, 1101, 1282; P3 1016, 1122, 1799, 4062]. During the hunger months of the year

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14 As will be explained further on in this chapter and in Chapter 8 on women’s income-generating options, produce, whether surplus or not, is often sold or shared with others.

15 During the season of scarcity the government institute ADMARC sells maize at a reasonable price (MK52 per kg in 2009) at depots throughout the country, but is often out of stock. Much of its maize is bought by middlemen who resell it for higher prices (up to MK100 per kg in 2009). After harvest, prices dropped to MK25 per kg in 2009.

16 During the 2008/2009 hunger season several brokers in and around Mudzi offered money which was to be repaid after harvest with 50 kg of maize per 1000MK borrowed [P2 1358], hence for a price of MK20 per kg, which is below the government-set price of MK52/kg and far below the maize price of MK70/kg to MK100/kg during these months of scarcity.
that we spent in Mudzi, some orphans who stayed with caretakers in the village decided to move to live with relatives elsewhere who still had some maize, while others were bluntly evicted because of their foster home’s food shortage [P2 0777, 0787, 1112, 1221; P3 0866]. When there is no food to be found anymore (or no money to pay the high price of it), certain tree roots are dug up, peeled, boiled, and eaten to at least fill the stomach.17 “Going to bed hungry” is the typical expression that Mudzi villagers use to denote their suffering during the season of scarcity [P2 0128, 1043, 1274; P3 0274, 1839, 3858]. The duration of the hunger period varies per year, as it partly depends on rainfall patterns, but also per household, as will be further explained in the next sub-section. On average, it lasts from November to March (see Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2), and peaks in January and February.

Most agricultural activities are to be carried out during this period of food insufficiency (which also coincides with the hottest period of the year) – making the physically heavy tasks even more difficult, hampering the size of the subsequent yield18 [P2 0665, 1030, 1037, 1214; P3 2352]. The need for cash to buy food and the abundance of work to be done on the fields, furthermore, together create a market for hired ganyu labour. This allows farmers in need of money to survive [P2 0806], yet also obstructs the work they should do on their own fields, thus perpetuating their food insecurity [P3 4087].

Towards the end of the rainy season there are no mangoes left in the trees, and no ganyu opportunities left in the fields [P2 0631, 0666, 0682, 0698, 0920, 0926, 1182, 1202]. The farmers’ eyes grow increasingly hollow, their faces shrunken, and their bodies frail, while the surroundings become lush and the maize plants tall [e.g. P2 1504; P3 1532, 2456]. Activities are reduced to a minimum; villagers lie listlessly in the shade of their huts, waiting for the hours to pass and the maize to mature. To maximize the amount of nsima that can be made per unit of maize, cobs must dry on their stem before harvest. Understandably, however, the patience needed for this cannot be mustered by those who slept with empty stomachs for numerous nights in a row. As soon as the first maize cobs have matured, these are picked one by one, and eaten from morning to evening boiled or roasted, roasted or boiled [e.g. P2 1405, 1410; P3 1306, 1532, 1616, 1630]. In an attempt to make nsima from fresh maize, some grains are put to dry in the sun before grinding [P3 1310, 1602, 1615, 1757, 1799, 1800]. This, however, results in relatively low quantities of nsima, and is in fact a waste of precious maize.

When the remaining cobs have finally dried on the stem, they are quickly harvested before thieves can do so. Almost as a revenge for the hardship suffered, the wide availability of maize and other food crops is now lavishly celebrated [P2

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17 I did not witness this in Mudzi, but in one of the two pilot sites during the year prior to my stay in Mudzi.

18 In his review of famine studies Dirks (1980: 23) found that low caloric intake leads peasants to work slower and rest longer.
Large quantities of white-flour *nsima* are eaten at lunch and dinner, and sometimes breakfast too [P2 0651, 1503, 1504, 1716, 1766; P3 0537, 1532, 2672]. Bits of maize are also sold on a regular basis, to acquire cash for luxury food and non-food items.¹⁹ Men and women spend many hours playing cards, and maize is contributed to serve as the jackpot for the winner [P2 1683, 1698, 1761, 1794]. Initiation ceremonies for pre-adolescents, remembrance ceremonies for deceased relatives, and other celebrations for which elaborate feasting meals must be prepared are organized at this time of food abundance [P2 1479, 1483; P3 1959].

Some farmers manage to keep seeds from one harvest to the next planting season, but as most seeds are edible, few can resist eating them [P3 0846, 0968, 1018, 1020, 1025, 1030]. When the next planting season arrives these farmers either beg small amounts of seeds from multiple connections in their social network [P2 0462; P3 1018, 1025], work on wealthier farmers’ fields in exchange for seeds [P2 0477, 1011, 1016], or look for money to buy seeds at the market [P2 0405, 0462, 0477, 0619, 0918; P3 1030].

**Diversity**

Clearly, the levels of food security are not the same throughout Mudzi. To determine which criteria most aptly indicate a household’s position on the poverty spectrum vis-à-vis the other Mudzi households is not a straightforward exercise. Depending on my quantitative data alone would probably have led to conclusions that are incongruent with what I observed. In many cases some background information on the particular respondent was necessary to value the comparative weight of the various indicators.²⁰ For example, all those in the upper segment of the poverty-wealth spectrum live in relatively large houses with an iron-sheeted roof, but such a house cannot by itself be taken as a direct indicator of prosperity. The house may be no more than a remnant of a past period of access to sufficient means, for example through an employed husband who died or left long ago. Hiring labourers to help cultivate one’s field too may seem a plausible indicator of relative wealth. However, among Mudzi’s most food insecure are two women who by all means find ways to hire help because they are physically too weak to cultivate enough land. They believe that investing in hired labour is cost effective for them. Furthermore, having no maize left within months after harvest is not the indicator of food insecurity that it may appear to be, as women with access to a regular source of financial support can buy maize whenever necessary. Even these women

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¹⁹ The selling of non-surplus crops will be further elaborated upon in Chapter 8.

²⁰ This confirms the argument of Wolf Bleek (1987b) – a pseudonym of anthropologist Sjaak van der Geest – that when data is retrieved through informants’ self-reports, its validity (hence the extent to which the particular data give an accurate indication of the issue to be measured) can only be ascertained and assured by the familiarity of the researcher with the informant and his or her context.
may at times be rationing their food, however, if it is unclear when exactly the next sum of money, for example from a husband working in South Africa, will be accessible to them. Their rationing does not indicate the same level of food insecurity as does that of women with no external sources of support.

Furthermore, in a number of cases women exaggerated their deprivation during the interviews (see Chapter 4). Such concealment seemed very widespread, but was particularly done by women who were somewhat better off. Maybe these women simply had more to conceal, or maybe they were (partly) better off because they knew best how to take advantage of a situation (e.g. by positioning themselves as more destitute in my interviews, which many suspected to be a stocktaking exercise preceding some form of development assistance). Depending on the formal interview data alone would therefore have led to an overestimation of the level of food insecurity in Mudzi.

By combining the results of quantitative interviews with our observations and informal conversations I categorized all Mudzi households into the three levels of poverty: the best off, the worst off, and those in between. This categorization is subjective as it is to a certain extent based on my personal judgment, but I believe it is more ‘objective’ (closer to reality) than a classification based merely on quantitative facts. I could have chosen to create a greater number of levels for a more precise stratification, but for the purpose of this study I believe that a rough impression of the two extremes between which all Mudzi households range is adequate enough. Of all Mudzi households, I found eight to stand out as most food secure and nine others to suffer exceptionally hard. The remaining households ranged in between.

Only the eight ‘best-off’ households are reasonably assured of year-round daily access to sufficient quality food (although a severe drought or other natural disaster would certainly affect them too). Most years their members manage to grow or buy a surplus of maize. They either sell this surplus at high prices during the hunger season, or with it pay poorer fellow villagers to cultivate their fields. One of these households is that of Mudzi’s Group Village Headwoman. Due to her status and power she can annex natural resources as well as resources that are brought into the community by development agencies, or demand shares from the resources of ‘her’ Mudzi people [e.g. P2 0701-2, 0752; P3 0402, 0676, also P3 1460]. Furthermore, two of this woman’s adult sons work in South Africa, and send her financial support if requested, for example when a funeral had to be organized for their father [P2 0304, 0787; P3 1517, 1749, 2077]. Three other ‘best-off’ households consist of elderly people (two married couples, one unmarried woman) who also have adult sons and daughters with jobs or employed partners in town. They have for years been helped by these children to build a solid house, buy sufficient inputs for good yields, and survive the meagre months without corroding their future food base [P2 0406; P3 4018, 4073]. All four prime-aged women in this group of most prosperous
households have a husband who for several years has had a steady, relatively substantial income, three of them in South Africa. The fourth is a pastor who lives in Mudzi with his wife. As the man is from a patrilineally organized ethnic group, the couple had initially settled in his natal village. However, after repeated accusations of witchcraft, they decided to move to the wife’s home village Mudzi. According to this woman, the accusations were a response to the agricultural success that they apparently had in the past [P3 4050]. My guess would be, without having any proof for it, that this success is, to some extent at least, related to the man’s position as pastor, which offers him various formal and informal means of acquiring money. The houses of these various families have iron-sheeted roofs, multiple rooms, and some furniture inside. One of the elderly men can often be seen sitting in front of his house in a meticulously white shirt, ironed pants, and shiny leather shoes – all pretty unique in Mudzi.

The women whom I position at the most deprived end of the poverty spectrum either a) are physically unable to properly cultivate their fields and lack support to compensate for this; b) remain married to a husband who does not help but does consume and spends parts of the household’s harvest on beer, cigarettes, or gambling; or c) have been particularly unlucky with a sequence of partners who left them with children to take care of without providing any support. These most deprived families generally live in small, one-room houses with thin grass-thatched roofs, and often lack a kitchen, pit-latrine, and bathing place. None of these households own a radio, bicycle, or bed. A few do not even own a mat to sleep on, but instead use a sack in which maize is usually stored, with only the chitenje that they wear during the day as blanket. Some must borrow a pot for each meal they cook, as their own has worn out and buying a new one is out of reach. Their hunger season lasts longest and is most severe because their yields are small and finish early. Those who are physically weak cannot compensate this by working on other farmers’ fields in exchange for cash or maize. These families sometimes go days without any food at all. The one characteristic that goes for all women in this group, and for none in the others, seems to be the fact that they never splurge. Even right after harvest they feel the breath of hunger on their necks. They hold on to the little maize they have, while others at this time tend to sell bits of their maize harvest to purchase clothes, snacks, household utensils, or other relative luxuries.

Most households can be categorized between these two extremes. Their members struggle but manage to get along day by day; they go hungry on some days but find food the next; they have few possessions but when obtaining a bit of money may treat themselves to some luxuries like dried fish, a donut, or hair chemicals. Most

21 The colourful cloth that women wear over their skirt to protect it from dirt, and that is also used to carry babies and toddlers on their back. Plural: zitenje.
live in two-roomed houses with grass-thatched roofs, and often have a separate kitchen and bathing place outside. They tend to sleep on a mat and under a blanket. Some even own a bicycle, which they hold on to also in times of hunger as it helps them to find piece-work at some distance when there is none available nearby.

Obviously, villagers can move up and down the continuum of poverty levels. Lovely (age 29), for example, was orphaned during childhood and struggled to get along without much adult support. Hoping to escape from her lonely ordeal, at 13 she married a boy she met while doing ganyu. For years the young couple lived in severe poverty, sleeping with an empty stomach many nights, losing three of their children in infancy. Recently the husband decided to try his luck in South Africa. Lovely and her children now eat every day. She even has a mobile phone proudly hanging around her neck, and her tiny hut is furnished with a table and chairs. Christina (age 34), on the other hand, managed to more or less get by when her husband was still around to help her on the field. The man also generated money for the household through ganyu labour. He recently abandoned her to marry another wife, however, leaving her pregnant and with three young children to take care of. She fears the hardships that she is prone to face during the upcoming hunger season. Similarly, Magda (54) lived a reasonably secure life when two of her adult children were employed in town. At least when food shortages became pressing and when agricultural inputs needed to be purchased she could usually count on their support. When both children died some years ago, Magda’s fortune did as well [P3 4037].

It appears from this analysis that most Mudzi farmers do not manage to grow enough food to feed their family from one harvest to the next. The few who harvest enough can do so only because they get external financial support to augment their farm’s productivity [see also P3 0276, 0301, 3015-6]. In other words, although often called ‘subsistence farmers’, not one Mudzi farmer can subsist on agriculture alone. To survive, they are in need of supplementary food, seeds, fertilizer, and chemicals for storage.

- Sexual relationships and livelihood security

A potential correlation that is of particular relevance to this study is that between marriage or sexual relationships and livelihood security. It appears from the above analysis that external sources of support are essential for a certain level of livelihood security. One potential way to gain access to such an external source of support is through marriage to a man working in town or abroad. From the above analysis it indeed appears that marriage (or divorce) can be a decisive factor for a woman’s movement up (or down) the continuum.

Marriage is, however, not a prerequisite for prosperity, as even among those classified as best off one woman has been without a partner for many years already. Nonetheless, it is striking that the others in this category are either elderly women who have a stable, long-term marriage with a husband who tends to collaborate for
the greater benefit of the household, or prime-age women who have an employed husband able and committed to provide regular and substantial support. In both cases, marriage is at least a facilitating factor for their relative prosperity. In the first, that of steadily wed elderly women, livelihood security stems largely from the fact that these women harvest more than they need. This surplus results from the financial support they receive from employed children at crucial times, such as when agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizer, and *ganyu* labour are needed, or when unexpected shocks such as disease or death occur. The fact that they have few dependents and a husband who actively participates in running the farm further adds to their welfare.

For the prime-age women who have employed husbands, marriage is undisputedly their main source of livelihood security. However, for half of all women married to a migrant man (hence also those in the ‘average’ group) this security is fragile. These are the women who were not born in Mudzi, but moved here upon marriage. Their relatively prosperous position is precarious because upon divorce they will have to leave behind all the wealth that accumulated around them, such as the iron-roofed house, the bed, blankets, radio. From one day to the next, on the whim of their husbands, their comfortable life may come to an end, and they will have to start from scratch again in their natal village. This happened to Sofia:

Shortly after we arrived in Mudzi, Sofia (25) moved into the house next to ours. For years she had lived in Balaka town with her husband, who traded in sugar. Pictures of that period show Sofia with round cheeks, long braided hair, and fancy clothes. Her husband, however, took an interest in their landlady’s daughter, and this girl soon expected his child. Not long after, the man sent Sofia back to her home village Mudzi, together with their four children, one of whom was still a baby. Sofia was reluctantly taken in by the grandmother who had taken care of her since childhood. Having lived in town, Sofia had no maize stores of her own and depended on charity. Within a few months, she and her children visibly shrivelled, and her baby became so weak that he barely survived. [P2 0276; P3 1635, 1867]

All the other women, who at marriage remained in their natal village following the commonly observed matrilocal residence rules, are entitled to the house built by their husband (or children). In these cases it is the husband who will have to move away if either one decides to divorce. He may take with him some of the assets assembled during the marriage and claim half of the harvest if he helped to cultivate it. But a woman’s investments in her house, her field, and her direct social network are secured, regardless of her husband’s decisions. These women can therefore in general be considered more livelihood secure than those married virilocally.

While the welfare of some women derives (directly or indirectly) from marriage, in several other cases the husband actually caused or contributed to a household’s deteriorating financial and food security. Of the nine women whom I categorized as the most deprived, five are steadily married. Four of them have a husband who misuses much of the household resources for his own pleasures (beer, cigarettes, gambling, snacks, radio batteries). As a matter of fact, none of the women in the
top and middle segment complained about such behaviour from their partner – they were either not married, or had a partner who they felt reasonably behaved himself. Some had been married to a mischievous husband in the past, but divorced him because of it. It appears that marriage thus can be a direct cause to food or livelihood insecurity, too. The reasons for women to stay married to a man who gives little and takes a lot are delved into in Chapter 5, which focuses on women’s choices concerning relationships. In the particular cases of the four Mudzi women in the worst-off segment, it seems that they have become used to enduring their husbands’ behaviour, dread enraging them, prefer not to be regarded with disrespect and distrust for being divorced, fear never finding another man, and doubt whether a new man, if they would find one at all, would behave any better.

Some of the worst-off women simply seem to have been unfortunate in their choice of sexual partners, as many of these men left them with children to care for but without the necessary support to do so. For other women, however, having a sequence of partners turned out relatively well. To effectively run their household, farm, or small-scale business, these women benefit from the occasional inputs they may still get or ask from one of the fathers (or paternal grandmothers) of their children (see also Swidler & Watkins 2007). This too will be further elaborated upon in Chapter 5.

It appears that a woman’s livelihood security is not directly related to her relationship status. This is an interesting finding in light of the main research question on the potential link between poverty and women’s sexual relationships. Steady marriage can be either beneficial, detrimental, or neutral to a woman’s livelihood security. The same goes for frequent partner change. What does seem to impact a household’s wealth status is the type of partner that a woman is involved with. A woman fortunate enough to have wed a man who is committed to investing long-term in the development of her household is more likely to end up in the better-off segment of the community. Women who for some reason choose to remain with an unsupportive husband are more likely to end up in the worst-off segment. It seems reasonable, then, that in general women pursue a relationship with the former type, and end relationships with the latter. Men of the former type are hard to find, however, as few feel sufficiently certain of a lasting marriage to ‘bet on one horse’. If they do, they risk losing all in case of divorce. Possibly as a way to increase their own livelihood security, many men maintain (formal and informal, active and latent) relationships with various women – to which end they must necessarily divide, and thus dilute, the scarce resources they have. Not surprisingly, some women, finding one man after another not fully committed to their household, continue their search for a better partner – and so, unwillingly, facilitate the spread of HIV.
Gender relations

Gender roles and realities
As most Mudzi inhabitants (at least 80 percent\(^{22}\)) descend from matrilineally
organized ethnic groups, it is customary here that a husband moves to his wife’s
natal village, builds her a house, and, ideally, helps to cultivate the fields she
inherited from her mother or received from the chief. In case of divorce, a man
moves away, leaving the children and the house to his wife. Rather than for his
biological children, a man carries responsibility for his sisters’ children – the
ones with whom he shares his mother’s blood. Consequently, women are in
theory linked more closely to their maternal uncles and brothers than their fathers
and husbands (Bryceson et al. 2004: 10, Lawson 1949: 181, Mitchell 1961: 33,
Vaughan 1985: 185) [see P3 2109]. However, this relationship between women and
their male matrikin (who tend to live elsewhere, namely at their wife’s compound)
is predominantly ritual and political in nature. Several authors have noted that
in southern Malawi the matrilineage hardly plays an economic role in the daily
lives of its members (Mandala 1990: 51, Morris 2000: 25, Vaughan 1983: 277-8,
Vaughan 1987: 120; see also Bleek 1987a: 144 on Ghana) [e.g. P2 1490]. For actual,
day-to-day physical and economic support, women must turn to a husband (or, if he
fails, his matrikin) – who is, through marriage, brought into a female matrikin unit
partly for that very purpose (Mitchell 1956, Mwambene 2005: 15, Phiri 1983: 259,
Richards 1969 [1940]: 23). The case of Sofia illustrates some of these husband-
versus-matrikin tensions. Especially because her situation was somewhat out of
the ordinary, since upon divorce she had no house or maize stores of her own, the
negotiations over who should help her became explicit:

Upon her return to Mudzi, Sofia hoped to be taken in by her maternal grandmother – who
had cared for her throughout her youth. This woman was, however, unwilling to provide for
Sofia and her four children. Instead, she ordered Sofia to move into the compound of her ex-
husband’s mother and sister, so that they would pressure her ex-husband into providing for
her and their children at least until the next harvest. Eventually, it was the man’s elder brother
who took the responsibility of solving (part of) the problem by promising to build a house
for Sofia and her children. Meanwhile, Sofia received food gifts from her mother-in-law and
ex-husband (although generally insufficient, as noted earlier). She begged support from her
brother working in South Africa, but he told her that it was her ex-husband who had given her
all these children and who therefore should take care of them. When I asked Sofia if there were
legal means to compel sufficient support from her ex-husband, she confirmed this, but added
that she would want her own brother to come back to Malawi to speak up for her in court. [e.g.
P2 0276-7, 1383, 1393, 1514, 2113; P3 1679, 1755]

Some women based in Mudzi do not live among their own but their husband’s
maternal kin, forming an exception to the rule. In these cases, the husband migrated

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\(^{22}\) Twelve percent of Mudzi women consider themselves as belonging to an ethnic group that follows
patrilineal descent, and six percent were born from a union between patrilineal and matrilineal descendants.
to town or abroad for work and requested his wife to move from her own to his natal village so that his matrikin can keep an eye on her [e.g. P2 1440; P3 0806, 1639, 1776, 1888]. The strong financial position of these men was probably decisive in their wives’ (N=5) obedience in breaching the matrilocal custom. It thus appears that whereas uxoriallocality originally may have facilitated or even stimulated Yao men’s long-term absence – as described in Chapter 2 – now men’s absence seems to promote virilocality. The tendency of wives of migrant men to transfer to their husband’s home village was already noted in the 1940s by Read (1942: 624–8) and Marwick (1965: 97), who expected this process to proliferate and in the long run threaten matrilocality and matrilineality (Phiri 1983: 271–2). However, most of the ‘dislocated’ women in Mudzi felt ill at ease among their husband’s matrikin [e.g. P2 1161, 1617, 1827, 1832; P3 0966, 1503, 1888, 1998], and during our stay in Mudzi, several got fed up with the gossip and conflicts they faced and moved back to their natal village [P2 1827, 1832; P3 1998, 4012, 4019]. In practice, thus, virilocality does not seem sustainable within the generally matrilocal Mudzi setting.

Land has always been and remains predominantly in the hands of women, who receive it from their mothers or the village head upon marriage or when otherwise considered ready to start taking care of themselves. This is not to say, however, that men cannot and never do have usufruct to some land. When I asked one of Mudzi’s elderly women how it came to be that only her daughters held some land in the village, even the one who lived with her husband in town, she simply answered that her son could get a plot if he would want to. As a matter of fact, over one-third of Mudzi husbands have some land, most of them at some distance in their home village. Historical studies show that this has been the case at least since the 1940s (Mitchell 1950, Vaughan 1985: 183). Those who have entitlements to a plot within Mudzi are mainly close relatives of the Group Village Headwoman – her brother, sons, and husband. Others, as did the Group Village Head’s husband, received a part of their wife’s field after a long, steady marriage, so as to encourage the man’s labour on the fields. On their own plot, men mostly grow cash crops, as it is their wife’s duty to feed them anyway.

Domestic duties are clearly divided between the genders and this division has changed little since recorded by early anthropologists (Mitchell 1962, Richards 1969 [1940], Tew 1950). Culturally endowed with entitlement to land, women have been and still are responsible for and in control of food cultivation and preparation (Alpers 1975: 16, Hirschmann & Vaughan 1984: 9–13, Mandala 1982: 30). Writing about the matrilineal Makuwa of northern Mozambique (adjacent to southern Malawi), Arnfred (2007: 148–9) has pointed out that women’s cooking should not be equated with the low status that this housewife’s task has in the

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23 Although divorce is common, most men easily find a new wife or even wives (see next chapter). Therefore, men can be relatively assured of their access to food and need not grow maize themselves.
Western context. Food, she emphasizes, is a prestigious domain of power. Although this power domain has diminished in strength over the years, as discussed in the previous chapter, it has not vanished. With this right to land and thus food, comes, however, the strongly felt and upheld moral obligation of a woman to feed her husband, children, and other household members. It indeed appears from our data that a Mudzi woman can refuse to warm the water for her husband’s bath, refrain from conversing, and reject sexual advances, but to deny him a plate of nsima is under no circumstances considered acceptable [P2 0125, 1303, 1403; P3 0550, 3316–9, 3850].

In an attempt to formally lay down Yao marital law, Ibik (1970: 19) recorded that a Yao woman’s duties in marriage consist of exclusive sexual and domestic services towards her husband. Mitchell (1962: 37) writes that when he studied the Yao in the 1940s, these duties were conceived of as a whole, so that even cooking for another man than a husband is considered adultery. My data confirm that this is still the case today [e.g. P2 1392].

When asked about the main differences between men and women, several Mudzi women remarked that when both return home after having worked in the field, men sit down to relax while women still have to fetch water and firewood, put out water for her husband to wash his body, prepare and serve food, and wash dishes and pots [P3 2937, 2982, 3122, 3337-8, 3646]. Throughout Malawi, women indeed carry the brunt of daily chores (Mathiassen et al. 2007: 37), as they are expected to perform most agricultural tasks, domestic tasks (fetching water, collecting firewood, cooking, and cleaning the house, compound, kitchen utensils, and clothes), and child-rearing tasks.

Mudzi men and women furthermore feel that good wives are not talkative or rude. During initiation rites and upon marriage, women are instructed to always respect and abide their husband [P3 2676, 3285–6, 3387–8]. Development sector reports often mention this point as indication that Malawian women suffer from severe gender inequality (e.g. White et al. 2005). These reports overlook the fact that men, at least those in Mudzi, are during initiation and upon marriage also formally instructed to listen to, respect, and care for their wives [P2 2042; P3 0506, 2676, 3283–6, 3389]. An example of how this may work out in practice came from Rosemary (49). She had decided to divorce her second husband – who displeased her anyway because he never helped in the field – when he one day denied her request to carry some water to the bafa for her when she was ill and tired from hard work. Indeed it was a female task to do so, but she felt “it was not showing respect” that her husband refused to assist now that she was weak and exhausted. She complained to the chief, who fined the man with buying clothes for Rosemary and her children, and accepted her divorce request [P3 0506].

Despite this example, it seems that overall, women’s social position depends on conformation to prescribed gender norms to a greater extent it does for men – a point I return to shortly.
The features of a good husband mentioned most by Mudzi women entail helping to cultivate the fields, providing money for soap and clothes, and building and maintaining the house, kitchen, bathing place, maize granary, and pit-latrine [P2 0550, 0992, 1456; P3 0548, 0747, 1563, 3766, 3793, 3841, 3847, 3858, 3863, 3927, 3937, 3945, 3970, 3994, 4002, 4004, 4006, 4011, 4018, 4019, 4020]. Furthermore, Mudzi women prefer that their husbands do not have other wives [P3 0732, 0742, 2586, 3839, 3992]. Features mentioned more sporadically concerned refraining from violence, being nice to his wife’s children (also if they are not his), helping his family-in-law, abstaining from alcohol, discussing important decisions with his wife, and taking her or their children to the hospital when necessary [P3 0732, 0742, 0747, 0824, 0841, 2586, 3432-3, 3790, 3990, 4000, 4002, 4011, 4018]. However, in practice few men live up to these characteristics of an ideal husband. Many women complain that their husbands do not (sufficiently) help them in the field, fail to generate money, spend income elsewhere, like women too much, or quarrel often.

One possible explanation for men’s frequent failure to live up to their side of the ‘gender contract’ was already touched upon in the previous chapter. It may, on the one hand, have to do with the vanishing of many of men’s arguably most masculine tasks and a narrowing down of their responsibilities to a task that is increasingly hard to accomplish: income generation. On the other hand, possibly as another side of the same coin, the household’s increasing need for money and men’s relatively exclusive access to it has made men respected members of the community – whether or not they conform to their prescribed gender roles (Arnfred 2001: 172).

Although seldom explicitly verbalized by my informants, the following fragment shows that fertility too is considered an important feature of a good husband:

Amila (33, five children, second marriage) is married to a man who prefers to spend his income on cigarettes and batteries for his radio rather than food or other necessities for his family. Much of the work in her field is done by Amila alone as her husband often refuses to help her. Nonetheless, when I asked Amila whether she considered him a good husband, her first response was that he is good indeed, because he has given her many children. [P3 3861]

According to Mitchell (1961: 50), among the Yao men were considered “merely a cockerel who begets children for the matrilineal group”. In this light it is surprising that men’s reproductive qualities were so rarely commented upon by my informants. The features of a good husband mentioned most by my informants – build a house, help in the field, and provide money for other necessities – function to facilitate a woman’s efforts in raising her children. Possibly, the fact that these

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24 As discussed in Chapter 2, Yao Muslims adopted only a “veneer layer” of Islam (Rangeley 1963: 25). Most do not abstain from alcohol.

25 In Chapter 5 on sexual relationships I will discuss under which conditions and circumstances these complaints may or may not lead women to instigate divorce.

26 A man’s failure to reproduce is not insurmountable, however. In the past at least a stand-in, called ‘fisi’, could in such cases be hired to do the job (Ibik 1970: 18, White et al. 2005: 30).
are mentioned rather than procreation itself stems from the fact that these tasks, contrary to impregnation, are often avoided by Mudzi women's husbands.

When Mudzi men and women perform a task traditionally assigned to the opposite sex – a married man fetching water [P3 0854] or a woman constructing a fence [P3 0976], they are ridiculed or scolded by their fellow villagers27 (see also Manda nd). As seems to have been the case throughout Bantu history, men and women have fairly separate life-worlds, and different social roles [see e.g. P3 3196-7, 3203-4, 3260]. Extensive interaction between members of the opposite sex is rare, and contact between men and women remains formal, even within marriage. This 'separateness' may be exemplified by the fact that whatever community meeting I would attend throughout the country when still employed at ICRISAT, men and women always sat in two different groups (see also Aguilar & Birch de Aguilar 1993). It has been argued that Malawians' general aversion to deviating from such behavioural gender norms stems from a deep-rooted fear that this will upset the ancestor spirits and so bring about misfortune (e.g. Manda nd). It may have been reinforced by the binary (hierarchical) gender ideology that Banda so vigorously promoted (see Chapter 2). My data furthermore suggest that both men and women seem to feel they have something to gain by upholding the prevalent 'gender contract'. Men prefer women to remain responsible for working the land and preparing their daily meals, while women prefer men to struggle to find cash – a point to which I return further on.

It is generally said, by social scientists, policy makers, and Mudzi villagers alike, that men have greater access to money than women. This is one of the assumptions underlying the transactional sex paradigm, the validity of which is assessed in this study. Throughout this book I will argue that this claim is, at least to some extent, upheld and emphasized by women to put to their advantage. In the following I assess Mudzi men’s actual access to income.

27 Despite the fairly strict gender contract, it seems that in some cases a gender-specific responsibility can be shifted into the realm of the other sex, as suggested by the following. It puzzled me that most women were willing to have their maize ground at the fuel-generated mill at a cost, while money is so scarce and the grinding can be done by hand too. Similar other technologies introduced to lighten women’s labour burden and more generally improve livelihood security have often not taken up by the women. This was the case, for example, with the clay cooking stoves that Mudzi women were taught to handcraft by an NGO during our fieldwork period. The stoves significantly reduced the amount of firewood needed for cooking, yet none of the women used the stove more than a few times. The reasons they gave when I inquired were little enlightening. Most just shrugged their shoulders, mumbling that they had had no time to grab the stove this time, but might do so another day. Improved technologies developed by agricultural scientists are another example, as these are rarely adopted by the poor small-scale farmers intended to benefit from them. The reason that one Mudzi women gave for this concerned the importance attached to upholding and passing on the practices of the ancestors [P3 2674]. Nevertheless, when the first maize mills were introduced, women were en masse willing to give up their old ways and even pay for the new service [P3 1123]. A possible explanation for this may be found in the fact that by doing so, they shifted the task of grinding from the women's domain of food production to men's domain of money. Women are still the ones to carry the maize back and forth to the mill, but the money needed for grinding can be demanded from men.
• Male access to money
As discussed in the previous chapter, since the colonial era men have been privileged in their access to education\textsuperscript{28} and waged labour. Nonetheless, in an underdeveloped economy like Malawi’s, jobs are hard to come by even for men. As mentioned, a number of Mudzi men have migrated to South Africa in search of employment. They tend to be very secretive about the work they do abroad [\textit{P2} 1635; \textit{P3} 0364, 2862, 4019], leading Mudzi villagers to assume that their tasks are dirty or dumb, and most likely both. Only one migrant was open about his activities, sending regular photographs of himself in full attire at the fuel station where he works as filling attendant – clearly a job to be proud of.

The few Mudzi-based men who are employed outside the village work as gate-men (guards), builders, or teachers. Their salaries are small although still substantial in village terms, but tend to be paid irregularly. Formal minimum wage for day labourers in Malawi is 100 MK.\textsuperscript{29} A gate-man makes about 3000 MK\textsuperscript{30} a month, a builder is only paid when certain stages of the work have been accomplished, and a primary school teacher may earn up to 10,000 MK.\textsuperscript{31} The majority of men has no steady employment and tries to access the money that circulates in their direct surroundings through self-employment. Some of the young, able-bodied men who possess bikes at times cycle over thirty kilometres to the nearest lakeshore to buy fresh fish, which they sell on their way back, and in and around Mudzi. Two elderly men make mats, one has a bicycle repair shop, one makes shoes, another makes hoes, and one has a mini-grocery store. All of them are in business only on and off, as they need (and do not always have) investment money to purchase the necessary materials or merchandise. Many men hire out their labour on a piecemeal basis to work on other farmers’ fields when money is needed and such labour is in demand. As mentioned, some have their own plot of land on which mainly cotton is grown for sale. Examples abound, however, of husbands who disappeared with the revenue of their cotton (sometimes grown together with their wives), only to show up again days later without any money left [\textit{P3} 0550, 0608, 2791, 2943–4, 2951, 2999–3000, 3088–93, 3310–1, 3377–8, 3468–9, 3613, 3766, 4018]. In sum, most Mudzi husbands have no regular income at their disposal, and when they have money they are not always willing to invest it in their (often temporary and thus always insecure) marital relationship.

\textsuperscript{28} Today few girls in Mudzi attend school, but boys seem to go even less. I have not thoroughly investigated this point, and base this estimation on a series of photographs that I took at the primary school nearest to Mudzi, which shows significantly more girls than boys per class. Several adolescent Mudzi girls were discouraged from attending school by their caretakers, who feared that the girls would end up pregnant and felt that the girls’ future would be more secure if they focussed on finding a proper husband instead [\textit{P2} 1744, 2030, 2042; \textit{P3} 1196].

\textsuperscript{29} Equivalent to half a Euro at the time of the research.

\textsuperscript{30} Equivalent to approximately 15 Euro at the time of the research.

\textsuperscript{31} Equivalent to approximately 50 Euro at the time of the research.
“As head he must provide” – women’s power(ful) discourse

In Chapter 1, I brought forward a ‘new’ matrilineal puzzle. This puzzle concerns the seeming contradiction between the relatively strong livelihood base of women in matrilineal and matrilocal organized communities and their claim to need male support. Part of this puzzle is the discrepancy between the apparent power balance in the traditional gender contract, and women’s persistent discourse on male superiority. Throughout Africa, scholars have noted women’s ostentatious display of deference to men.

Mudzi women repetitively emphasized that men are in general stronger, braver, and smarter than women33 [P3 2344, 3160, 3173, 3182, 3186, 3282, 3407–9, 3578, 3603, 3624, 3635, 3671, 3860, 3864]. Invariably, women described their husbands as the *akulu*

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32 The mini-grocery store is run by the (long-term) husband of Jasmine (57). He generally does not share his income with her, but does live on the foods from her field, which he helps to cultivate. His wife and live-in adult daughter both complain that he just sits on his money. They do not know what he spends it on. At any rate, his sales are sporadic and his profit can only be marginal.

33 Although infrequently, women at times also voiced condescending remarks about men, as did as Mery (74, widowed): “Ah, women are more intelligent! They stay at home, cook, and are satisfied. They just work hard in their fields, meanwhile trying to guide their husbands on what to do. While men just do things without thinking, they are all over the place, moving around, only thinking about drinking beer. When a woman advises him, he just says: ‘Don’t tell me what to do! I know everything!’ That’s why so many women in Mudzi are not married even though they are being proposed to!” [P3 3610–3].
(the elder) or mutu wa banja (head of the family) [P3 0529, 0746, 3191, 3249–50, 3286, 3670]. As a sign of respect to their husband, women kneel down when speaking or listening to him. Conversely, this is not expected of men addressing their wife (they do kneel or squat when interacting with someone higher up in the formal hierarchy, e.g. an elderly man or woman).

Although a woman’s kneeling when formally addressing her husband may seem a clear indication of her subordinate social position, this need not necessarily be interpreted so. As several anthropologists have pointed out, women’s performative subservience is in many African societies “a façade hiding a considerable degree of equality between the sexes” (Baerends 1994: 17). Writing about the matrilineal Kwahu in Ghana, Van der Geest (1975) argues that both women and men subscribe to a portrayal of female subordination and male superiority in ‘exchange’ for women’s private powerful position and men’s lack of power over their wives and children. Audrey Richards (1969 [1940]: 92), who studied the matrilineal Bemba of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in the 1930s, wittily reverses the perspective, and so helps to better comprehend the confusing coexistence of women’s submissive appearance with their actual position of power:

A Native of this tribe would probably have been astonished to see a Victorian gentleman pick up his wife’s handkerchief when she had let it fall, allow her to pass first through the door and serve her first at meals, when he might have discovered that the same husband was an undisputed patriarch in his home and the sole legal guardian of the children, and that his wife was entirely dependent economically upon him. How inconsistent, he might have argued, to combine a rather extreme form of patriarchal authority with an outward show of giving precedence to the wife.

The outward show, then, may be interpreted as a normative form of courtesy from the more towards the less powerful. In Malawi, politeness and respect indeed continue to be highly valued, not only between generations and sexes, but in all social interactions. This high value attached to politeness could support the hypothesis that deference towards the weaker-positioned sex functions to compensate otherwise demeaning displays of dominance. However, concluding from this that Malawian women are thus the stronger sex too would be misleading. As I will try to make clear throughout this book, the power balance between the men and women of Mudzi is complex and multi-layered, with neither sex holding the ultimate power. Both men and women have something to offer that the opposite

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34 Interestingly, in ChiChewa the same metaphor is used as in English. Mutu literally refers to the corporeal head of a human body. It would be worth investigating whether the term was adopted from the English colonialists or missionaries, who, as discussed in Chapter 2, introduced patriarchal ideas about domestic gender roles.


36 According to Richards the Yao of Malawi and the Bemba of Zambia have comparable kinship and marriage systems (Richards 1967 [1950]: 230).
sex needs, but individual husbands and wives can be relatively easily replaced, diluting the negotiating power of each group.

Looking more closely at Mudzi women’s comments gives some indications to what they may try to imply by insisting that men are stronger, braver, and smarter. Often, such statements form part of the explanations given about why men are more successful at generating money [e.g. P3 2344, 3173, 3182, 3282, 3407–9, 3578, 3603, 3860].

To the discourse on natural male superiority some women added that men are also socially and culturally better positioned to earn money. They are, for example, more likely to finish school while girls tend to get pregnant and drop out [P3 3869], and can move around freely while women must remain near their compound to look after the children [P3 3050, 3434-5]. The following quotes suggest that it is this task of the husband to provide for the household that grants him a formal position of authority:

Chistina (34): “By nature a husband is the head of the family, so we listen to him. Women who are married depend on their husbands, for example when you lack salt, you can tell your husband. Even during hunger season you tell him that the maize flour has finished.” [P3 3249–50, see also 3288]

Agnessi (42): “We find money together but women don’t have power or responsibility, men are the ones who have got responsibility. They protect it [the money] as head of the family because they buy everything that is needed at home.” [P3 3466–7]

As a matter of fact, Agnessi’s comment is in stark contrast with the reality of daily life. Indeed, as noted by Agnessi, and further elaborated upon in Chapter 8, not only men, but women too, have means to generate money. But unlike Agnessi’s statement, men and women tend to keep their incomes strictly separate. Furthermore, the “things needed at home” that Agnessi refers to are in practice more often bought by women themselves than by their husbands. The claim that men, as household heads, guard all money and pay all household expenses simply does not hold. Rather than reflecting common practice, women’s discourse on male superiority reflects prevalent gender norms (whether or not these are age-old, or have been shaped through time by external patriarchal influences, as discussed in the previous chapter). It could be hypothesized that women’s persistent reproduction of the norm is, consciously or not, a means to an end. By positioning men as (best suited as) household head, women can hold them responsible for providing and claim support from them. Women, they feel themselves, should not have to generate money. They should instead find a husband to do this for them. As Saida (aged 28) explained: “We women don’t like to do ganyu, [we are] thinking: ‘No, we have a husband for that.’ That’s how it is in village life…” [P3 3646, also P3 3242–4, 3860]. It seems that the responsibility for generating money is, although not always successfully, preferably put on men’s shoulders.

Although a husband is supposed to provide for his wife and children, it is not taken for granted that he does so wholeheartedly, as his loyalties and affections are likely to lie with his matrikin in the village where he grew up. Women’s carefully
deferent attitude towards men may therefore also stem from a sense of gratitude for what is perceived as a man’s self-sacrificing, having abandoned his home and kin to help a non-related woman [e.g. P3 3205–6] (see also Drews 1991: 90). It might be argued that particularly women in matrilineally and matrilocaly organized communities have reason to fervently reproduce and emphasize the cultural script that a husband must provide material and physical support. After all, it is her household that needs money, her compound that needs maintenance, and her field that needs clearance – rather than his or even theirs. As the marriage bond is generally fragile and insecure, a man can never be certain to pick the future fruits of his investment. A man’s commitment to investing in his partner’s household is therefore highly appreciated as a sign of his seriousness about their relationship. In the next chapter I further elaborate on men’s material care as both expression of and prerequisite for emotional attachment.

Another factor leading women to generally treasure their husband may be men’s relative scarcity. In Mudzi women outnumber men, as can be concluded from the fact that all men in Mudzi have a wife, while about one-third of the female population does not have a husband [P3 2957, 3127–8, 3426]. Some informants suggested that the scarcity of men results from a different birth ratio [P3 0307, 3490–1]. More likely, however, the unequal ratio of men and women is related to extensive male outmigration to find waged labour in towns, on estates, or abroad. The imbalance has led to severe competition among women over men [P2 0028–9, 0320, 0867, 1208, 1408–9, 1895, 1901, 1908, 1940; P3 1139, 1160, 1563, 3495–8, 3817, 4104]. Rivalling over (potential) husbands, women generally feel little loyalty towards their fellow village women [P2 0867, 1529–30, 1894, 1940; P3 2761]. “Men,” one female informant stated, “only belong to their mother, never to any wife” [P2 1894]. As can be expected from this view, wives suffer competition not only from other (potential) partners of their husband, but also from his mother and sisters [P2 1146, 1152, 1161, 1490, 1706, 1714; P3 1505, 1759, 3976]. This competition becomes particularly visible when a man gains access to resources [P2 1152, 1161, 1706, 1714; P3 3976].

In sum, it may be in an attempt to tie a man to them and seduce him into supporting their household that women willingly subscribe to the ideology of male superiority. By paying due respect to their husband as ‘household head’, women can emphasize and try to capitalize on his normative role as provider. To what extent, or under which circumstances, this would be a conscious process I dare not say. I suspect that in many cases women just follow the behavioural norms they were taught and see practiced around them. Not doing so would lead to public scolding or covert disapproval from others, and reprisals from the ‘wronged’ husband. Nonetheless, some comments from Mudzi women (mentioned earlier in this chapter and presented in further chapters) suggest that they are well aware of the advantages attached to keeping men responsible for the arduous task of finding household money.
Conclusion

One important characteristic of Mudzi village is its predominantly matrilineal and matrilocal organization. The basic principles of this organizing system have remained essentially unaltered throughout time, although it is important to note that the practice has probably never strictly followed the norm – as goes for all human behaviour. Descent in Mudzi is generally traced via the female bloodline and loyalty continues to be felt most strongly towards the matrikin. Land is still largely in women’s hands, and the related responsibility to produce and prepare food remains an exclusively female right and obligation. Logically – considering the fact that women are tied to a specific location, most men still join their wife’s homestead after marriage (and leave again after divorce).

A strict division of duties and responsibilities between the sexes direct women and men towards a general preference to be married, so as to supplement to each other’s tasks and assets. An actual, positive link between marital status and livelihood security can, however, only be discerned in the cases of couples who have stayed together for a long time, indicating commitment from both husband and wife to each other and their household. Not often, however, do men diligently perform the tasks they are expected to as husbands. Despite the general assumption that men have greater access to money, few men in Mudzi actually manage to generate sufficient money on a regular basis or are motivated to do so. Nonetheless, women persistently hold on to a rhetoric of men’s responsibility – even their superior innate suitability – to provide for their households. As suggested, this may be a (direct or indirect, conscious or sub-conscious) attempt to pressure husbands into taking up this male duty.

The second main characteristic of Mudzi is its overall, high level of food and livelihood insecurity. The villagers are still largely dependent on homegrown food and cash crops – which is favourable to Mudzi women’s power base compared to that of women in more money-oriented settings, such as cities. Nonetheless, also in Mudzi access to money is essential for survival, as a result of multiple factors that have deteriorated Malawi’s agricultural productivity (discussed in the previous chapter).

The severe poverty of Mudzi villagers has influenced, not to say challenged, the data collection process of this study, as will be discussed in the next chapter on the research methodology. The dynamics of daily life in the village that I described in this chapter, however, also created opportunities for gaining unsolicited access to rich data, which will also be explained in the following chapter.
Knitting narratives: Research methodology

Introduction

To assess the validity and value of any research finding, knowledge of how exactly it was attained is a first requirement. In the case of this study, the data collection process has been far from straightforward. Because of these two reasons I feel it is justified to devote a full chapter to elaborating upon my research methodology.

The importance of methodological accounting became particularly clear to me when I began to notice that the various research methods I used led to divergent and even contradictory outcomes. My research results were apparently conditioned by the methods through which they were collected. This was obviously frustrating and problematic, yet at the same time informative, as will be explained further on. To enhance the accuracy of my findings I switched between and combined different methods, ‘triangulating’ my data.¹ Some of the methods I applied intentionally while others developed spontaneously. In this chapter I discuss each of the methods used, as well as other factors that have been of relevance to the process of data collection and analysis.

The lack of a predetermined structure that characterizes this study’s data collection process was intentional, at least to some extent. I did not want to restrict my investigation to the topics that I presumed were potentially related to my research question, rightfully fearing that this would lead me to miss out on important but unexpected explanatory factors. Instead I wanted to grasp as fully as possible all of women’s daily life considerations, in order to be able to frame their sexual choices within the appropriate wider context. Although the direction of the research was instigated by a clear hypothesis to be tested, I had no particular set of

¹ An example of such triangulation already appeared in the previous chapter, where I described how I combined qualitative and quantitative data to categorize Mudzi households based on their relative position on the poverty spectrum.
theories in mind to guide the data collection process. In the social sciences, such an approach is called ‘grounded research’ – meaning that theory is formed during and through the analysis of field data and relevant literature (Glaser & Strauss 1967).²

To allow for such a holistic point of departure, I opted for a classical ethnographic case-study approach. According to Robert Yin (2003) the case study approach is particularly suited for studying complex, contemporary social phenomena that cannot be easily distinguished from their real-life context. The interaction between livelihood insecurity and sexual relationship choices may well be considered such a phenomenon. By restricting the study of complex, interwoven phenomena to a bounded case, it becomes manageable. In this study, the ‘case’ is one particular village community that I have called Mudzi. The classical ethnographic aspect of my case study approach entailed living among the research population for an extended period of time, building rapport through informal interaction and participation in everyday activities, and so gaining insights into the overall daily lives of those under study. By making these choices, I traded off generalizability to in-depth thoroughness, efficiency to inclusiveness, orderliness to flexibility, systemicity to serendipity. I did not anticipate the hardship that came with this endeavour, which required surrendering to methodological uncertainty and full submersion into a tough field,³ but on hindsight I believe it has been worthwhile.

The harsh living circumstances in Mudzi, described in the previous chapter, led to a precarious research situation. Studying a population in crisis, or on the edge of survival, triggers ethical doubts, feelings of guilt and shame, and internal conflicts about longing to help while also wishing to understand how life is usually lived without that help. The fact that I embodied potential help and hope further complicated things. Villagers shrewdly attempted to gain support through me by (over)emphasizing their deprivation and enviously competing with each other over my attention, keeping a close watch on my every step and especially anything that might reveal the privileging of another villager⁴ [e.g. P2 0155, 1206, 1227, 1475, 1637; In its most radical form, grounded research is not preceded by any hypothesis or literature review. As described in Chapter 1, this does not apply to my research. Nonetheless, my choice to let the fieldwork (to a certain extent) ‘take its own course’ instead of departing from well-defined theoretical and methodological frameworks, makes it appropriate to use the classification ‘grounded’. I had done similar fieldwork before in Guatemala, where I spent six months living in a small village community to conduct ethnographic research. However, for reasons discussed in this chapter, I experienced the fieldwork in Malawi to be much more taxing.

An example of this is the Mudzi woman who during our fieldwork gave birth to twins. Soon after this, she was left by the babies’ father. The woman’s breasts were clearly too empty to feed both babies properly. I found it very difficult to refrain from helping this woman by buying her some cans of milk powder. Other women must have noted my temptation and were very explicit about its repercussions, threatening that they would all come to demand support if I would help this one mother, as they all had babies and they all suffered [P2 1206, 1227]. And they were quite right at that. It would have been unethical, not to mention jeopardized my position, to help only some while not others. Eventually I did find ways to assist some women that I pitied in particular, including these twins’ mother among others, by paying them to help us fetch or cut firewood, or recruiting them as research assistants (see Chapter 7).
These factors called for inventive research methods and constant caution about safeguarding my position as an independent researcher equally interested in all but without intention or means to actually help all. The harsh living circumstances furthermore challenged my study results simply because part of my energy too was directed at mere survival.

A significant role in the data collection process was played by my research assistant Gertrude Finyiza, a young Malawian woman who responded to the job advertisement I placed in one of the national newspapers. She turned out to be much more than the Yao translator and housekeeper that I was looking for, assisting me also as a cultural broker, data collector, and friend. More than I, a white foreigner unaccustomed to most of what our informants considered normal, she became an entrusted and valued ‘fellow villager’, who always managed to uphold a balance between assimilating with the community and maintaining a detached position as researcher. Her ‘insider’ stories about what had been discussed at the water pump or by villagers coming by for a chat with her, the conversations of the many women that eventually joined me in being taught how to knit by Gertrude, and her reflection upon what occurred around us have all been of invaluable help to my understanding of Mudzi life. In this chapter I therefore also elaborate upon Gertrude and her indispensable role in this study. Whether or not to include the casual remarks that villagers made to Gertrude, some of which may have been intended as confidential, into my data set obviously led to ethical deliberations, which too are discussed in this chapter.

Research approach

Public health research, including that related to HIV and AIDS, continues to rely heavily on survey-based methods for data collection. These methods have clear advantages over qualitative research, such as the already mentioned efficiency and potential for large scale, but also the relatively easy analysis of (numerical and comparable) data (see also Carvalho & White 1997, Scrimshaw 1990). However, as argued by many other social scientists,5 in Mudzi I found that quantitative data on its own, without sufficient contextualization and triangulation, was inadequate for obtaining a reasonably representative impression of (an aspect of) village life. In this section I describe the study’s data collection process, including the problems we encountered with structured6 interviews, our attempts to overcome these, and the leaps of faith that together shaped my research methodology.

I have often clarified my research purposes in Mudzi, repeatedly verified villagers’ willingness to participate, stressed that they were free not to answer our questions,

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6 By ‘structured’ I mean that the same set of questions was asked of each interviewee (as Bennett & George 1997: 3).
and asked permission to use their photographs in the final research report. Yet I am quite sure that most Mudzi villagers have no means to fully understand what they consented to (see also Zaman & Nahar 2011: 154). Many might still agree if they did know what exactly their permission entailed – they might care less that their names and faces would be circulated among a small group of academics far away, while others might even feel proud about it (see also Van der Geest 2011: 148). Nevertheless I consider it right to safeguard their privacy by changing all names, including that of the village itself, and to not link names to the pictures that I use. Further personal information of informants, such as age, marital status, and number of children, has mostly been left unaltered. Only in a few cases, when recognition would be possible on the basis of some unique details, have I changed such details to protect the privacy of the person(s) in question.

Moving to the village
Before Gertrude and I settled in Mudzi, I undertook two village-level studies commissioned by ICRISAT concerning farmers’ adoption of one of its improved groundnut varieties. My supervisors at the institute felt uncomfortable with me staying overnight in localities without facilities that were close to middle-class, urban standards, and, after many attempts to persuade them, agreed only if my expeditions did not take longer than one week at a time. In total I spent six weeks in the two villages, one in central Malawi, the other in the deep south. These studies allowed me to acquaint myself with village life and so functioned as a pilot study for the longer-term research in Mudzi.

In the two pilot study villages I lived with a family and could observe the daily life routines within a household – something I was not able to witness as up-close and personal during my stay in Mudzi. Despite the privilege of being part of a family, I found it taxing to constantly be at the whim and mercy of others. In Mudzi, I therefore requested and was allocated a private house for Gertrude and me by the Group Village Headwoman, on the border between Mudzi A and B, next to the path connecting the two villages. The house, which belonged to the Group Village Head’s son now working in South Africa, was one of the better-looking houses in the village: relatively big, divided into four rooms with half-high walls, and with an iron-sheet roof. One of the rooms had been used to lock up the goats at night, and it took quite some time before we got rid of the smell. In this room we stored our pots and hoes. Gertrude and I both had our own separate bedroom. We

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7 As I describe further on, during the three years prior to undertaking this PhD study I worked in Malawi as a social scientist at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT).
8 I had intended to be sleeping on a bamboo mat, just like most villagers. To my relief, however, I found a bed standing in the otherwise empty house. Only when guests came to visit (several curious, in-country expat friends, and advisor Sjaak van der Geest), did I take out my bamboo mat to sleep on.
were supplied with a table and two chairs, and I had brought a cupboard that could be locked to safeguard our belongings – these filled the fourth space.

Like most houses ours had a veranda in front, and two separate little structures behind it. One contained firewood and three stones to cook on, the other many insects and a mere hole in the ground – our pit-latrine. In front of this latrine a grass fence was put up, behind which we washed ourselves.

None of the houses in Mudzi had running water or electricity. Gertrude went to fetch water at the water pump almost daily; I joined her only occasionally – for reasons to be explained later. To charge my mobile phone and the small laptop I brought for data storage, I installed a solar panel on our roof. Despite the many hours in full sunlight, it took about two days of charging to have the laptop running for two hours. Most of our data are therefore handwritten. Towards the end of the fieldwork period I hired an assistant to enter Gertrude’s and my journal entries into the computer.

I paid the Group Village Headwoman a monthly rent of 2000 Kwacha, almost 10 Euros at the time. For this price we also had access to some of the land around the house, on which we planted maize, pumpkins, peas, groundnuts, and sweet potatoes. After some time in the village, I ordered the local bike mechanic to make
us two bicycles from the parts he had laying around, which took him some time because he did not have enough parts for two full bicycles and needed to travel to Balaka several times for extra parts. But when he had finally managed to assemble the bikes, we spent our time more efficiently as it took less time to visit far-away households, the markets and clinics in the area, and even Balaka (a good two-hour, bumpy ride).

My arrival in Mudzi stirred up quite some commotion, of which I only came aware later. It made the Group Village Headwoman and the Village Heads of Mudzi A and B nervous because they felt responsible for our safety while fearing that the presence of a mzungu in a simple, unprotected house would surely attract malevolent attention [P3 0256]. Also lay villagers worried that my presence would attract thieves to their community [P2 0754]. Only upon our departure did the Group Village Headwoman tell us that she had been called twice to the sub-Traditional Authority (one rank above her on the hierarchical ladder) to justify her acceptance of my presence, because she should know that azungu are notorious for blood stealing [P3 2848]. Other villagers too were scared that I had come to steal their blood [P3 0572, 2360]. Not surprisingly then, several asked Gertrude if she was not afraid to share a house with me, and whether it caused her nightmares to sleep so near to me [P2 2071]. A number of young children burst into tears each time they saw me, making me suspect that their parents used me as a bogeyman in their child-raising endeavours.

As time went by, the initial anxiety calmed down, until eventually, towards the end of our fieldwork, women began to worry about our upcoming departure, wondering out loud what they were to do with their afternoons if they could no longer come to chat, knit, or play a bawo game at our house [P3 0890, 1425, 1740, 1923].

**Trial and error data collection**

The first mistake I made when starting my life in Mudzi village was to come in an impressive four-wheel-drive car with the ICRISAT logo on its doors. After this it did not matter how often I emphasized that I was sent NOT to start up a project but merely to understand what daily life in a Malawian village entails. The simple fact that I was connected to an organization made many villagers believe that one day I would confess that I had tricked them about my neutrality so as to spy on who really deserved support and who not, and help those identified as needy [e.g. P2 0071; P3 0537, 0557, 1019, 1532, 1936]. They hoped and expected that I would bring them maize during the hunger season, fertilizer at planting time, and blankets during the cold season. But I disappointed them time and again. Some argued among each other,

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9 A Swahili word originally meaning ‘someone who wanders around aimlessly’, now also in Malawi widely used to denote white foreigners. Plural: azungu.
Gertrude overheard, that I had indeed emphasized from the beginning that I would not come with handouts or start a project \[P2 1206, 1227; P3 2487\]. Yet they all found it difficult to understand why on earth I would give up my surely comfortable life to suffer with them, asking them so many questions about their impoverished lives if it were not for some form of aid \[P2 0071; P3 0537, 0557, 1532\]. This suspicion logically influenced the image that my respondents wanted to create of themselves.

It took some time before I noticed the discrepancy between the answers I got during my interviews and what I observed. After I was granted permission by the District Commissioner, the Group Village Head, and Village Heads to undertake my study in Mudzi, I requested all inhabitants to be gathered. I had written and learned by heart a full speech in ChiChewa, in which I explained my intentions and thanked them beforehand for their hospitality. I was not specific about my research focus on women’s motivations for (risky) sexual relationships, as I anticipated that this delicate issue would scare off potential informants, and might stir up gossip about those willing to talk to me. Instead I broadly explained that I wanted to understand daily life in a Malawian village – which was indeed my intention, as noted earlier, so as to contextualize women’s sexual choices. I warned the villagers that I would be asking many questions, because life here would be very different from what I was used to, and I stressed that they were at all times free not to answer. No one ever objected to answering though. But their answers, as I found later, were often tactical rather than truthful.

I had intended to develop a quantitative database, with a number of demographic details on all the adult women in Mudzi village, which I would then supplement with information gathered throughout the research period. Hence, Gertrude and I started out with a basic set of questions for each woman on issues like her age, marital history, size of household, size of land, amount of maize stored (see Appendix 2 for full list of questions). At several occasions throughout the year we visited all households again to ask questions related to that specific period. For example at planting time we passed through the village asking all women what they were planting, how they had accessed the seeds, et cetera. I then used the opportunity to also ask them what they had been eating the previous day, since this was the hunger season. If they answered they had eaten porridge or nsima, we would ask about the source of the maize, and if bought, the source of the money to buy it with.

The first interesting point revealed by the baseline interviews was that the total number of households in Mudzi A and B was substantially smaller than officially registered. Based on the official household list that I received through the District Commissioner I had expected to find 74 households in Mudzi A, and an approximately equal number of adult women. However, when passing by all the houses I encountered no more than 37. As discussed in Chapter 3, I solved this reduction in number of respondents by adding Mudzi B to my sample, of approximately the same size. Both villages had until recently been parts of the
same village, are adjacent, and to this day share one water pump and one graveyard. The inhabitants of Mudzi B were relieved that they were included in whatever project or handouts might come from my presence, while those of Mudzi A seemed disappointed that they now had to share whatever was coming.

Another early mistake I made was not to bother the Group Village Headwoman with my list of questions – which I did out of respect. On hindsight the correct sign of respect would have been to interview her before anyone else. My negligence led to anxiety among the other villagers [e.g. P3 1434], who feared the anger of the Group Village Head. Several therefore came to beg me to interview her too, or ‘register’ as they called it. I then duly did so, elaborately apologizing for my delay in approaching her, and she seemed pleased. According to the answers that she gave, she should be classified as one of the poorest members of the village, with barely any land or food stores. In the days after this interview the Group Village Head sent relatives from other villages to ‘register’ with me too. I was left little choice but to ask them the same set of questions that I had posed to all Mudzi women, as always preceded by an explanation about the purpose of the interview. In this introduction I explicitly emphasized that there would be no future benefit in it for them, that I merely hoped for their willingness to assist me in helping me understand village life.

One likely explanation for the initial eagerness to be interviewed was that everybody soon heard about the small gifts I had brought to our first interviews. As a token of my appreciation of their time and patience I gave each interviewee a 500-gram bag of salt and a bar of soap after the baseline interview. Gifting to respondents is frowned upon by some social scientists, who feel that this ‘buying of answers’ could compromise the authenticity and reliability of data by encouraging informants to tell the researcher what they think he or she wants to hear (Weinreb et al. 1998: 10–11). I found it ethically immoral, however, to extract personal information from respondents for a cause that is unlikely to ever benefit them directly. I surely hope that my data and analyses will somehow contribute to improve the relevance and effectiveness of development interventions. Realistically, however, the impacts of this one individual study will be minimal at best, and most likely not be directed specifically at my informants. Rather, the one to benefit most from this study is me, as it offered me much desired insights on poverty dynamics at the grassroots level, and will further my academic career (and, as a matter of fact, that of Gertrude). To balance the scale somewhat in favour of my informants, and reciprocate for the insights I received from them, I decided to give gifts – which seems to have been the right choice as it was deeply appreciated [e.g. P2 0259–60; P3 2848–9], lowered suspicion about my intentions, and eased my discomfort about bothering villagers with my questions.10

10 See Bleek (1979) for a reflection on the dubiousness and difficulties of conducting fieldwork, and particularly so-called participant observation, when great social and economic inequality exists between the anthropologist and his or her research population.
The salt and soap gifts were probably one incentive for the Group Village Head and her relatives from outside of Mudzi village to insist on being interviewed. The other likely reason is revealed by their use of the word ‘registration’. To participate in projects or receive handouts, such as the subsidized fertilizer coupons distributed by the government, beneficiaries are usually first registered. To be sure not to miss out on a possible project or handouts that might follow from my enquiries, everybody wanted to be ‘registered’ by me.\footnote{For a Group Village Head in particular it is beneficial to have large numbers of people registered as village inhabitants. External aid providers generally assume that chiefs know best whom among their subjects are in most dire need of support, often leading them to have handouts distributed by the chiefs. Hence, the more registrants per chief, the more handouts this chief receives. As in the tributary system of the pre-colonial days, chiefs are locally entitled to redistribute the items among themselves and their followers as they see fit. Notably, a distribution considered strategic by a chief does not necessarily match the intended distribution of the aid provider.}

I entered the quantitative data collected through the interviews in an Excel spreadsheet for easy reference and comparison. The first time that I noticed we had been given incorrect information was when our neighbour told Gertrude that she was off to feed her pigs. During the interview, just a few days earlier, she had however claimed not to own any livestock [P3 0539]. I then corrected her answer in my Excel sheet. But when similar cases kept occurring I realized that I should not erase the incorrect information we were given at first, because it could actually be of interest to note on which topics the women were hiding or twisting the truth, and how. As Bleek (1987b) has argued in an article on lying informants: when people lie, it means that something important is at stake.

Bit by bit I came to understand that asking questions is generally considered impertinent, experienced as intrusive, and unlikely to yield useful results [e.g. P2 1262, 1602, 1887; P3 0254, 1224, 1227, 1509, 2497, 2525, 2544]. At the rare occasions that I would overhear someone asking a fellow villager a direct, personal question, the response was often a reprimand or evading answer [see also P3 1837]. Throughout each interview I could see Gertrude get more and more uncomfortable, and increasingly apologetic for the many questions we were asking [e.g. P3 0966, 2109, 1509]. This aversion against inquisitiveness – further analysed in Chapter 7 – combined with the assumption that there was something to gain from overstating their destitution, led to a largely untrustworthy database [P2 1227, 2078]. I suspect that women’s tactical answering was not only individually intentional, but often also the result of social pressure [e.g. P3 1936]. The community as a whole, and the Group Village Head in particular, would benefit from an impoverished and urgently-in-need image, to attract aid agents, development projects, and handouts.
The untruthful elements in the answers could in some cases be revealed through observation [e.g. P3 0539, 0975]. An example of this was the claim of one woman that she and her family were only eating mangoes at that time because they lacked maize. Gertrude and I saw her young daughters walk to the water pump each day, however, with piles of dirty pots and plates on their heads to wash [P3 1012]. At least eight women during the interviews claimed not to grow cotton for sale, yet were spotted planting, spraying, weeding, or harvesting cotton on their field, and selling their produce. Separately interviewing two women from the same household also brought out dissimilarities in their answers [P3 0511, 0552, 0975, 4107]. Especially regarding the assets that the household owned (e.g. number of blankets and livestock), the size of the current maize stores, and external sources of support, women apparently felt reluctant to tell the truth during the formal interview.

Many other falsities were exposed by the women themselves when talking to Gertrude. They seemed to consider her more akin to them than to me, and so at times as one of them rather than an extension of me as researcher. On one of our first days in Mudzi a group of women joined Gertrude and me on our veranda, and after some time started chatting amongst themselves. One teasingly asked a pregnant woman why it had now happened to her twice that a man impregnated and then abandoned her before she even gave birth. The one who asked this was then reprimanded by an older woman, saying these issues should not be discussed in front of outsiders. It did not take long however, before Gertrude came to be considered more of an insider. Especially at the water pump – the place for gossiping – Gertrude was told or overheard many eye-opening stories that contradicted or supplemented the answers given during the formal interviews. Women seemed no longer uncomfortable discussing their ‘private’ village matters with Gertrude present (and, later, not in my presence either). Gertrude, in turn, apparently did not feel uncomfortable to pass on to me what she was told or overheard. When I once enquired about this, she mentioned that she felt my wish to understand village life and particularly women’s decision-making processes was sincere, and appreciated my commitment to this end. My ethical doubts about taking as data the confidentialities that she passed on to me are considered further on.

Increasingly, women visited our house to greet us and chat – with Gertrude rather than me because of the language barrier (and probably the larger socio-cultural distance in general). I was often present though, and at times deliberately joined in the conversation to make clear that I was informed about what they told Gertrude. At times, the women would explicitly instruct Gertrude to translate to me what they had just said, to make sure I understood, especially when they thought it was very funny. Exactly to what extent they knew that and cared about whether Gertrude communicated everything they said to me cannot be ascertained. What has become clear though, is that in an informal setting women did not seem to make a great effort to keep up the lies they told us during the formal interviews.
Our growing realization that the formal interviews did not result in reliable data was strengthened by the comments of a small group of women from another village, who one day walked past our house. They discussed among each other that if I had picked their village and interviewed them, they would surely lie about everything to enhance their chances of obtaining support [P3 0483, see also P2 1749, 2007–19; P3 2216, 2529]. I had to acknowledge that the interviews, while straightforward in their planning, execution, and analysis, were in this case not an effective way to gather information, at least not on topics concerning wealth and poverty status.

The answers to my (more qualitative) questions on women’s marital history did, however, seem relevant and useful. I suspect that many women did not give a complete list of past relationships, but their accounts of how their relationships had started and ended were insightful – even if some of them may have been beside the truth. The courting, marriage, and divorce stories of all Mudzi women gathered through the interviews gave me a basic understanding of relationships from which to interpret the gossip, events, and choices that we heard of throughout the research period.

The demographic database did have some advantages, however. It helped me to identify women in a specific situation whenever I looked for these for further enquiry. For example, when I wondered about the reasons some women might have to settle in their husband’s home village of instead of their own – as traditionally prescribed and still usually practiced, I could easily track down the women who had answered during the interview that they were born outside Mudzi. It has provided me at least with a fairly complete set of reasonably reliable data on basic demographic givens from each Mudzi woman, such as (approximate) age, years of education, ethnic descent, religion, and house description. While the interviewing was thus not fully worthless, it did feel disruptive, unnatural, and uncomfortable. Instead of becoming more familiar, I sensed that the interviews enlarged the distance between me and the villagers, who looked apprehensive each time I appeared at their compounds with a notebook.

Johannes Fabian (1990) has argued against the assumption that informants (or anyone, for that matter) have readily discursive ‘information’ in their heads that

12 In the quantitative social sciences, the reliability of scientific observations includes the extent to which they can be replicated (Scrimshaw 1990: 89). In anthropology, this aspect is considered unfeasible, if only because most of the variables under study cannot be controlled. Rather, reliability of anthropological data can only refer to the extent to which respondents’ answers are truthful (Van der Geest, pers. comm.). Reliability, then, can only be ascertained and ‘measured’ through thorough knowledge of the particular respondent and his or her context (Bleek 1987b).

13 The same was found by Bleek (1987b) during his study of (among other things) birth control and abortions in rural Ghana, Rahman (1999: 34) during his study of women and microcredit in rural Bangladesh, and Wamoyi et al. (2010: 5) during their study of transactional sex in rural Tanzania.
can be uttered whenever asked for it. Collecting data merely through questioning people about issues outside of their context is thus not only problematic because it may be culturally inappropriate and so cause unease,\textsuperscript{14} and allows for twisting and hiding the truth. It is also problematic because people often have not thought out beforehand how they think or feel about certain issues, and why exactly they do so (see also Pool 1989: 29–31). Producing on the spot a clear statement that precisely, or even roughly, covers and conveys what one vaguely feels (or would feel if one were to take all the time needed to deliberate over a certain issue) is an art that few human beings master. It can therefore not be expected that informants’ accounts are always (or even ever) reliable representations of a truth – even when the informant had no intention of purposefully twisting his or her truth. Instead of an \textit{informative} approach to data collection, in which it is assumed that reliable data can be straightforwardly provided upon request, Fabian proposes a \textit{performative} approach. In his idea of performative ethnography, a researcher should create opportunities to interact with informants on the basis of ‘coevalness’ (i.e. on equal terms\textsuperscript{15}), and let knowledge be shaped during such processes of interaction. ‘Performance’ here does not only refer to empirically observable movements, in the sense of a practice carried out in a particular place. A naturally flowing conversation can also be considered a performative act, in which a certain discourse is co-produced through an exchange of thoughts, reflections, and revisions. I return to the issue of data production through performative conversations further on.

The problem of interviewing obviously not only exists as ‘wrong’ answers, but often also as ‘wrong’ questions. In order to get valid answers – hence information about the specific issue that the researcher intends to assess – careful selection, formulation, and framing of questions is crucial. And for this, sufficient knowledge about the particular research setting is required (see also Bleek 1987). For example, when I asked farmers which crop they harvest first after the hunger season they named an early-maturing groundnut variety, which I then took to be the crop that marked the end of \textit{njala}, the hunger period. However, when I actually witnessed the end of the hunger season I noticed that instead of groundnuts, fresh maize cobs were the first to be picked from the fields and, either boiled or roasted, consumed with great fervour. Except for those individual cobs, however, the maize was

\textsuperscript{14}After we finished our interview with them, some women sighed with relief that answering our questions had not been as difficult as they had feared it might be.

\textsuperscript{15}To be exact, with the term ‘coevalness’ Fabian (1983) literally means ‘a sharing of the present time’ between ethnographer and the other participants of his or her project to co-produce knowledge. With the term he calls attention to and criticizes anthropologists’ tendency to perceive their research subjects as still living in pre-modern times.
not harvested, as it must remain in the field until the cobs have fully dried so that they can be stored and ground into maize flour. The first crop to be actually harvested were indeed those groundnuts, but by then people already been able to fill their stomachs with fresh maize cobs. The farmers had not intentionally tried to mislead me. I had simply made a wrong assumption and incorrectly formulated my question when trying to find out when and how the hunger season comes to an end. Even though I had lived in Malawi for three years before I moved to Mudzi, had extensively read the literature on sub-Saharan African poverty dynamics, and had made several short trips to villages targeted by ICRISAT projects, much of what I encountered when living in Mudzi I could not have imagined before. Consequently, I could not have formulated questions on these issues, and would never have found out about them if I had relied only on self-designed questionnaires.

Reluctant to continue the formal interviews as the main method of data collection, I intended to rely more on informal interactions that I felt were both more appropriate and more fruitful. These, however, are more difficult to bring about and direct. Instead of purposive planning so as to get instant answers on specific questions, I found myself at the mercy of the ‘flow’ of things. The village gossip and personal affairs that women confided to Gertrude were incredibly insightful, keeping us updated about the happenings in and around Mudzi, the topics considered interesting to discuss, and the various opinions about these happenings. Where possible, I tried to create opportunities for informal visits, such as buying tomatoes from a village woman, helping on another’s field, or asking to see or learn a certain craft – all reasons that were perceived as far less threatening than being approached with a written list of straightforward personal questions. Eventually I found that an ‘excuse’ for visiting was not even required, as a casual visit just to say hello was highly appreciated and often led to interesting, naturally flowing conversations. Although we thus let things around us take their own course as much as possible, Gertrude and I always tried to keep in mind and be particularly sensitive to the issues relevant for this study’s topic of interest. What we heard and observed around us – besides being data in their own right – were leads to further inquiry, which we followed up on whenever the opportunity occurred or could be created. Hence, our increasing resort to ‘free-wheeling’ should not be interpreted as “simply being there and passively watching what people are about” (Pelto 1970: 92). Even though we tried not to dictate the course of actions around us, our own actions were certainly guided by the ultimate goals of this study – namely unravelling the interrelations between livelihood (in)security and sexual decision making.
One important opportunity for informal interaction presented itself largely unplanned. After I had selected Gertrude to be my research assistant, she told me about her handicraft skills. Because I had long wanted to learn how to knit I was pleased to hear this, and decided to bring some knitting needles with me to Mudzi so that she could teach me. I deliberately brought some extra pairs, in case one of the village women would want to join us. In the late afternoons, when we had finished interviewing or visiting and I had written down my notes, Gertrude and I sat outside in the shade and knitted. As we appeared ‘not busy’, women felt free to come and sit with us and chat. It took some time before the first one dared to take up a pair of needles and try, but eventually more and more women and girls joined me in learning how to knit and crochet. The fact that I often had to ask Gertrude for help and made many mistakes may have helped them get over their initial shyness. During these knitting sessions I was as much of a ‘coeval’ to the visiting Mudzi women as I probably could have become. For the time being we were not hierarchically distanced because of our roles as researcher and researched, but joined in mutual enjoyment of the same leisure activity and pursuit of a shared goal. I had never expected that these informal classes would eventually lead to a group of 10 to 15 women and girls voluntarily gathering at our house practically each afternoon to knit, crochet and, most importantly, chat. Only when their fields required the women’s attention at planting and harvest time, were Gertrude and I left to knit alone. Notably, the exact composition of the group was different almost every day. In total about 35 women and girls spent at least some afternoons with us in this way. The group of most regular visitors consisted of about 15 women. Most of the women who joined us were unmarried at the time, or had a husband who was away for a period of time (working in elsewhere in Malawi or in South Africa). Women who had a partner staying with them at the time tended not to join us or only briefly, soon running home again to see if he needed attending [e.g. P2 1503–4; P3 1609].
As can be expected, these daily gatherings were a great opportunity for the ‘performative’ conversing that I much prefer to ‘informative’ interviewing. As Fabian (1990: 18) puts it, “the ethnographer does not call the tune but plays along.” During the formal interviews I asked respondents to reflect on issues outside of their context, ‘out of the blue’ as far as the respondents were concerned, making it difficult for both them and me to get to the heart of a matter. During the knitting sessions, women brought up issues (opinions, jokes, complaints) that emerged more naturally from normal interaction – hence within a logical context. While the interviews evolved around topics that I had chosen, the conversations during the knitting sessions were directed by the interests of the women and girls themselves. If the group was big, there was usually

16 Obviously, after a certain topic is introduced by an interviewer, a more-or-less naturally ‘performative’ conversation, in which there is ample opportunity to jointly ‘create’ insights, can still develop about that topic.
a lot of joking and laughing, and gossiping about people not present. When there were only a few women, the conversations became more personal and intimate. I feel that the triangulation of 1) straightforward, factual data collection (although to some extent unreliable), with 2) informal, on-the-spot, and within-context-produced reflections of women on themselves and others, and 3) our own observations of village interactions gave me a good insight into the daily lives of the women of rural Mudzi.

Obviously, women’s informal narratives were also full of twisted truths, as revealed by the fact that various parties (or even the same party on different occasions) regularly told us or each other different versions of past events. Rather than trying to uncover what really happened, tempting as it may be and often was, I tried to focus on finding out what each party might have had to gain by telling their particular version. As remarked earlier, when people choose to lie, something important is apparently at stake.

Activities like fetching water, collecting firewood, and cultivating the land also helped me to better understand the women, by personally experiencing the physical hardship, repetitiveness, and social aspects of such tasks. These activities also helped to strengthen my bonding with them, as they generally appreciated that I was not afraid to get my hands dirty and my muscles tired [e.g. P2 0065–6; P3 1799]. When I managed to accomplish a certain task they seemed sincerely delighted. I did not undertake all household tasks each day though, to ensure sufficient time for writing down my elaborate field notes, but also not to be an interruptive factor at the normal water pump conversations. Letting Gertrude fetch water on her own usually led to more interesting new insights than when we went together.

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17 Some of these pictures were taken by Gertrude, and others by villagers interested in operating my camera.
Besides the interviews, informal conversations, and participatory activities, merely living in the village and being around to observe life brought many unexpected insights too. I would never have imagined that women would join literacy classes when they were already able to read and write, hiding this skill by using their left hand. Or that many villagers, having just made it through months of struggling for (expensive) food, once their meagre maize harvest was in, would begin selling it for ridiculously low prices. Or husbands disappearing without a word when the hunger season set in, leaving their wives to cultivate the fields and take care of their children alone. And to then shamelessly return when the harvest was about to be brought in, with a small gift to appease their abandoned wives. Several of these women had during the knitting sessions foreseen this, and vowed not to take back the deserter if he dared to pull this trick. But when it came to be, each woman did. All the events and developments that I had not expected to occur worked to puzzle me, triggering me to delve deeper, and so helped me to eventually better understand village life dynamics.

‘Participant observation’ is the common term used to denote the most characteristic research method of anthropology, referring more or less to what I just described: taking part in the daily life routines of the population under study. Wolf Bleek18 (1987) has noted that this term is often misleading, as anthropologists are seldom able to actually take part in and observe the specific activities that they study. In my case living up to the term would have entailed engaging in sexual relationships, but more importantly – to come anywhere near to experiencing what Mudzi women go through – it would have entailed somehow getting rid of all my safety nets. The first requirement was beyond what I was prepared to undertake for this study, if it had been achievable at all. The second was utterly impossible. Rather, as Bleek (1987b: 315) remarks, “anthropological knowledge is predominantly based on what people say they do, not on what researchers see them doing.” Indeed, although through our (long) presence in Mudzi Gertrude and I witnessed many relevant contextualizing aspects to sexual

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18 As noted earlier this is a pseudonym of Sjaak van der Geest. See Van der Geest 2011: 146–7 for his reasons for using a pseudonym.
relationships, the major contribution of our participation in daily life was the access it offered to women’s spontaneous (rather than artificially induced) narratives.

I did not, however, manage to live in Mudzi full time during the one-year research period. In the beginning I still had certain responsibilities towards ICRISAT, e.g. meetings to attend and presentations to give. Furthermore, after three years in Malawi I had come to dearly miss home, family, and friends. Although at times it was possible to phone from and to Mudzi, often the network did not allow this, and even text messages often did not go or come through. The utter disconnectedness from my ‘former’ life, lack of contact with my home base, combined with heavy malaria prophylaxis and malnourishment, caused many sleepless nights, nightmares when I did sleep, and eventually mental distress. Although feeling guilty about it, I knew I could entrust essential parts of the data collection to Gertrude, so I left the village four times. During those times Gertrude took over the daily journal writing and as such kept track of what occurred in Mudzi while I was gone. Once I returned to the village I read her notes and discussed them with her in depth, which then generally led to important new leads to follow up (whenever an opportunity for this occurred or could be created).

Additional data: moving beyond the village
During the interviews several Mudzi women mentioned that they engaged in selling food (raw or processed) in times of financial need to find money. Such women, having their own means of generating income, might have different expectations from men and sexual relationships than women without an independent income, I hypothesized. To gain a greater understanding of the causes and consequences of women’s independent money making, we began looking for and talking to small-scale businesswomen selling their merchandise at one of the three markets in the Mudzi area. Only one of these (at what is called a ‘trading centre’ in Malawi, with permanent market structures and a small clinic, approximately five kilometres from Mudzi) is in operation all year round, while the other two (at approximately one and two kilometres away) are virtually non-existent during the lean season. In total we interviewed 30 market women (see Appendix 3 for the set of questions) on their business, marital, and child-bearing history to see if any pattern could be discerned regarding the relationship between income-generating activities and sexual choices. These data are discussed in Chapter 8.

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19 Dutch readers may know Thea Beckman’s children’s novel Kruistocht in spijkerbroek, which has also been made into an English film under the title Crusade in jeans. During my time in Mudzi I at times felt like the main character of this story, who through an accident with a time machine is stranded in the 13th century. Nobody around him has a clue about the lifeworld he grew up in, moreover, that world no longer exists. Even though I could obviously go back to my own lifeworld, it often felt so out-of-touch that I experienced it as merely a vague memory that could not be shared with anyone around me.

20 When I stayed in one of the pilot villages during the hunger season, I had brought with me cookies and cereal bars, which I tried to eat at night without letting others hear it. I felt so awful doing this that I thereafter decided to go hungry along with the villagers.
Women with an official job and hence steady income would also have provided useful information to shed light on a potential link between livelihood security and sexual decision making. However, such women were hard to come by in and around Mudzi. I only managed to find and interview one young woman employed in a mini-shop in the largest market in Mudzi’s vicinity, and a nurse employed at the small hospital at this marketplace.

This nurse was also a relevant source of information on the sexual and health behaviour of people in the area. Both she and the chief nurse of the district hospital in Balaka gave me access to their monthly birth statistics of the past years, which allowed me to assess whether a significant difference exists between specific months in the number of births (and hence the occurrence of unprotected sex nine months earlier). The interesting results of this exercise are discussed in Chapter 5. Gertrude and I also had ourselves tested for HIV in the clinic offering Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) services nearest Mudzi, to experience the setting and procedures, and we visited this clinic twice more to collect statistics on the number of positive and negative tests carried out among men and women.

Other interviews outside the villages were held with staff of the various development organizations active in Mudzi, both at their so-called field offices in Balaka town and at their national headquarters in Lilongwe. Although the insights gained through these meetings were interesting, they were not of sufficient relevance to the purpose of this book and are therefore not used directly.

In an attempt to gain insight into women’s management of their meagre resources I asked four Mudzi women to keep track of their daily incomes and expenditures for three and a half months. These financial diaries have been particularly relevant for illuminating how resources flow through the community and how women tactically invest in social relations. The findings from the diaries are more elaborately described and analysed in Chapter 7.
Language

The interviews were held in either ChiChewa, the national language of Malawi spoken by all but the oldest generation in Mudzi, or ChiYao with the elderly women. I had deliberately selected a research assistant who is fluent in both tongues. I had studied ChiChewa myself too, but in ChiYao I could only greet. During my earlier research in Guatemala I had not undertaken any interviews; all my data was gathered through informal conversations, which I believe greatly enhanced the reliability as well as local relevance of the data. This had however only been possible because I had sufficiently mastered Spanish, the mother tongue of all my informants. I aspired to accomplish the same with ChiChewa, and have studied it extensively. However, after the six-week pilot study, I realized that I had spent most of my time and energy merely trying to communicate. Spanish had been relatively easy to learn, being another European language with familiar grammar rules and recognizable words. ChiChewa was of a completely different order, without any correlation to the languages I had known so far. Each word completely alien, each sentence a complicated puzzle with an unfamiliar logic. I had to acknowledge that I had not been able to master this new language sufficiently to get to the level of mutual in-depth understanding necessary for ethnographic research. That is where Gertrude came in.

During the interviews we held in Mudzi I formulated some questions in ChiChewa, while others I posed in English and Gertrude would then translate. After some time she rarely had to translate the responses back to English, as I well understood what had been said. Spontaneous conversations were more difficult though, when I did not know the topic and therefore regularly missed the point. Some interviews were recorded and then transcribed by Gertrude and me together, to allow for in-depth exploration and discussion of what had been said and how. However, the various types of recording equipment I had brought not only often failed on me, but also increased the discomfort of the interviewee, leading me to increasingly leave the equipment at home [P3 0623, 2212, 3562]. Once transcribed, I usually had little difficulty disentangling the grammatical puzzles and understanding the meaning of the statements. So while I have unfortunately missed many literal quotes – lost in translation especially in the case of informal chats, there were many others that I could follow literally and interpret personally. The transcriptions of the interviews showed Gertrude’s translations to be usually very literal, converting the exact words used rather than summarizing whole expressions. This enhanced the accuracy of the translation and joint interpretation process. To diminish distortion I furthermore instructed Gertrude to write down in ChiChewa all the quotes that she overheard or were uttered to her in her field notes as literally as she could remember.
Analysis of data
Gertrude’s and my hand-written field notes were converted into almost 650 typed pages. I have coded these notes with the data analysis software ATLAS.ti (version 6). The encoding has helped me to organize the mass of qualitative data – the many detailed stories about what occurred and was discussed during every day of a full year. Whenever I began the analysis of a new subtopic within this study, I first retrieved all of our notes about that particular topic through ATLAS.ti, read through them, and further organized them into subsections so as to eventually ‘find’ a system in them and allow for generalizations.

Obviously my analyses do not only rely on what Gertrude and I have written down. When rereading the diaries or ATLAS.ti compilations, in my head the anecdotes became contextualized within memories of the particular situation (or discussions about that situation) as well as of relevant situations that occurred prior to and after it. My own notes thus functioned predominantly as reminders of situations and forgotten details of that situation rather than as data in itself. Gertrude’s notes, however, were not only reminders but also useful for discourse analysis, as her specific selection of what occurrences were worth noting down, and her reflection upon and description of these added an extra layer of ‘emic’ information. I further elaborate upon this aspect in the next section.

Researchers
In most sciences the personal background of a researcher should not matter. Trying to uncover universal laws, the effects of anything else but the selected variables under study are eliminated as much as possible. The value of findings is measured by the extent to which they are objectively verifiable and replicable – meaning that if the same test were carried out by another researcher at another moment, similar outcomes should be found. While the research tools and procedures need to be made explicit so as to allow such replication, the particularities of the researcher should be irrelevant and are therefore usually considered unnecessary to reflect upon.

In this sense anthropology is quite exceptional. Part of ‘solid’ anthropological ethnography is self-reflection, as the researcher is his or her own tool to generate data (and in this case, so was Gertrude). The researcher-as-tool is not neutral, nor omnipresent, nor invisible, which makes it relevant to reflect on how his or her presence impacts the data collected. With most anthropologists I share the belief that we can only gain partial understanding of people’s beliefs and practices. Firstly, we can merely observe what we have access to and choose to look at, or stumble on accidently – which is influenced by who we are and how people in the field respond to us. Furthermore, because insights into the daily lives of the research population are usually gained through taking part in daily life, this active presence of the researcher inevitably influences the field, the informants,
and hence the data collected, as I too experienced in the field and described above. Secondly, as widely acknowledged by anthropologists, making sense of what we observe always involves interpretation. In sum, both what we can observe and how we interpret it is conditioned by our own personal background and the particular circumstances of the fieldwork.

Despite these weaknesses as a scientific research method, I believe participant observation\(^{21}\) has several crucial strengths that make it worth using. As explained earlier, many of the insights I gained in this study would have been difficult to acquire through other research methods. To overcome the method’s weaknesses, an anthropologist must be conscious of his or her position within the field and within the process of data collection and interpretation. While always aiming to minimize bias and distortion, it is still necessary to point out or at least share some of the personal background information of the ethnographer – to let the reader know through which eyes he or she is given a view and analysis.

As my research assistant Gertrude played a significant role in the construction of our data set, it is relevant to not only describe my own but also her personal background.\(^{22}\) Despite the widely acknowledged need for reflexivity in ethnography, anthropologists often obscure the role and impact of their research assistants (Pool 1994: 20–21). Dependence on an interpreter tends to be considered and experienced as a weakness, for it presumably distances an anthropologist from his or her informants, and so obstructs access to authentic, ‘unfiltered’ data. A few anthropologists have argued, however, that it is exactly through intense collaboration between the (outsider) researcher and the (insider) assistant that their two ‘worlds’ can be brought closer and insights can be jointly constructed (Bleek 1978, Mommersteeg 1999, Pool 1994). Acknowledging the advantages, or at least the inevitability, of an assistant’s impact on the process of data construction calls for a reflection upon the particularities of this assistant. As experienced and described by Berreman (1962), different assistants may lead to completely different research outcomes. In the following I sketch Gertrude’s personal background and elaborate upon her role in the research. Where relevant throughout this book I note her contribution to the data or analyses concerned. This is not only a matter of respect for her work, but, in line with the above, my own attempt to grasp and represent to the readers how interpretations took shape and conclusions developed.

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**Principal researcher: Janneke Verheijen**

I am a 34-year-old woman, born and raised in a well-to-do, urban environment in the Netherlands. When, at the age of 10, I read about the Masai in one of my

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\(^{21}\) As noted, I take this to mean taking part in the daily life routines of the population under study rather than suggesting that anthropologists can actually participate in and observe all activities under study.

\(^{22}\) Gertrude has read all that I have written about her in this study, and approved of it.
grandmother’s weekly magazines, I was hooked, and dreamt for years of living in an African village myself. I had not heard of anthropology yet, and regretted that the dream seemed unachievable. As time went by I came to realize that there are many groups of people around the world living lives profoundly different from mine. My interests broadened, and studying Cultural Anthropology was the logical result. During these studies I spent 18 months in a Guatemalan jungle village – partly working in an eco-tourist resort and partly conducting my Master’s research, which focused on the impacts of the recently introduced televisions in the village, especially on gender relations. I found that the soap operas that most women loved to watch diminished their acceptance of gender inequalities as natural and inevitable (see Verheijen 2005 and 2006).

Looking back, the theme that played the central role throughout my studies was the resilience and agency of marginalized, oppressed groups that are usually depicted as powerless victims. I was intrigued and inspired by two books in particular: Veiled sentiments: Honor and poetry in a Bedouin society (1986) by Lila Abu-Lughod, and Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance (1985) by James Scott. Both books acknowledge and eloquently analyze the agency of those living under severely restrictive circumstances to create opportunities for self-determination. What these books exemplified for me was that cultural power dynamics are not to be taken at face value. There may be winners and losers, but the losers are not necessarily passive victims. Often they actively deviate from existing norms – albeit within culturally accepted limits. While this adds to their feeling of self-worth, at the same time it affirms and solidifies these cultural boundaries, as these are not challenged but (grudgingly) accepted. Both books prove that studying such power dynamics – defiance within societal boundaries – can reveal a lot about the wider cultural setting. Not surprisingly, my fascination with this theme resonates throughout this book.

After my studies I obtained a position as social scientist at an agricultural research institute called the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) through the Associate Professional Officer program of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. While ICRISAT’s headquarters are based in India, my station was located in Malawi: I was finally off to Africa. My assignment was to conduct research on the impacts of AIDS on the food security of small-scale, resource-poor farmers. Together with my long-time boyfriend, I lived a more-or-less typical expatriate’s life: my sizeable salary (and the relatively low prices of living) allowed us to buy a car, and employ a housekeeper, gardener, and night-guard. Even when hunger ravaged the rural areas of Malawi, we found the supermarkets in the capital well stocked with imports from South Africa, and the (few) restaurants served us as usual. I spent most of my days in the office, making only occasional day-trips to the field. On such trips our delegation was always welcomed by groups of singing and
dancing women – the villagers had been expecting us and were ready to show us what they thought we wanted.23

During this period I enrolled in the IS-Academy: another initiative of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in alliance with various knowledge institutes in the Netherlands. Launched in 2005, the IS-Academy (IS refers to the Dutch acronym for International Cooperation) resulted from the observation that social scientists are insufficiently involved in developing policy on international cooperation, and civil servants do not habitually draw on available academic knowledge. The aim of the IS-Academy is therefore to improve communication and collaboration between policy makers and social scientists for the benefit of sustainable poverty reduction and development. As one way to accomplish this, the IS-Academy funds research positions for both young civil servants and social scientists on policy-relevant topics. With a research proposal on the potential contribution of agricultural interventions for reducing female susceptibility to HIV I was selected for one of the two PhD positions in the HIV/AIDS trajectory. For reasons mentioned earlier, I could only commence the actual fieldwork for this study after my three-year contract with ICRISAT ended in 2008.

Research assistant: Gertrude Finyiza

As my preparations for the Mudzi fieldwork coincided with the final phase of my contract at ICRISAT, I had to follow the institute’s formal employment protocol to find a research assistant. This meant placing an advertisement in one of Malawi’s national newspapers, in which I called for a female Yao speaker who was willing to live in a village with me for one year. I received over 200 application letters in response. The male and non-Yao speaking applicants were easy to dismiss. From the remaining letters I first selected those from respondents with the highest education levels and most work experience, and discussed these with my (Kenyan) supervisor. He gave me the wise advice to instead select someone with only a secondary degree and, at best, a bit of relevant work experience. He expected – probably rightfully so – that those better qualified would never be willing to stick it out with me under the circumstances in which I planned to be living and working, while someone less qualified would probably be less used to urban luxuries and grateful for the job opportunity. From the five young women whom I then selected for interviews, Gertrude simply struck a chord with me. Her Yao (besides ChiChewa) was fluent, her English sufficient, her attitude pleasant.

• Personal background
Gertrude was born in 1985, in her father’s home village in the Southern Malawian district Mangochi. Although her father was of (patrilineal) Ngoni descent, most

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23 In Chapter 8 I delve a bit deeper into the interaction between external development agents and their intended beneficiaries.
of their fellow villagers were Yao, which allowed Gertrude to pick up the Yao language from her peers. Her mother worked as a midwife, and her father was employed as a jack-of-all-trades at a nearby Roman Catholic missionary post. When he died, the Italian sisters offered support to his family by taking their youngest daughter Gertrude into their orphanage’s boarding school, where she received an exceptionally solid education for rural Malawian standards.

Halfway through her daughter’s secondary schooling at the mission post, Gertrude’s mother decided to move with her children to her own home village in the Central Malawian district Dedza – so that they could inherit land when she eventually died. An employed relative was found who was willing to pay for the continuation of Gertrude’s secondary education near their Dedza village. The man soon died, however, leaving Gertrude with the choice of following her sisters’ (and many other village girls’) example of marrying and farming, or somehow managing to find her own money to finish school. As a child, she had been intrigued by those villagers who every morning dressed up nicely and left for a job, and by her mother when she would dress up to attend a formal meeting. This is what she envisioned for herself too. When a distant aunt living in Malawi’s capital Lilongwe offered to take her in and care for her, Gertrude assumed this entailed continuing school and quickly accepted. Unfortunately, the woman was too pleased with the diligent nanny, cook, and housekeeper that Gertrude turned out to be, and kept postponing her niece’s enrolment in school.

When Gertrude realized that it had never been her aunt’s plan to actually pay for her education (nor for her work), she decided to leave and find her own means. She enrolled herself in a private secondary school because these accept payment in monthly instalments rather than per term as required at public schools – which would lead to amounts too large for her to save up. To gather the monthly instalments she awoke at 3 a.m. every morning and fetched water for houses under construction, walking up and down pumps and construction sites with large water cans on her head. At 8 a.m. she would leave work and head for school. Within two years she graduated. In the year between graduation and becoming my research assistant, she found money in various ways. She rented a telephone and settled herself beside the road to offer calling services, produced seeds for a multinational agribusiness, and taught handicrafts and English at a privately run school. With the money she earned she rented a small house without electricity or water in one of Lilongwe’s ‘high density’ areas, and sent whatever she could spare to her mother who had become too old to find money herself. Her mission remained finding funds for further education. When I hired her, she felt that the accomplishment of this mission was finally within reach.

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24 The term ‘high density area’ is used in Malawi to describe city neighbourhoods in which the (generally small, run down) structures are built close to each other, in contrast to the ‘low density areas’ in which (generally large, luxurious, fenced) compounds are built at some distance of each other.
• Role in the research
Gertrude quickly became a valued personality in Mudzi. She was respected for her education level, English proficiency, and employment with a white foreigner, and so taken as role model by Mudzi’s youth and women [e.g. P2 0111, 1322, 1519; P3 0374]. She was valued for her neutrality within the ever-changing web of village amities and animosities, her capacity to operate a cell phone, and her handicraft skills, and was frequently asked for assistance in all of these terrains [e.g. P2 0155, 1225, 1305, 1381, 1395, 1439, 1498, 1551, 1600, 1643, 1801, 1906; P3 1065, 1801, 1923, 2678]. Despite their deference to her, many people seemed to feel at ease with her, as if she were one of them. She indeed has an amazing ability to strike the right tone with everybody, from rebellious teenagers to the distinctively old.

While most villagers were long uncertain and suspicious of my agenda in Mudzi, that of Gertrude was considered clear and unsuspicious. She seemed to be seen as simply lucky to have found employment, her probing about certain ‘annoying’ topics was understood as something that came with the job that she had taken up (as any of them would have done if they had the opportunity), rather than blamed on her. The normality of her participation in daily life activities such as fetching water, her fluency in the (social, cultural, and spoken) languages, her non-threatening agenda, and her pleasant personality all contributed to the fact that Gertrude became such an important ‘instrument’ for data collection. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, her reflection upon these data proved to be relevant information in itself. Surely her interpretations cannot be considered representative of those of Mudzi women, as she had another ethnic and religious background than most Mudzi villagers, had a higher education level than most, and had spent some years in the city. Nonetheless, her perceptions were certainly emic25 rather than etic, offering me an impression of the ‘logico-empirical systems’ (Harris 1968: 571) that prevail in Malawi, pointing out where my ‘normalities’ differed radically from hers and possibly that of Mudzi villagers [e.g. P2 1498; P3 0545, 1249, 1774, 1801, 2342, 2458, 2560, 2623]. For example, I may never (or at least not without considerable delay) have become sensitized enough to realize that a woman washing laundry is not a casual everyday occurrence. As I further discuss in Chapter 7, in a resource-poor context like Mudzi such a seeming triviality is actually highly indicative, namely of rare access to money for soap. Being ‘tuned in’ to village life, Gertrude was always quick to casually remark upon this underlying information [e.g. P3 0930,

25 The concepts ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ were coined by linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike (1954), who defined them as follows: the “etic viewpoint studies behaviour as from outside of a particular system,” while the “emic viewpoint results from studying behaviour as from inside the system” (1967 [1954]: 37). The terms have become widely applied in the social sciences, although there are no standard definitions (Lett 1996). In general, ‘emic’ tends to refer to local, participant, or insider explanations of phenomena, and ‘etic’ to scientific explanations of the same phenomena and the emic statements about them.
through which I soon learned to see the significance of such events too. When we became more intimate with the village women I noticed that they jumped to the same conclusions in similar instances. In the next section I delve deeper into the content of the data generated by and through Gertrude.

I have already described how Gertrude’s handicraft skills may have saved the study, as these unintentionally led to the frequent informal meetings that offered me indispensable insights into Mudzi women’s minds. Another unplanned way through which Gertrude generated insights that would have been difficult to retrieve otherwise was her venture to buy enough maize to get herself through the year after our fieldwork, now that she had a salary and access to cheap maize. When Mudzi villagers harvested their maize and looked for chances to sell some of it, Gertrude turned out to be a reliable buyer. This was appreciated by those in need of money, and offered us a great opportunity to see when, how, and why maize was sold, even though it was a secret undertaking in many cases [e.g. P2 1500, 1508, 1550, 1562, 1565, 1572, 1582, 1597, 1611, 1668-73; P3 2185].

Gertrude’s advice in the selection of gifts was also valuable, and indicative of how well she was ‘tuned in’ with Mudzi villagers. While I initially expected that during the hunger season villagers would be most happy to receive edible items, she convinced me to instead buy soap and salt – which were indeed highly appreciated. Her better understanding of Mudzi women’s preferences also showed when at the end of our fieldwork we bought *zitenje* (the cloth that women wear over their skirt, carry their babies in, use as blanket, etc.) for all village women as a final thank-you-and-goodbye gift. To my surprise and amusement, the designs which I had picked were disliked by the Mudzi women for being ‘last year’s fashion’, while those that Gertrude had chosen were favourite.

**Gertrude’s data**

For an impression of the data the Gertrude generated in her field notes, I copy a (quite randomly selected) excerpt from it. In these notes she describes what occurred, and particularly what has been said (revealing to some extent also what is left unsaid), during the afternoon of March 19 2009 by the women that came to visit. The texts between square brackets are my additions for clarification.

At 1: 50 Sofia [25], Kondwani [35], Ellesi [16], Ada [18] came to knit. Kondwani started saying that Esnart [23] is not getting better because of the fighting and she is failing even to go and fetch some water. Then Ada said that: am going back home to make porridge for my dotta [daughter]. And Ellesi started laughing and said that: Ada you are now busy taking care of your child, does it mean that you didn’t know that if you sleep with a boy without condoms you can get pregnant? Then Kondwani answered that: Ellesi you need to respect Ada because you are not of the same age.

At 3: 40 Livia [21] came and she called me separately and she started saying that: I have missed my periods for 2 and half months but I don’t know what is wrong. Then I told her that: if you slept with your boyfriend without any protection that means you are pregnant and Livia
said that: ah-ah-ah, I didn’t [admitting later that she did] but at the hospital when I went for injection they told me to go back after 3 months but I didn’t. Then Livia left with a sad face. Then Sofia [25] said that: aunt Getu [as some called Gertrude] ndapita tiyeni mundiperekeze [I’m off, escort me], then I escorted her while Ellesi, Kondwani, Lovely [30], Grace [22] were still knitting, then Sofia told me that: Livia seem to be pregnant because she told me that she has missed her periods for 2 months and she told me that she don’t know what to do (we just laughed) and Sofia said to me that ticheza mawa [we chat tomorrow] then she left. Then I asked Grace about what people cook when there is a funeral (where they get food). Then Grace answered that since we harvested from our fields we contributed maize and nandolo [cowpeas], that’s what we are still using right now. Then Tumanene [26] said that: am going back home because my 2 dottas are ill (malaria). Then Kondwani started saying that: am going to beg some ndiwo [from] Sofia [relish, in this case beans which Sofia had received a bag of from her ex-husband as form of support, peace-making offer, and overture for reunion. Kondwani received a cup of cooked beans for free.]

Sofia came back and she started laughing by telling Tumanene that: please you need to tell your husband in South Africa to be buying nice clothes for you because he sent some clothes as if they don’t sell nice clothes in SA! He must sent [sic] some money for you to buy what you want! Because everybody at the pump was laughing at you. And Tumanene was angry and didn’t answer anything. [P2 1437–1441]

Gertrude’s narrative style is simple. She straightforwardly sums up what happened next and next and next, mostly using first-person speech when quoting others. Although there is generally little elaboration, reflection, or interpretation by Gertrude on the events that she describes in the diaries themselves, her notes offered me ample leads for further inquiry, which always generated interesting and often relevant discussions with her (which I then described in my own field notes). These discussions regularly brought up new questions and so led to new directions for our research endeavours.

As mentioned, not only were Gertrude’s field notes an important contribution, but also her verbal reflections upon the daily lives that we saw and heard unfolding around us greatly contributed to my understanding of Mudzi. As we spent much time together – living together, sharing all meals, and walking long distances to go places or meet villagers – we had sufficient time to talk about what we noticed and how we interpreted this. An example of this from my own field notes:

Gertrude remarks at breakfast that Chikondi often writes [in the income and expenditure diary we asked her to keep] that she pounds maize for other women [in exchange for money]. “You don’t think it is true?” I ask. No, with two small babies, doesn’t think that women would ask her, thinking that she doesn’t have the power for it. Indeed, even at her own house two girls were doing the pounding rather than herself. “So you think she hides something [the real income source],” I conclude, and probe [knowing the common logic by now] “but who would propose to a woman with two young babies?” She answers: “Ah, they [men] can/will, especially knowing the behaviour of her husband [who does not help Chikondi, only shows up at night for food and shelter] they will think she needs support.” [P3 2458]
Justification for a focus on women

In this research I have focussed on women – of all ages, but particularly those in the mid-age category: those in the prime of their lives, with a household, field, and children to care for. Men have only been included at times, when the opportunity arose. Not often did I purposefully approach a man for interaction [e.g. P3 0879, 2132–8, 2549–52] – with the frequently visited male village head of Mudzi A as the exception because of his formal position as community spokesman. This focus on women has both practical and topic-related underpinnings.

As has become clear in this chapter, to a large extent I have let the data collection process more or less run its own, itinerant course. As a result, we interacted most intensively with the village women rather than the men. Women form the core of the (largely matrilineal) Mudzi community; they are its stable members. Their husbands and boyfriends are rather temporarily involved individuals, not much connected to the other men and women in Mudzi. Although this by itself was no reason to exclude them from the study, the fact that they were less present in everyday public social interactions, which are dominated by women, made it difficult for us to casually encounter and interact with them without much disrupting the ‘natural flow’ of things. Interaction between non-related men and women is uncommon in Mudzi and generally frowned upon as it could indicate a (upcoming) sexual relationship. As will become clear throughout this book, there is a lot of rivalry between Mudzi women over men. As a result, any ‘suspicious’ interaction between a man and woman is closely watched and scrutinized. Gertrude received relationship proposals at various occasions throughout our fieldwork period [P2 0893, 906, 1020, 1048], which she kept scrupulously secret from other women, out of fear of triggering jealousies and distrust. Building on my experience in Guatemala, I had purposefully asked my husband to visit me in the field so that my marital status would be clear to all. I so hoped to avert male proposals on the one hand and female fears of competition on the other. However, as I was without my husband during most of my time in Mudzi, some expressed surprise about the fact that I did not take on a lover for the time being. “He sure did,” I was guaranteed, considering how long I had already left him unattended.

Our active interaction with Mudzi men may or may not have aggravated the fears and suspicions that my presence stirred in general, and may or may not have caused (covert) tensions and hostilities. In any case, beyond the various practical considerations, men’s opinions were only of secondary relevance as my research question revolved around women’s decision-making processes. Surely, we observed men’s actions where possible, and heard lots of talks about men, so that men are not completely absent from this study. Readers particularly interested in the Malawian male perspective on sexual relationships and AIDS I refer to Kaler (2003, 2004a) and Kalipeni & Ghosh (2007).
By concentrating on the women who lived in Mudzi during our fieldwork, men were not the only ones left ‘out of focus’. Even more so were those who decided to leave Mudzi. This is important to realize, because for all I know these may have been women and girls with particularly different attitudes towards securing a livelihood and sexual relationships from those who stayed behind and were studied, which may have biased the results. Likewise, I have not inquired much about prime-age women who died prior to the study, who may have had deviating attitudes towards sexual relationships. I regret not having gathered more information on numerous issues including these, but there is only so much that a researcher can do during a limited period of time and given the focus of the study.

Ethical considerations

Contrary to some other social scientists, working in other settings or at the service of or with funding from other agencies, I was not obliged to have my research proposal approved by an ethical council. ICRISAT did require that I follow a course and take an exam in ‘research ethics on human participation in research’. I did so at the Office of Research Integrity of the US Department of Health and Human Services.

Neither of these two facts has much to do with my moral concerns during our fieldwork. These concerns first and foremost sprouted from common human sense (‘common’ at least in the cultural environment where I grew up). The first of the two moral dilemmas that most bothered me was the extent to which I could and wanted to disturb Mudzi women – who were obviously too polite to turn me away yet seemed uneasy with my visits. The other moral dilemma concerned the acceptability of including women’s and men’s informal comments that were not expressed to us for obvious research purposes.

There are no universally ratified ethical rules that social scientists must abide, as there are for some other professions such as medical doctors. There are however various, largely overlapping, lists of ethical guidelines for anthropological research, of which I take the 2011 Association of Social Anthropologists’ (ASA) Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice as reference point here, because this code offers advice for both my concerns.

The problem of including Mudzi women’s and men’s informal comments in our data set is the fact that it cannot be ascertained whether this would be approved of by those who expressed the comments. What is lacking, thus, is their informed consent as far as this specific data is concerned – a directive mentioned in most ethical research codes. All villagers have however been invited to the introductory
meeting in which I elaborately explained my wish to stay in their community
to gain an in-depth understanding of their daily lives, and in which I asked for
their approval for this endeavour. As also noted earlier, I have made clear, both
at this point and at later occasions, that everyone was at any time free to refuse
participation without further consequences. All village women, thus including
those who regularly visited us at home, have in addition been told again about the
research and asked personally whether or not they were willing to help me in this
study. All expressed their willingness. Moreover, all women (and men) who visited
our house did so completely voluntarily. They were aware of the general research
purpose of our stay in their midst, and are likely to have been aware that most
of what they said in my or Gertrude’s presence reached me. To this end I often
deliberately participated in conversations to emphasize that I could and did follow
what was being said, and brought up issues that women had told Gertrude.

Although I frequently emphasized our general research purposes, I never
mentioned to Mudzi villagers my particular interest in sexual decision making and
HIV risk. This goes against the ethical code that potential informants must know
precisely and in as much detail as possible what they are consenting to. I have
felt no ethical hesitation, however, in remaining vague about my ultimate goal
of unravelling the interaction between livelihood insecurity and sexual practices.
Firstly, I did not lie when stating that I wanted to gain a general understanding
of women’s daily lives. As mentioned, this was indeed what I hoped to achieve.
Secondly, as also noted earlier, I believe that more detail about my exact topic
of interest may have harmed the individuals that I would have approached with
questions or interacted with in any other way. The main principle of most ethical
research codes states that the quest for knowledge may not harm the wellbeing
of research participants. The fact that I hid my precise interest focus was the
result of weighing pros and cons: I preferred to protect my (future) informants by
emphasizing my general interest in women’s lives and decision-making processes
rather than their involvement in sexual relationships.

Other measures were also taken to minimize potential harm and protect the
wellbeing of research participants. We never passed on information that we
received privately to third parties within the village community. We tried our best
to avoid discord and jealousies among villagers, for example by not privileging
anyone over others. By changing the name of the research locality as well as all
names in this thesis, I am reasonably confident that no harm will be done to any
of the persons involved by using the comments that they expressed to the research
team (that is, Gertrude or me) or in our presence.

The ASA ethical guidelines furthermore suggest that anthropologists should avoid
“undue intrusion” by their enquiry and methods (principle I.3), elaborating that:

In many of the social scientific enquiries that have caused controversy, problems have not
arisen because participants have suffered directly or indirectly any actual harm. Rather,
concerns have resulted from participants’ feelings of having suffered an intrusion into private and personal domains (ASA 2011: 4).

As explained in this chapter I have often felt that visiting villagers’ homes with a list of set questions and pen and paper to note down their answers, or even voice recorder to register their every word, made many nervous and uncomfortable. I believe that this research approach was too intrusive for the Mudzi case, and was effectively circumvented by increasingly relying on informal conversations. In other words, my discomfort about including villagers’ conversations with or in the presence of Gertrude was eased because it allowed me to lessen the burden that I would have placed on them otherwise. In the ethnographic chapters that follow, the fruits of our struggles to gather relevant, personal, and often intimate data are presented and assessed in detail.
Women’s sexual relationship choices

Introduction

It is with some reluctance that I refer to sexual relationships in the title of this chapter. The main focus of the chapter are the relationships between men and women which are distinguishable from all other sorts of relationships by the fact that those involved have sex with each other – hence the title. However, labelling these relationships as ‘sexual’ leaves the impression that they revolve predominantly around sex. And this, as will become clear, is misleading. Sex is one aspect of unions between women and men, usually engaged in right from the onset of a relationship. But for most men and women it is not a main reason for partnering.

The transactional sex paradigm, described in Chapter 1, asserts that many poor women engage in sexual relationships to access material support from men. What is believed to make these relationships risky in a context of high HIV prevalence is that these women – presumably desperate for support – do not demand that men use condoms and are involved in multiple relationships simultaneously or successively. When using this definition of sexual risk, many of Mudzi women’s sexual relationships too must be called ‘risky’. The fact that it is not uncommon for these women to readily accept relationship proposals from unknown men further adds to their risk in this context of high HIV prevalence.

The ultimate aim of this chapter is to assess the extent to which male support is a motive for Mudzi women to engage in risky sexual relationships, and whether acute poverty underlies this. As will be discussed, Mudzi women often explicitly subscribe to the notion that it is poverty that pushes them to enter into (multiple) sexual partnerships. The ethnographic data presented suggest, however, that this discourse itself should be considered part of a complex survival strategy.

I first make some introductory comments on different relationship types, and the vague and flexible distinctions between these. Then I assess each of the three aspects
that make relationship practices in Mudzi particularly risky in an environment of high HIV prevalence. Finally, I deconstruct Mudzi women’s discourse on their need for male support on basis of the data analysed in the preceding sections.

**Defining relationships**

In the context of this chapter on sexual relationships two issues are worth noting beforehand. Firstly, it is important to recognize that throughout Africa the conjugal bond has long been and in many places continues to be considered inferior to the lineage bond. Both men and women in the first place remain members of their lineage, irrespective of whom they marry. As a result, women are not primarily considered (prospective) wives, but (prospective) procreators of the lineage. A woman’s social identity and self-identity are thus not derived from wifehood but rather from motherhood. This is exemplified by the fact that women, as soon as they have children, are in Mudzi always addressed and referred to as “Mother of So-and-so,” and not, as is customary in the West, in their capacity as wife, as “Mrs. Name-of-husband.” Such naming may seem a trivial particularity, but it signals an essentially different value system. Marriage to a certain man is not a central part of a woman’s identity, and switching partners does not affect her identification. Although marriage in general is valued for practical reasons, precisely whom a woman marries is considered of less importance. This may be illustrated by Audrey Richards’s finding that young women of the Bemba – a matrilineally organized society with kinship structures similar to the Yao – were expected to simply accept the first marriage proposal she received (Richards 1969 [1940]: 22). Scholars of matrilineally organized communities throughout Africa, furthermore, have noted that too strong a commitment between husband and wife tends to be socially disapproved of, and discouraged in more or less subtle ways, as this is feared to compete with the spouses’ loyalty towards their respective lineages (Bleek 1987a: 139, 142, Poewe 1981: 56, 67–8, Stuart et al. 2011a: 30).

Secondly, throughout Africa anthropologists have noted that traditional marriages were not sealed through one, single, clearly defined rite, but rather became gradually solidified through processes that could take extensive periods of time. To what extent this was the case for the Yao is unclear. The one classic reference point for this ethnic group – British sociologist and anthropologist James Clyde Mitchell – only reported that formalized marriage rites seemed non-existent, writing that: “marriage is legalized entirely by the public acknowledgement of the fact by representatives of each [partner’s matrikin] group” (Mitchell 1962: 35). In

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an attempt to lay down Yao marital law, Ibik (1970: 15) noted likewise that a couple is considered married when specifically assigned matrikin from both spouses (the *ankhoswe*) acknowledge the marriage and by doing so allow cohabitation. However, examining marital court cases in matrilineal Malawi, Mwambene (2005: 11-12) found that judges sometimes rule a relationship to be marriage even if no *ankhoswe* have validated it, for example if the couple had cohabited for a number of years and the man had built a house for his partner. It seems reasonable to assume that marriage formation in southern Malawi resembled the described processual type. Our findings from Mudzi would neatly fit in with this hypothesis.

Our data and this hypothesis also fit in with James Gibbs’ theory of epainogamy (1963), which tries to identify the societal structures and processes that stabilize and destabilize the institution of marriage. In epainogamous societies, marriage is highly valued and socially sanctioned, resulting in generally stable marriages and low divorce rates. In non-epainogamous societies, to the contrary, marriage is unstable and divorce common. According to Gibbs (1963: 555), an important characteristic of non-epainogamous societies is the low level of marriage bond “ceremonialization” – which appears to apply for much of Africa as for Mudzi in particular. Another characterizing attribute of non-epainogamous societies is normative ambiguity concerning marital relationships – which too applies to the Mudzi case, as I will describe.

The Mudzi definition of marriage (and consequentially divorce) that I adopt in this book is without clear-cut demarcations and open for some individual interpretation. The ChiChewa term used for it is *banja*, which literally translates as nuclear family or household, and in principle refers to a steady relationship that entails living together. Following general custom within Malawi I use the English term ‘marriage’ as a translation of *banja*. A *chibwenzi* relationship in principle refers to the courting stage of a relationship, in which partners remain in their separate households and visit each other during daytime. In theory, the couple can get to know each other during this period, while the man assembles the items (pot, pan, plates, cups, blanket) that he is supposed to bring to marriage [P2 045], 1436; P3 0608, 1911, 3799, 3800, 3843, 3847, 3937, 3943, 4009]. In practice, a *chibwenzi* relationship does not necessarily lead to *banja*, and a *banja* relationship need not be preceded by a *chibwenzi* stage.

In Mudzi, a couple is considered formally married only if the *ankhoswe* have gathered to approve the marriage and a payment has been made to the chief to formalize it. The amount due varies per chief; in Mudzi it was set at 700 Kwacha.³ Although the groom should be the one to pay this money, some of my female informants ‘lent’ (read: gave) their husband-to-be the amount to speed up the

³ Approximately 3.5 Euro at the time of the research – a relatively substantial amount, say seven days’ wage for someone lucky enough to find piece-work.
formalization of their relationship [e.g. P2 2137]. If the sum is not paid, and the chief thus not officially informed, he or she will not intervene and assist when a marital crisis occurs [P3 0531, 1266]. The payment is considered a token of a man’s seriousness about the relationship.

In everyday practice, however, a man tends to cross the line from being labelled as boyfriend (*chibwenzi*) to husband (*mwamuna*) as soon as he spends a night at his partner’s house. Men who never spend a night but continue to visit regularly, may also in everyday speech eventually be called husband, both by the woman involved and others. Furthermore, many men do not formally terminate their relationship with a certain woman, but rather just disappear, leaving their wives in doubt about their relationship status for quite some time [e.g. P3 0546, 1501, 1856, 3821, 3959, 3996]. Even when a woman knows that her husband has left her to found another household, she may still at times refer to him as “my husband” [e.g. P2 1704; P3 1531]. It seems that the categories of boyfriend, husband, and ex-husband are not clearly demarcated, leaving ample opportunity to use the terms interchangeably and to one’s advantage [e.g. P3 1179, 2058, 2385–6, 2708]. The causes and consequences of this indeterminacy are analysed further on in this chapter. For now it suffices to point out that when in this chapter I mention a certain relationship type or status, I follow the terms used by the informants in question. In most of the cases, when I write ‘married’, this means that the couple lives together, but not necessarily that the relationship has been formalized [see P3 1460]. Furthermore, as the distinction between *chibwenzi* and marital relationships is not always clear nor of relevance, I use the terms interchangeably with ‘sexual relationship’, ‘sexual partnership’, and ‘sexual liaison’, which underlines the ambiguity of the relationship classifications. Likewise, a relationship proposal, whether *chibwenzi* or *banja*, in practice means a request for a sexual relationship. Therefore, I also use the terms ‘relationship proposal’ and ‘sexual proposal’ more-or-less interchangeably, depending on the particular facet I want to emphasize.

As will become clear, the scene of sexual relationships in Mudzi village is highly dynamic, with unions constantly forming, dissolving, and reviving. Although Mudzi women refer to the ideal of a steady, lifelong partnership with a husband who provides for the household and helps in the field, it is doubtful whether such stable relationships have ever been the norm. Partnerships tend to be casual and temporary. As a result of their generally unstable unions, most of my informants have had multiple sexual relationships throughout their lives, some of them simultaneously. At the time of the baseline interviews, 56 of 90 Mudzi women considered themselves married. Of these at least 18 knew, or had reason to believe, that their husband was at the same time also married to another woman. During the course of our fieldwork, at least nine women maintained relationships with several men simultaneously [e.g. P2 0284, 0912, 1084, 1600, 1718, 1993; P3 1186, 1208, 1462, 2253, 2709]. Of the 34 women who were not in a relationship at the time of
our first interview round, 10 were widowed, 17 abandoned, and 7 divorced by their own choice. I have no means of quantifying the turnover rate of relationships in Mudzi as most of the women we interviewed claimed to have had only one or two partners throughout their lives, while other evidence suggests that they had many more\(^4\) [e.g. P2 0082, 1058, 1629; P3 1221, 3921]. Personal observation gives some indication though, as during the course of the research at least 17 marital relationships dissolved – in 7 cases the woman sent off her husband, in 9 cases the husband left by himself, and in 1 case the man passed away. Of all these women who lost their partner, 11 remarried within the same year, and 2 even twice.

Riskiness of relationship practices

While the next chapter revolves around the act of sex itself, this chapter assesses the relative riskiness of Mudzi women’s relational behaviour in a context of high HIV prevalence. About sexual intercourse itself it suffices for now to note that condoms are rarely used in Mudzi. Considering this low condom use, the relational practices that put women at increased risk of HIV infection, are 1) their often quick acceptance of relationship proposals from unknown men, 2) the high turnover rate of relationships, and 3) the frequent occurrence of overlapping relationships. In the following sections I assess each of these three risky facets of relationship practices. In particular, I aim to unravel the rationales behind each, so as to understand the extent to which a need for material support plays a role.

Quick and pragmatic entry into sexual relationships

• The practice of proposing

Relationships in Mudzi tend to come about quickly and easily. Formally only men can propose to start a relationship. Following matrilineal custom, men generally do not have their own house, but move in with their wife. Consequently, those proposing are either young bachelors still living with their mother, recently widowed or divorced and thus homeless men, or married men who want a new or an extra partner. Proposals often entail little more than the straightforward remark that the man is either looking for a *chibwenzi* or for a *banja*. It is then up to the proposed to inform him whether she too is interested in starting a relationship, be it *banja* or *chibwenzi*. Whichever relationship type a woman agrees to, acceptance is soon followed by sexual intercourse with her new partner.\(^5\)

Sometimes a man’s offer is clear: bringing substantial gifts and visiting a woman’s parents are interpreted as signs of his seriousness about a longer-term

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\(^4\) See Helleringer et al. 2011 about biased self-reports on sexual history in rural Malawi.

relationship. Offering some money to have sex right then and there in the bushes is at the other end of the proposing spectrum [P2 1546; P3 2489]. Often, however, a man’s exact intentions remain uncertain, and women must outweigh the risks and benefits of accepting or declining a proposal. In the worst-case scenario – not a rarity – the man makes alluring promises about a shared future but disappears shortly after impregnation, leaving the woman with a damaged reputation and an extra mouth to feed. Some men continue to visit frequently, but never actually move in – apparently married elsewhere. Others live up to their promises, at least for some time: building their wife a house, helping her in the field, and providing money for other needs.

Occasionally, women receive proposals from boys and men from within the small Mudzi community or from fellow students at school. However, both men and women mentioned that they prefer to date or marry someone from outside their home village, as they feel it is difficult to respect and be respected by someone they have played with as a child [P2 0009, 0563, 1593; P3 2132]. To find a partner, men therefore generally go to another village, ask around for unmarried women, and either visit those at home to propose or have someone else transmit the proposal. Alternatively, friends and relatives can be asked to approach suitable women in their network to propose on a man’s behalf. The following account, based on what Naima (19) and Ethelo (23) separately told me about how they got together, is exemplary for many other unions:

During adolescence Ethelo built his own shed near his mother’s house and lived there alone for some time. He began to long for company in the evenings and told his brother – who had married in Mudzi – that he wanted a wife. This brother suggested that Naima (19) could be a suitable partner. She already had two children, but, he told Ethelo, took good care of these children, did not involve herself with many men, and worked hard in the field. With Ethelo’s approval, the matchmaking brother then approached Naima, asking her if she would be interested in marrying his brother. Naima answered that she first wanted to see the proposer. When Ethelo visited his brother in Mudzi again, Naima was called to come and take a look. The matchmaker assured her that his brother worked hard in the field, and Naima then and there agreed to marry him. [P3 2132, 3893]

To a large extent proposing and accepting are informed by day-to-day pragmatism. In the above example, the assurance that Naima behaved as a proper woman was enough reason for Ethelo to propose marriage. Likewise, when Naima found that her proposer looked reasonably normal, and was likely to help cultivate her field, she too was prepared to start living as a couple. Whether some level of attraction may have played a role too in her decision to accept is difficult to ascertain but not unlikely [see for example P3 3863, 3889, 3990, 3998, 4002] – a point to which I return further on.

Regularly, relationships come about with even less forehand knowledge of the spouse-to-be. In their quest for a partner, some men simply approach a woman or girl they meet on the road, at the market, or at a football match, and ask her on the
spot whether she is available for and interested in starting a relationship. The many self-reports of random proposals and proposals from unknown men are backed by first-hand experiences of Gertrude and myself [P2 0176, 0288, 0906, 1020, 1048; P8 0083]. Even when proposals came from men unknown to them, many women accepted without hesitation [P2 1131, 1208, 1710; P3 2064, 2105, 3766, 3819, 3849, 3900, 3927, 3959, 3976, 3978, 4000, 4012]. Considering the relative shortage of men (see Chapter 3), they were relieved to have found someone who was prepared to commit himself, and feared that their proposer might take his offer elsewhere if they dawdled too long [P3 0418, 0714, 0746, 1444]. Some justified that there was no point in trying to find out more about the man, because both he and others could be lying anyhow [P3 0495, 0530, 3965]. Several women acquiescently said they had trusted that God sent them the husband they deserved [P3 0742, 3917, 4000, 4018]. The only way to find out if someone will make a good partner, many women felt, is to just start living together [P3 0530, 2785, 2795, 3900, 3962, 3978, 4012]. For some women, the mere fact that they were proposed banja rather than chibwenzi was enough reason to accept:

Salika was 19 when a man came to the house where she stayed with her parents. When he asked her to start a family with him, she accepted immediately because “when a man proposes banja, it means he is serious about taking care of you”. [P3 3978, also P3 3455–6, 3889]

Aisha (then 19) was moving around selling vegetables when a man proposed chibwenzi to her. She refused, declaring that she did that before and then was left pregnant – she would not accept anything less than marriage now. After a week the man came to visit her, stating that since he did not have a wife at that time, he was willing to marry her. Without knowing anything else about the man, Aisha then and there allowed him to move in with her. [P3 3891]

Other women, or the same women at other points in their lives, did take some time before accepting a proposal – depending on their character, the urgency of the need for a partner, the quality of the life offered by the proposer, and past experiences [P2 1456; P3 2134, 3793, 3895, 3897, 3915, 3935, 3939, 4016; P8 0014]. Some just waited to see whether the man’s interest was sincere enough to come back and repeat his proposal [P3 2134; P8 0014]. Others actively asked around about their proposer’s marital status and behaviour [P3 3793, 3895, 3897, 3915, 3935, 3939, 4016]. Generally, these women were sufficiently satisfied if they heard that he was not aggressive, or a womanizer, smoker, or beer drinker. Notably, working hard in the field was in many cases merely considered a plus, not a prerequisite. During this time some proposers tried to make a good impression by bringing soap, body lotion, relish, or even clothes and biscuits. Most women gladly accepted the gifts, interpreting them as a promising indication of their proposer’s future performance as provider of the household (see also Wamoyi et al. 2010: 10), as did Malita:

Malita (62) met her first husband on the way back from buying relish at the near-by trading centre. A passer-by told her that he wanted to marry her: “Ndikukufunani banja...” Malita did not accept immediately because the man came from far so she did not know anything about him. When she later inquired, his friends told her that he was a good man because he did not
have another wife. In the following month he came to bring soap, salt, relish. “When I saw those gifts,” she says, “I realized that he is a good man and we married.” [P3 3939, also P3 3786, 3793, 3897, 3986, 4002]

As can be expected, many of Mudzi women’s life histories testify that neither upfront inquiries nor gifting behaviour during the courting stage guaranteed a good husband.

Not all relationship offers are accepted. As we shall see further on, young women who still live with and are reasonably provided for by their caretakers tend to be pickier about exactly whose offer to accept. Even women with their own household, field, and children to take care of may refuse proposals if they do not trust the offer (for example when it sounds too good to be true, leading to suspicion that the proposer may be a particularly ‘bad catch’, possibly ill and in need of care [e.g. P2 1445; P3 0538, 4004]), or when they feel the circumstances are not ‘ripe’. Several noted, for example, that they were still too angry about the misconduct of their previous husband and feared similar behaviour from the next [e.g. P2 1527; P3 0517, 0698, 0991, 3919, 4004]. Whenever these women did feel ready again to accept a new proposal, this generally seemed to have little to do with the particular proposer but rather with the timing of his offer. At least, this is how women frame their relationships choices: as instigated by pragmatic considerations rather than affectionate preferences. In other words, and as suggested by the data described earlier in this section, marriage is highly valued, but exactly whom one marries often seems of less importance.

• Reasons for accepting

Discourse of need and destitution

Gertrude asked Jane (17) about the young man she had been walking with. Jane answered that it was her new boyfriend, explaining that they had met the day before at the football field where he had proposed chibwenzi and she had accepted. “He repairs radios”, she merely added, “so it will not be difficult for him to provide money for soap.” [P2 1710]

The motive that Mudzi women mentioned most frequently for becoming (and staying) involved in a particular sexual relationship was their need for material support. When justifying their acceptance of a sexual proposal women often used the words mavuto [problems], kuvutika [to have problems/suffer], or kusowa [to lack/be needy], adding that they had hoped that their proposer would help them to get the things they lacked, in particular soap, food, and clothes [e.g. P2 1580, 1653, 1901; P3 0495, 0732, 0741, 0784, 0991, 0995, 1501, 1730, 3165, 3594, 3790, 3849, 3861, 3941, 3949, 3953, 3970, 3988, 3998, 4005, 4008, 4012]. Many then elaborated upon their claimed need for support by emphasizing that they had lost their caretakers or struggled to care for their children alone [e.g. P2 1653, 1901; P3 0741, 0746, 0784, 0995, 1501, 3849, 3949, 3953, 3988, 3998, 4002, 4012]:
Mariya (38) relates that her parents had so many children to take care of that she structurally lacked soap, clothes, even food. Therefore, when at 15 a man offered to take care of her, she gladly accepted his proposal. Her problems were so urgent, Mariya emphasizes, that she did not take time to inquire about the man or get to know him better before actually marrying. The man turned out to be lazy, and did not give her the support she had hoped for. One day their baby fell off her back because she did not have a sufficiently large and strong chitenje with which to properly tie the infant. She blamed her husband, for he had failed to meet her needs as mother. Fed up with his behaviour, she complained to her ankhoswe and chief, and divorced. She moved back into her mother’s house, where she faced the same problems as before. Fortunately, it did not take long before a next man proposed marriage, and she again accepted gratefully. In the first years of their marriage the man behaved fine, regularly buying ndiwo, soap, clothes for her and later their three children. But he liked other women too much, and began spending nights elsewhere. One day he simply stopped coming back home. Mariya struggled to keep her household going, working hard in her field and doing ganyu on the side for money. She felt relieved when yet another man came looking for a wife and was referred to her house – he moved in the very same night. The man did do ganyu every now and then, but gave her little money, spending most of it on beer. On top of that, he sometimes beat her badly when he came home drunk, which soon made her decide to send him away. The next proposer really was a good man, because he often helped her on her field and treated well her children from other men. Unfortunately, he died a few years after marriage, leaving her with two more children to take care of. One day when doing ganyu in a neighbouring village, she and one of the other day labourers found out that both had no partner, and decided to marry – “so that he can help me”. Mariya assumed he would be a serious man, since he was working on the field at the time they met. But she now 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 her six children.

Similar to many other women’s statements, Mariya clarified that she entered and stayed in marriage because of the material support that she needed and needs from a husband. Not only in the formal accounting of their marital histories to us, but also amongst each other did Mudzi women, such as Jane quoted earlier, underline the material rationale for their involvement in sexual relationships. In women’s self-reports, thus, the assumptions that underlie the transactional sex paradigm are repeatedly confirmed.

This is the only data fragment that I have ‘fabricated’, by blending the stories of various Mudzi women into the marital history of one fictional woman. Fabrication of cases is obviously risky. By only picking out certain elements of a real case, removing these from their context, and merging them at wish within a new fictional context, an ethnographer enlarges the risk of overlooking important correlations between factors. Nonetheless, this approach has been applied by others too. Nick Miedema (1983) even did so on a much wider scale in his study on the Scilly Islands. He opted to condense all his data into the form of a biography of one fictional ego, striving for an impression of a ‘typical’ Scilly islander. An elaboration upon this method can be found in Miedema (1984). In another anthropological study, by Warner & Lunt (1941) on the social class structures in a North American city, all cases presented were fictional merges of real data. Contrary to Miedema, I do not suggest that my imaginary Mariya represents a ‘typical’ Mudzi woman – the great diversity of women’s situations makes it preposterous that one marital history could be representative for all. I have simply chosen to condense the data in this way for efficiency sake, so as to represent numerous rationales within a relatively short text. Based on our findings from and experiences in the field, I believe that this fabricated relationship history does justice to the accounts of real Mudzi women.
Women’s widespread claim that poverty had pushed them to engage in sexual relationships seems backed by birth statistics retrieved from the two maternity wards in the area. At both wards data could be recovered for (almost) each month of the five years prior to the research. Table 1 shows the average number of births per month over these five years and so gives an insight in the seasonal fluctuations. The table shows a significantly higher number of childbirths in August and September. This peak occurs nine months after the time when food shortages become most pressing.

Figure 5.1: Average number of births per month between 2004 and 2009 at the nearest health clinic and Balaka hospital.

It is unlikely that fewer contraceptives are used during the hunger months than other months – these seem to be used minimally at any time despite their availability, free of cost, at the various clinics in the area. It also seems improbable that more women deliver at the hospital during these months instead of at home, in their fields, or on the side of the road on their way to the hospital. What does seem plausible is that the incidence of miscarriages increases during the harsh hunger months, causing a dip in birth rates in the months that follow. Furthermore, mothers may be forced to wean their babies during the hunger period as their

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7 One maternity ward is located in the small clinic at the nearest trading centre, approximately five km (or one hour walking) away, and the other in the district hospital at Balaka town, approximately 13 km (or two hours on bicycle) away.

8 Notably, the 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.
breastmilk dries up, which reactivates their fertility. At the same time, however, 
fertility may be negatively affected by the lower food intake. In line with women’s 
own statements about the link between pressing need and resorting to sexual 
liasons for male support, the peak may indeed indicate an increased incidence of 
unprotected sex during the season of scarcity.

Contesting the ‘acute poverty’ claim
Interestingly, however, the birth statistics in Table 5.1 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 food is highest and – albeit to a lesser 
extent – when the availability of money and food are highest. In other words, the 
incidence of unprotected sex also peaks at the very moment at which advocates 
of the transactional sex paradigm hypothesize a decline in women’s sexual risk 
taking. The increase in sexual relationships during harvest time was confirmed by 
the (unsolicited) quotes from informants, such as the following:

While knitting Livia (21, unmarried 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!” Another 
woman added: “Have you forgotten that during cotton-selling season farmers have a lot of 
money and can cheat on you [by saying] that they’ll marry you and then when the money 
finishes go back to their wife??”[P3 0507]

Ada (18), chatting at our veranda, remarked: “At the time of cotton people are happy, 
everywhere new relationships start because of the money”. [P2 1167]

When Venesi (35) passed by with an unknown man, Livia (21) commented: “We are close to 
cotton season, a lot of marriages now.” [P2 1300]

As described, all Mudzi women grow their own maize, and many also grow and 
sell cotton. At least for the time being, their livelihoods are secure during harvest 
time. Nonetheless the occurrence of sexual relationships appears 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 claimed in 
Mudzi women’s self-reports and assumed by advocates of the transactional sex 
paradigm. More accurately, women seized the opportunity to access extra money9 
– as some men have, or claim they will soon have, full pockets after selling their 
cotton harvest. Assessing the data obtained through other means than the formal 
interviews indeed paints a more nuanced picture, for example about the type of 
material support desired and received from men. Rather than merely concerning

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9 As anticipated by Gertrude: P3 2466.
the coverage of basic necessities, gifts include soft drinks, fancy clothes, expensive slippers, hair chemicals and extensions, even cell phones [P2 0912, 1702, 1878, 1890; P3 0863, 1472, 2240, 2466, 2560].

The peak in sexual relationships around harvest time may, however, stem not only from higher rates of acceptance by women, but also from increased numbers of proposals by men. In her historical study on famine in southern Malawi, Vaughan (1987) writes that colonial administrators were shocked to see many men abandoning their wives and children when food shortages became pressing. Our field data indicate that this continues to occur [P2 1178, 1221, 1624; P3 1729]. Dora (age 42) was one of the women whose husband disappeared without a word when times became hard. During the hunger season, she had to find food for her household and cultivate her field with only the help of her children. When her harvest was about to be brought in, however, her husband re-appeared, bringing with him some fresh fish, a radio, and a chitenje. Dora gladly accepted the gifts and let him re-enter her household [P3 1729]. As can be gathered from the following excerpts [and P2 1221, 1795; P3 1917, 2202, 2766], it was fairly common in Mudzi that men, like Dora’s husband, came to propose precisely when women had food or money in abundance (see also Vaughan 1987: 48):

When Venesi (35) passed by with a certain man, Livia (21) started laughing and said that: “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, also P3 2404]. 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 Gertrude was fetching water at the pump, a man passed by whom she had not seen before. One of the women explained that it was the second ex-husband of Salika (39), adding that he still comes to see their children every now and then – especially when he hears that Salika’s brother, who works in South Africa, has sent her some money. [P2 1629]

Belita (46): “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. 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, it appears that the material support they retrieved from men at times entailed luxuries rather than basic necessities, and was non-existent at other times. Furthermore, as will be elaborated upon in Chapter 8, women regularly have means to find money other than through sexual relationships with men, and many of them indeed resort to these means when
they (temporarily) have no sexual partner or feel they receive too little support from such partner. In sum, the urgent economic need that women themselves refer to insufficiently explains their involvement in sexual relationships.

Women’s engagement in sexual relationships during times of temporary abundance can partly be understood as an optimization of their access to resources. Although they do not necessarily need support at that very moment, the initiation of a new relationship may well be in anticipation of the ever-returning times of shortages. This seems confirmed by Rosemary (49) who answered, when I asked her whether women with an independent income still want to marry: “Yes, for in case you fail to take care of yourself and your children sufficiently during the hunger months, or in case you fall ill…” [P3 2851]. I further elaborate on sexual liaisons as important form of social insurance (or ‘social capital’) in Chapter 7.

Part and parcel
The ‘acute poverty’ claim is contested by insights that we gained through multi-annual birth statistics, women’s casual comments, and our own observations. It is furthermore contested by data, both from our own field notes and secondary sources, suggesting that gifting plays an intrinsic role in all sexual relationships – irrespective of either partner’s economic status.

I have already described that in Mudzi’s marital ‘gender contract’ a husband is required to provide all that his wife needs besides the food from her field. It follows from this that women, rather than feeling forced to offer sex in exchange for support, feel entitled to receive support when in a sexual relationship [P2 0095, 0492, 0633, 0777, 1724, 1731; P3 2138, 2651, 2900–15] (see also Hunter 2002, Leclerc-Madlala 2003, Wamoyi et al. 2010):

Two days after their first child was born, Elube’s husband left to work in town. He never returned nor sent even one bar of soap. After some time, Elube, 15 years old at the time, decided to move back to her mother. When two years later she met a man on the street who asked her whether she was married, Elube explained that her marriage had ended. He then asked her whether she had any children, Elube answered she had one indeed. The man said he was willing to take care of the child if she would marry him. Elube 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.” She gratefully accepted the offer. [P3 3849]

Note that Elube perceives marriage as a way of “finding soap on her own”. Like most Mudzi women seem to do, she considered receiving support from her mother a dependency, while receiving soap from her husband a right. A man’s role as provider entails that he supplies his partner with gifts during the courting stage, and supplementary food, household items, clothes, or money during marriage. Not surprisingly, men’s promises towards prospective or newly acquired partners tend to revolve around the money or gifts that they will bring [P2 1725, 1831, 1878, 1890; P3 1862, 2689, 3963]. And, as hoped by the women accepting such relationship proposals,
men indeed often bring with them support, whether basic necessities like money, maize, relish, salt, and soap, or more luxury items like soft drinks, snacks, clothes, beauty products, even mobile phones. Benefits could also entail the payment of transport on a bike taxi instead of having to walk, or payment of grinding maize at the mill instead having to pound it by hand [e.g. P2 0492, 0766, 0992, 1584, 1600, 1643, 1733, 1893, 2060; P3 2481, 2560, 2651, 2900–15, 3841, 3843, 3847, 3852, 3990, 3996]. Those who continue to do so on a regular basis are by definition considered ‘good’ husbands [P2 0550, 1456; P3 0548, 1563, 3933, 3937, 3943, 3945, 3970, 3982, 3994, 4004, 4019, 4020].

The equation of a sexual relationship with men’s gifting is socio-culturally so deeply embedded that several informants implied that a certain man and woman were sexually involved by merely stating that “he took her to the market” [P2 2001; P3 1482, 1679]. 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, Alma (66) commented that those were “her husband” now, as they helped her to get the things she needed [P3 4018].

Gifting and providing are thus considered part and parcel of sexual relationships in Mudzi, as is found elsewhere in Malawi and sub-Saharan Africa. When engaging with men, Mudzi women expect no less. Other authors point out that a woman would feel offended and face ridicule from others if she received nothing from her lover, and that it would be considered immoral from a man not to give gifts to his sex partner (Ankomah 1999: 299, Helle-Valle 1999: 393). Some studies among African youth found that sex and male gifting are so much expected within a relationship that boys would break up with a girl who does not ask for money or gifts, suspecting her of wanting to spread HIV (Nyanzi et al. 2001: 96), and girls would break up with a boy who aspired to abstain from sex, considering him ‘childish’ (Bensch 2011: 145). Van den Borne (2005a: 124) relates that when a


12 Several contemporary anthropologists have argued that the tradition of bridewealth may have laid the basis for the now frequently noted transactional aspect of sexual relationships in Africa (e.g. Helle-Valle 1999: 379, Hunter 2010: 190, Nobelius et al. 2010: 498–9, Wamoyo et al. 2010: 16). This would be nearly insignificant for matrilineal societies where there is no customary payment of bridewealth. Even so, the less well-defined requirement for men to show long-term commitment, through gifting and labouring in his partner’s field, before becoming properly accepted as husband or son-in-law (e.g. Richards 1969 [1940]: 77), may have had the same effect. If current-day relationships in patrilineal societies are modelled after an exchange of bridewealth for sexual access to a woman, in matrilineal societies the tradition of a man’s continued gifting to formalize a marriage bond may have led to a persistent expectation, even claiming, of male support in sexual relationships.

woman tells an unrelated man about her financial problems, it is implicated that she is actually communicating her interest in a sexual relationship with him. Rather than male-female interactions entailing direct and deliberate exchanges of material support for sex, the picture that emerges is thus one in which sex and gifting are deeply intertwined and are both no more and no less than inherent features of male-female unions. “Sex and material gifts”, Wiseman Chirwa (1997: 8) argues for relationships in Malawi, “can have the same emotional value”. As a result, gifting is also strongly interrelated with feelings of affection and love, a point to which I return further on.

Because sexual relationships grant a woman entitlement to support, they form an important means for her to increase her livelihood security. Although, as we will see further on, such direct access to support is not the only reason for women to engage in sexual relationships, I here want to make the point that women tend to play an active role in assuring such support.14 As providing is expected from male partners in sexual relationships (just like paying reverence, attending to household chores, and caring for children are expected from the female partner), women have a right to claim such support. We overheard some men discuss, and were told by others, that women can be very explicit and demanding about the kind of gifts and the large share of the meagre incomes they desire from their partner [P2 0095, 0492, 0633, 0777, 0924; P3 1126, 2138, 2651, 2900–15]. 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]

Some women went as far as tactically dumping one partner for another whom they expected to be more ‘profitable’ [P2 0931, 1614, 1828]. Other women confided that they feigned interest in a particular proposer so as to access his gifts for as long as possible [P2 1560, 1724, 1731; P3 2470]. Not only through such almost exploitative tactics do some women assure or optimize their access to male support; many women invest to solidify relationships too, most notably through performing the task expected from wives, but also through material investment. Some Mudzi women, for example, bought credit to make phone calls whenever their budget allowed them to stay in touch with their chibwenzi [P2 1236, 1252, 1372, 1395, 1398, 1400], or luxury foods to please him [P3 1935, 2058, 3860]. As with male gifting, such overt female investments are strongest during the courting stage of a relationship

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which, it should be reminded, does not only include premarital youth but also married, widowed, divorced, and abandoned women in all other age groups).

These varied examples nuance the stereotypical depiction of men forcefully demanding sex in exchange for their support and women passively succumbing. Rather, Mudzi women make a deliberate efforts to pursue and sustain relationships. Moreover, they tend to actively ensure that their sexual relationships yield material benefit, while men, often without a real source of income, may at times be the ones to suffer from the reigning transactional expectations.

Self-providing women, non-providing men
The data presented so far have challenged the narrow focus of the transactional sex paradigm, which characterizes urgent need as primary motive, basic necessities as objects of exchange, and women’s powerlessness as their position in the transactions. It was demonstrated that the transfers may consist of basic necessities like food and soap, or relative luxuries like hair extensions or a mobile phone, and relationships with men may serve as a direct means to resources or as an insurance against future need. Whichever the case, it was found that the material support offered by men goes a long way to explain women’s engagement in sexual relationships. So far, our data thus support the transactional sex paradigm’s focus on women’s involvement in relationships for material transfers from men. This ‘male material support’ argument fails to explain, however, all of the relationships that we encountered in Mudzi. Patricia (36), for example, earned a substantial independent income with her thriving chitenje business, yet stayed with a husband whom she described as lazy and promiscuous. Rosemary (49) accepted a proposal from the village drunkard, who would surely not contribute to the household income – more likely misuse her money for his drinking habit. Apparently, there are also other motivations for women to get involved with men besides accessing male’s material support. In the following section I discuss these complementary and alternative motivations.

Other reasons for sexual relationships
Conformity and community respect

“It’s just natural, God created a man and a woman to live together.”[P3 3203–4, also P3 3189–90, 3310–1, 3617, 3675, 3900, 4018]15

Socio-cultural approaches to HIV prevention, with the explanatory ‘transactional sex’ paradigm at their centre, have often overlooked the power of convention, and the wish to conform to it. Various Mudzi women could not think of another

15 The women who made such references to God were from various religious denominations, i.e. Islam, CCAP, African Continent, Jehovah’s Witness, and Zambezi Church.
reason for having accepted a marriage proposal than that it is simply natural for a woman to have a husband, and for a man to have a wife [P3 2971, 3900, 4018]. A number of women (most of them Christian, some Islamic) referred to God or the Holy Scriptures as prescribing that men and women must unite. Several women explained their acceptance of a marriage proposal by stating that they had been waiting for a man to found a family with ever since they had stopped school\textsuperscript{16} and just spent their time helping their (grand)mother in her field and in her household [P3 3627, 3904, 3945, 3994, 4009]. As girls matured, the longing for a husband and a household of their own became more pressing. At 19, Kondwani (35) felt ashamed that she was not married yet like her peers, and gladly accepted the first marriage proposal she received [P3 0515]. Other women too stated that it had simply been their time or age to get married [P3 2507, 3980, 4009, 4018].

To assess the extent to which women make divergent relationship choices when their material needs are met through other means than relationships with men, Gertrude and I sought out women with independent incomes. In total we talked to 30 small-scale businesswomen selling merchandise at one of the markets near Mudzi (multiple times, in most cases, unless they could not be found again), as well as the nurse employed at the health clinic of the nearby trading centre. Notably, these women, who managed to generate an independent income on a more-or-less regular basis, had marital and childbearing histories similar to Mudzi women without any regular source of independent income. Conversations with the income-generating women revealed that many of them married and remarried not because they lacked soap or food, which they purchased with their own money, but rather in order to be a respected member of their community. They wanted to follow conventional female behaviour and avert the risk of being portrayed or perceived as a prostitute, or as a threat to married women in the community (see also Haram 2004: 223).

One of the most successful women at the markets that we frequented was Patricia (36), who ran a thriving business of zitenje – the colourful cloth wrap that many women wear around their waist and tie their babies in. Patricia complained that her husband did not help her in any way in her business, and that he had extramarital relationships. The reason she mentioned for staying with him despite her discontent 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 0455, 0707, see also P3 3056]

Avoiding the gossip triggered by being without a partner also turned out to be an important motive for women who had no independent income (see also Schatz 2005: 486–7).

\textsuperscript{16} In Malawi primary education is free, but secondary education is not. Many children and youngsters therefore do not continue on to secondary school, and many drop out before even reaching that stage.
Chikondi (28) told us that some months back she had married a man on 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 pump after her first husband had left her, because they suspected her of receiving their husbands in her house. Within reach for her to hear, women had told each other: “Don’t talk to her, she may steal your husband.” Quickly marrying a new man had been the only way for her to stop such gossip, she felt. She now has an extra mouth to feed, but at least is accepted again by her fellow village women. [P3 3817-9]

Rosemary (49) received repeated 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]

Contrary to Chikondi, who did not know whether her new husband would be a good provider or not, Rosemary was well aware of the behaviour of her new (alcoholic) husband, and the probability that he would not provide her any support. Nonetheless she accepted his proposal, and as a result was accepted again by her peers. The importance of community inclusion for future survival will be further discussed in Chapter 7 on social capital and informal safety nets.

As experienced by Chikondi, women without a partner (in the sexually active age group, it must be added) are looked upon with suspicion [P2 1534, P3 0913, 2337–8, 2507, 3056, 3149, 3272–3, 3492–3, 3606-7] (see also Campbell 2000: 486, Schatz 2005: 486, Van den Borne 2005a: 108). Especially when an unmarried woman has young children it is commonly assumed that she must be in need of a partner to help her take care of them [P3 3127–8]. Conversely, men who want to ‘taste’ a new woman are believed to hunt especially for unmarried young mothers, as these presumably want support and are therefore quick to comply [P3 2458, 3650] (see also Miller et al. 2010: 4). The relatively large number of unmarried women (probably resulting from high levels of male out-migration) thus poses a – real or imagined – threat to their married fellow village women. When the widowed Evelin (29) wore a new chitenje [P3 2295] or the abandoned Jeneti (37) ate dried fish for lunch one day, the figurative alarm bells went off throughout the village and gossip abounded about how the women may have obtained these [also P3 2850, 3041]. Several unmarried women found their house intruded by married fellow village women whose husbands had not returned home at his usual time, to check to see if he had been ‘stolen’ [P3 0608, 3606, 4018].

Teleza (28), a mother of two and without husband at the time of this conversation, explained:

“If they find money themselves, women do not need a husband. But the problem here in this village is that even if I start a business and everybody could see that I am finding my own support, still when they see you chatting with a man they say ‘Aiiiii, she is [sexually] involved with that one.’ Many women therefore force themselves to be married, so as to end such insinuations.” [P3 3056]
According to Teleza, the problem is not so much that women have no means to generate an income: they have options for this and thus do not necessarily need a husband for it. The problem is rather that having an independent income does not protect women against malicious gossip and jealousy – which can only be averted by being properly married. While Teleza says that women force themselves to be in a relationship, it seems more accurate to state that women force each other to time and again accept new relationship proposals.

Without a sexual relationship, Mudzi women thus face harassment and risk social exclusion because other women feel contempt for them and fear losing their own husband to them. Moreover, women without partner cannot easily count on support from fellow villagers, even if these are kin, because it is felt that providing material support is particularly a husband’s task. Unmarried women, it is commonly felt, should find themselves a husband to provide for them, rather than beg and expect support from others.\(^\text{17}\)

When the old Sibil, nearly deaf and blind, came to beg some salt from us, she prefaced her plea with an extensive clarification of why she had no husband to turn to for salt. She was too old now, she said, to draw water for a husband to wash his body, too weak to wash his clothes, or even to have sex with him at night. Only after having defended elaborately why she had no husband from whom she could request salt, did she ask us for some. [P2 0126]

Eveles (88) was bending over deeply to remove the weeds in her rice field. Two women who passed by stopped for a chat. Instead of meanwhile helping the old woman with her heavy task, they commented that she should get herself a husband to be helped on the field. Like Sibil, Eveles objected that she could no longer take care of a husband as a wife should. [P3 1100]

Amila (33) was pushed by her brothers and uncles to accept her second husband’s proposal after her first husband had left her with a child to care for. They warned her that if she chose not to grab this opportunity, she should not expect support from them in the future [P3 3861]. Likewise, Sofia (25) was denied support by her brother in South Africa because, he argued, it was her ex-husband who gave her all those children that she now had to care for, and him that she must turn to in case of need [P2 1514].

Ideally, as gathered from the above, a woman has a husband to provide for her and their children. Conforming to this ideal brings respect, while defiance brings about both 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, 2927, 2939–42, 2979, 3115, 3293, 3308–9, 3437, 3492–3, 3580, 3608, 3900, 3923].

Male tasks

“If your house collapses, you want a husband.” (Roda, 66, divorced) [P3 3231–2]

Another reason regularly mentioned for accepting or staying with a partner – albeit often in combination with the aforementioned reasons – concerned specific tasks

\(^{17}\) Obviously, when women are married they are referred to their husband for support [e.g. P2 1415].
that only men are assumed capable of [P3 0780, 3196–7, 3231–2, 3272–3, 3296–7, 3440–1, 3474–5, 3492–3, 3829, 3939, 3943, 3945, 3996]. As mentioned, husbands are supposed to build their wife a house, and preferably a separate kitchen, *bafa*, pit-latrine, and granary too. Furthermore, most Mudzi houses (and kitchens and toilets) have thatched roofs, which must be renewed annually. If, due to lack of sufficient firewood or labour power, walls are made of mud bricks that were sun-dried instead of burned, portions can be easily washed away by heavy rains if the roof is not well maintained. The grass fences that are constructed as *bafa* usually do not survive the rainy season either, nor do the twig granaries. Regular maintenance is thus required – and considered a typically male task.

Men’s physical labour is also appreciated in the fields. Whereas in the past men were charged with clearing new fields from trees and bushes (Tew 1950), this task is seldom performed anymore because the increased population size has hampered the traditional system of shifting cultivation (Mandala 1982: 30). Nowadays, men may help to make ridges, apply fertilizer and pesticides, and harvest. Mudzi men who have their own field tend to work there, sell what they harvest, and (ideally) share some of the revenues with their wives.

These physical tasks can also be carried out by a grown-up son, but they are often married elsewhere. Hired labourers could also build or maintain the necessary structures and help in the field, but many women consider it a waste of money to pay for the tasks that a husband should do for free [P3 2113, 3296–7, 3474–5]. Furthermore, as noted earlier, an unmarried woman able to hire labourers would be frowned upon and risks accusations of adultery and prostitution [P3 3041].

Love, lust, and looks
Judging from the data described so far, Mudzi women may seem calculating creatures who merely marry to safeguard their access to financial, social, or human capital. However, while pragmatic considerations undeniably play a role, so too do love, lust, and looks:

Makuta’s husband migrated to South Africa and sends regular support for her and their two children. Through this marriage, Makuta’s livelihood is reasonably secured and so is her reputation as respectable community member. The financial leeway and status as a migrant’s wife furthermore allow her to occasionally hire labourers to perform typical male duties for her household without arousing gossip. Nonetheless, Makuta (32) maintains a secret relationship with a man from one of Mudzi’s neighbouring villages. Every now and then she borrowed Gertrude’s bicycle to visit her lover, always seeming happy and excited with the prospect of meeting him again. On one of these occasions she told Gertrude that her husband had been away for almost four years, adding: “Aiiii, imagine! I cannot manage to stay without sex for so long.” On another occasion Makuta confided that she really liked her boyfriend, so much so that she longed for a baby from him. She planned to become pregnant just before her husband would return, so that she could pretend it to be his. [P2 1494, 1539, 1600, 1695, 1757; P3 2253]
The example of Makuta and her secret lover shows that not only pragmatic considerations play a role in women’s relationship choices. The various pragmatic reasons that I described in the previous sections were all well provided for through Makuta’s marriage. Something else, which I would characterize as romantic love and a desire for physical affection, drove her to engage in an additional relationship – even though this potentially endangered her highly beneficial migrant marriage. Typically, however, Makuta did not want to sacrifice this marriage, despite the strong feelings for her lover. She longed to carry his child, but preferred to raise it within her existing marital situation.

Love is a tricky topic – probably everywhere, but certainly in Mudzi, especially when regarded from a Western point of view. Whereas in the modern-day West a major classificatory difference exists between ‘liking’ and ‘loving’ someone, ChiChewa vocabulary does not contain distinct words for these emotions. Both are commonly captured by the same verb *kukonda*. This may be indicative of the different value attached to love in Western and Mudzi discourse and experience, and of the difficulties in analysing Mudzi relationships from a Western perspective. But interpreting what meanings are attributed to the concept of *kukonda* is not only complicated by this linguistic detail.

Various authors on male-female partnerships in the region assert that romantic love seldom features as an entity in itself in the relationship choices they studied (Cornwall 2002: 977, Haram 2004: 222, Mills & Ssewakiryanga 2005: 92, Richards 1969 [1940]: 22, Wamoyi et al. 2010: 6). Cross-cultural studies testing the universality of romantic love found relatively little signs of it in sub-Saharan Africa (Jankowiak & Fischer 1992, Lindholm 2006). Indeed, no hints can be found in Mudzi discourse of the mythical ideal so pervasive in the West that each individual has one perfect, destined match worth waiting for. Rarely, furthermore, did Mudzi women mention affectionate emotions as the exclusive reason for their involvement in a relationship. This does not necessarily mean, however, that passionate attractions are absent. As the case of Makuta reveals, such emotions do occur [see also P2 0766, 1135, 1701; P3 0844, 4006, 4007]. Her case also illustrates, however, that these are often granted a less prominent role than pragmatic concerns, and as a result may be locally considered unworthy or even inappropriate to mention.

I have relatively little data about women’s extramarital relationships such as that of Makuta, who volunteered this information herself. Although we interviewed all Mudzi women about their past and present relationships, and some told us about

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18 Alternative words include *kufuna*, which literally means ‘to want’ and can be used to express a desire for someone; *kugomera* translates as ‘admiring’ or ‘feeling attracted’, and might come closest to the English ‘being in love’; *chikondi chogonana* means something like ‘sleeping-together-love’, which however need not indicate any affectionate feelings; and the noun *mkomya* could be translated as ‘fondness’, referring particularly to (material) attentiveness between persons (Tirza Schipper, personal communication, Oct 3 2012).
(past) extramarital partners [P2 1208; P3 1804]. I suspect that most women limited their accounts to publicly recognized relationships (and probably even omitted many of these too). This is noteworthy because it could be hypothesized that extramarital relationships are more prominently driven by affectionate emotions than marital relationships. This may be so because, as in the case of Makuta, when a woman opts to take an extra partner rather than switch partners, she is most likely reasonably well provided for by her husband, and thus need not necessarily seek this in her other partner. Furthermore, women’s involvement in extramarital relationships is far less accepted than men’s, so that women must be secretive about it. Logically then, a woman cannot receive substantial gifts from her lover, let alone have him work in her field or compound, as this will surely raise suspicion. These factors make it seem reasonable to assume that attraction more often plays a (decisive) role in extramarital relationships than in marital relationships. It must be taken into account that the following analysis is largely based on women’s reports and our observations of publicly overt relationships.

As described, most relationships come about quickly, without partners actually getting to know each other – which generally precludes romantic feelings from fully developing. Free marital choice tends to be associated with a proliferation of romantic love as the basis for marriage (Rosenblatt & Cozby 1972, Sorrell 2005). This seems not to be the case in Mudzi. Although couples do not take time to let feelings grow before marrying, some appraisal is done by the women and most likely by men as well, and some level of attraction or liking is appreciated [P3 3863, 3889, 3998, 4002, 4005], as in the following example:

Victoria (now 26) related how a girl with whom she was chatting asked her whether she would be interested to marry her brother. At the time, Victoria, who had never been married and still lived with her mother, told the girl that she wanted to see the brother before deciding. A meeting was set up and Victoria agreed to marry because, she accounts, the boy was ready to marry her, and he “pleased her/made her happy” [anandisangalatsidwa] during their first meeting. The couple married a week later. [P3 3889]

Only a few times did women say that they were or had been in a certain relationship because they liked or loved their partner, and it is striking that these remarks always concerned their first intimate relationship [P3 3833, 3915, 3929, 3998, 4002, 4006, 4007]. Overhearing women discuss amongst each other their contemporary relationship choices also suggests that attraction and affection were expressed as decisive factors almost exclusively by adolescent women. Practically all insisted on at least seeing their proposer before deciding whether or not to accept [P2 0176; P3 0530, 3889, 3893]. Upon merely seeing him many women agreed to be in a relationship. One of these women explained that she had interpreted the attraction she felt at first sight to indicate that “our blood was matching”, which was reason enough for her to accept a marriage proposal [P3 0530, see also P3 3889]. Throughout our stay in Mudzi several youngsters, furthermore, declared that they rejected a proposing
man because they “did not like him” [P2 0766, 1400, 1586, 1740, 1831; P3 0448, 1797, 3885], blaming for example his bad smell [P2 1586], ugly clothes [P2 1831], or unattractive face [P2 1296]. It appears that affection and attraction as such only play a decisive role, or are condoned to play a decisive role, in the early phases of some women’s lives. Hence, when they still live with and are reasonably cared for by their (grand) mother, when their respectability does not yet depend on a married status, and when, because of these factors, they are not yet considered serious competitors on the marital market. This corresponds with those ethnographic studies that found (aspiration for) love to be a significant factor in the relationship choices of their rural African informants, focused particularly on premarital relationships of youngsters (e.g. Nnko et al. 2001, Poulin 2007, Stoebenau et al. 2011).19

Most prime-aged women – with children to care for, a household to run, and a field to cultivate – reveal a far more pragmatic approach to relationships and try to advise or even pressure youngsters to make what they consider wiser choices [P2 1740, 1745, 1825, 2044; P3 1636].

Dorica (15) is one of the few adolescent Mudzi girls attending school. She lives with her mother who occasionally trades crops and foodstuff, and an elder brother who performs *ganyu* when the family needs money. During our fieldwork period a young man visiting his friend in Mudzi proposed marriage to Dorica. The women who came to knit with us that afternoon, all in their twenties and thirties, felt that she should accept, because the proposer had a job and was also involved in trading. “She won’t be able to find school fees [to continue her education],” one argued. Another added that there are no jobs to be found even if she would manage to finish school. This man, all felt, would be her best bet for a secure future [P3 1636]. Dorica doubted, however. She had felt ready for marriage, but this was not the kind of guy she envisioned herself with. She preferred to continue her education – which is commonly considered incompatible with marriage, as a husband needs someone to care for him at home, and pregnancy would soon keep her tied to the house anyway [also P3 4104]. Dorica’s mother, who for two consecutive years had made the effort to gather money for Dorica’s secondary school fees, now strongly urged her daughter to choose marriage over education and accept the employed man’s proposal. When she eventually threatened to no longer pay Dorica’s school fees – out of genuine concern for her daughter’s future, as far as I can judge – the girl obeyed, dropped out, and married. [P2 1744]

It seems that throughout life women are taught, by others and by the harsh circumstances they face, to value livelihood security over romantic feelings. This socialization process may help to explain why most women tended to emphasize, to me and to each other, the material grounds for being in a relationship – which does not foreclose, notably, that these women have and are guided by emotional preferences too.

Grasping the role that love and affection play in women’s relationship choices is further complicated by the fact that emotional attachment is deeply intertwined with material factors [P2 1518, 1553, 1588, 1589, 1704; P3 0863, 2172, 2462, 3968].

While knitting one afternoon Tumanene (26) told us about her husband who works in South Africa. Livia (21) then commented: “Your husband loves you, because he was buying some hair extensions for you, and now that he is in South Africa he sends you money.” Tumanene smiled, and said: “Yes, it is true”[P2 1518]. Later, Makuta (31), whose husband also migrated to South Africa, lamented: “Please listen to me, I miss my husband!” Tumanene replied: “Even myself, every night I look at his picture 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 in the field together.” [P2 1553]

A man’s love for his wife is measured by his compliance with the duties expected from a husband: fulfilling his wife’s material needs and wishes, and helping her with the heavy physical tasks around her house and in her field. Taking up the plight of financially caring for a partner in a setting that is economically highly insecure like Mudzi is considered and valued as a manifestation of love20 [P2 1518, 1553, 1589, 1704; P3 2172, 2462]. In return, such dedication from a man to his partner may in itself trigger affectionate feelings from her. Male support, both material and physical, is thus not only an expression and indication of love, but can, as Cornwall (2002: 977) has also argued, actually produce love. Looking back on our time in Mudzi, Gertrude believes there was ‘love’ only between three of the couples. Rather than taking this as a fact (I think I saw signals of being ‘in love’ among others than these three), the criterion that Gertrude uses is telling. She concluded that there must have been love in these relationships because the husbands provided substantially to their wives instead of dividing the relatively large wealth they had access to between several partners.

In sum, when one Mudzi girl lamented that her boyfriend had stopped giving her money [P2 0615], this need not have been merely a regret about the loss of income. Most probably, through this statement, she also communicated her concern about his fading love or at least interest in her. In other words, reading from women’s frequent comments on economic transfers that this is all they care for ignores the symbolic value that such transfers can have for them besides their material value.

It seems safe to say that where there is gifting (between a non-related man and woman), there is sex21 – and where there is sex, there is gifting. This does not mean, however, that whenever there are sex and gifting, there is love (see also Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009: 20). Love is longed for in a relationship, and considered an important ingredient for a long-lasting, stable marriage [P2 1605; P3 0824, 1208, 3223–4, 3923]. It is, however, not considered a prerequisite for entering a chibwenz
relationship or marriage – as demonstrated in the previous subsections. Rather, it is generally considered to arise from and be nurtured by the caring behaviour of both partners – a woman preparing her partner’s favourite meal, a man bringing household necessities before his partner asks for it, and helping to cultivate her field without complaint [e.g. P2 1606; P3 2507, 2676, 3860]. Some Mudzi women stated that such love usually lasts only from “just after marriage until the first child is born” [P2 1605; P3 0844, 3191], while others believe that it is something that grows when spouses persist in their commitment to each other and their household over an extended period of time [P3 2507, 2752].

Possibly related to the emotion of love is the motivation of revenge, which two Mudzi women mentioned as reason for engaging in a relationship [P2 1208, 1636, see also 1058] (see also Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009: 55, Tawfik & Watkins 2007: 1096). Both women felt hurt and angry upon finding out that their husband was having sexual relations with another woman, and took on a temporary lover to get even with their (to-this-day) husband.

Besides love and looks, sexual lust too plays an ambivalent role in women’s relationship choices. A few women hinted that their own feelings of lust drove them [P2 0158, 1539, 1600; P3 0790] (see also Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009: 39–41). More often, however, women mentioned it when I asked whether they thought that women in general would still want a husband if they could generate their own income. Some resolutely answered that in such case a woman should not need nor want a husband [P3 2935, 3164, 3190, 3230, 3400, 3499, 3640]. Most others noted one or more of the reasons discussed above for women’s preference to be in a relationship even if she has an independent income [P3 3005-6, 3056, 3102, 3204, 3293, 3379, 3416, 3441, 3456, 3475, 3606, 3617, 3629, 3651, 3675]. And several women pointed to a natural, uncontrollable desire for sex [P 3075, 3148, 3255, 3269, 3441, 3443, 3536–7, 3596, 3617, 3664]. One of them, married and in her fifties, empathetically remarked that: “Well, for example, it is difficult for a woman to build a house. But even if you manage to get everything done by yourself, there always remains one thing that you cannot do alone…” [P3 3350].

Most other women who suggested sex as reason for women with independent incomes to engage in relationships with men sounded more judgemental about it. As will be further elaborated in Chapter 6, sex has throughout Bantu history been valued as vital to individual, conjugal, and community wellbeing. Nonetheless, casual comments from Mudzi women suggest that too explicit an appetite for sex is disapproved of in women [P2 1124, 1417; P3 2166, 3367-8]. Other scholars of male-female relationships in the region have also noted that engaging in sex for pleasure.

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21 For material related to villagers and Gertrude concluding that a certain girl or woman must be involved in a sexual relationship based on her visible access to resources, see P2 1524, 1787; P3 1340, 1571, 2302, 2337, 2341, see also P3 2253.
is considered unfit for women\textsuperscript{22} (e.g. Cornwall 2002: 965–6, Nobelius et al. 2010: 490). By claiming that women who are sufficiently livelihood secure can have no other reason to be involved with men than to satisfy their sexual desire, some of my informants thus insinuated that such women must by definition be driven by lust. This potentially negative conclusion too may help to explain why women tend to underline time and again that they entered a relationship (or series of relationships) because of dire need – a point to which I return further on.

Interestingly – and surprisingly, considering the high value attached to motherhood – only one woman explicitly noted that a desire to beget children may be a reason for women to accept relationship proposals [P3 3475]. Theoretically, relationships are no prerequisite for procreation. The lack of emphasis on the aspect of reproduction may indicate that in daily life practice, too, relationships are defined by the very fact that there is more to a union than mere reproduction.

\textit{Frequent divorce and remarriage}

“The problem with men here,” commented Pamela (27), “is that the first days they are very serious about loving you, but soon they will just leave you at home wondering where to find food.” [P3 0844, see also P3 0871, 3191]

The high rate at which men and women change partners is the second ‘risky’ relationship practice to be discussed in this chapter. Pamela’s complaint about the quick dissolving of relationships in Mudzi is confirmed by studies that found divorce rates to be comparatively high among matrilineal groups in general,\textsuperscript{23} including those in Malawi.\textsuperscript{24} Summarizing the reasons mentioned in the literature for the fragility of matrilineal marriage bonds, Amy Kaler (2001: 531) lists 1) the perception that men are torn between their natal village and that of their wife, 2) the absence of bridewealth payments to solidify the marriage, 3) cultural ideologies that prioritize the brother-sister bond over the husband-wife bond, 4) the relatively high status of women enabling them to easily send off an unsatisfactory husband, and 5) the persistence of male out-migration in searching for employment. Not all of these seem sufficiently backed by empirical evidence, however. Arguably, statements one and three may in theory apply to patrilineal societies as well, in which case it is the women who are emotionally torn between their natal village and the village of their children, and in which the lineage bond may also be prioritized over the marital bond. So while these attributes may well underlie marriage instability, they seem insufficient to explain why divorce rates would

\textsuperscript{22} Such a repressive female sexual morality has been linked to Christian influences in Africa (e.g. Ahlberg 1994, Arnfred 2007). I dare not say to what extent this is the case in Mudzi. In the next chapter I elaborate upon sexual mores and practices.

\textsuperscript{23} Bleek 1975, Gluckman 1950, Mair 1953: 99.

be highest in matrilineally organized societies. Lesley Noonan (1979) compared ethnographic data on 442 ‘preliterate’ societies regarding conditions that are in the social science literature often mentioned as affecting divorce rates. Of the tested variables, only matrilocal residence after marriage was found on its own to predict greater marriage instability. Post-marital matrilocal residence may be associated with arguments one, four, and five (although this last is strongly related to other factors too, as argued in Chapter 2). The argument that the custom of bridewealth increases marital stability is not supported by Noonan’s cross-cultural study, nor by Gibbs who notes that marriage payments are at times just (fruitless) attempts to counter high levels of marriage instability (Gibbs 1963: 558).

Georges Reniers (2003) calculated that divorce probabilities in Malawi are among the highest on the continent (ranging from 45 to 60 percent per lifetime), and within Malawi are highest in the (largely matrilineally organized) Southern Region. This is in line with the outcome of comparisons based on ethnicity rather than locality, which found that throughout Africa no ethnic group was recorded to have a divorce ratio higher than the Yao (Bleek 1975: 192, Barnes 1949). Based on a longitudinal data set, Reniers (2003: 189) estimates that in rural Balaka about one-third of first marriages end in divorce even before the fifth anniversary, and almost two-thirds dissolve within 25 years. Of all divorced women in rural Balaka 70 percent remarries within three years after divorce, and 90 percent is remarried within eight years (Reniers 2003: 194).

My elderly Mudzi informants attribute the high relationship turnover to the increasingly loose morals of current-day youth [P2 0327; P3 0435, 0953, 1146, 1326, 2586, 3003-4, 3345–8, 3361–4, 3439, 3586, 3813, 4025, 4027]. One woman in her sixties commented that youngsters these days “get husbands like they are getting tomatoes at the market” [amangotola mwamuna ngati tomato pamsika] [P3 3003]. Kaler (2001) however found that the very same discourse on loosening morals and increasing divorce rates prevailed in interviews conducted in the same research area in the late 1940s, when today’s elderly were young (see also Vaughan 1987). While this

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25 The tested variables are bridewealth, household organization (independent or extended), type of union (polygamous or monogamous), post-marital residence, settlement patterns, subsistence activities, division of labour, and religious practices.

26 The divorce ratio is defined as a percentage of all completed marriages, estimated at 68 percent among the Yao.

27 These data form part of the Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (MDICP) described in Chapter 3.

28 Younger women too at times complained that “men these days” do not want to commit themselves to a serious relationship [P2 0177, 1131; P3 3252].

29 Several Mudzi elderly women attributed the disobedience of contemporary youth towards the traditional authority of community elders to newly introduced concepts like ‘democracy’, ‘freedom of speech’, and ‘gender equality’ [e.g. P3 0953]. I return to point this in Chapter 6.

30 These interviews are described in unpublished records of James Clyde Mitchell, which are archived in the Rhodes Library at Oxford University.
might point to a progressive volatility of partnerships, Kaler rather interprets it as a consistency in the invoking of an invented idyllic past. Indeed, many of Mudzi’s elderly women had themselves behaved in ways which they now condemned, for example marrying before they were properly matured (when their “breasts were still small”) [P3 0366, 1326, 3962, 4021], remarrying several times [P3 0608, 0703, 2206, 4104], having extramarital relationships [P2 1208; P3 1804], and conceiving children with men other than their husbands [P3 1804] [see also P2 1692]. Mitchell (1956: 186) estimated in 1956 that at his research site near Mudzi, 80 percent of men and women over the age of 40 had been through at least one divorce – which suggests that marriage instability has been fairly stable over at least the past half century.

In Mudzi, relationships tend to be dissolved as casually as they were begun. Notwithstanding Pamela’s earlier-quoted complaint about men’s tendency to quickly abandon a new partner, women can do so too, as she did herself:

On their way to the pump, Gertrude brought up the rumour she heard about Pamela’s brief marriage. Pamela confirmed that she had gotten married and divorced within three weeks, elaborating that: “I worked alone in the field and he helped me only for a week. Then I just told him ‘Basi, banja latha, dzipitani’ [Enough, our marriage is over, you must go], then he just packed and left.” [P2 1225]

If the marriage bond had been formalized (by appointing matrilineal relatives as marriage counsellors and making a payment to the chief), upon divorce it must be formally dissolved. For this, both spouses must again go to the chief with their ankhoswe to have him or her write a letter of divorce [P2 1652; P3 1856, 2297, 3199-3200]. The ankhoswe then decide on division of the couple’s properties [e.g. P3 1723] – the children, house, and field in principle remain with the woman (see also Mwambene 2005: 16–8), while the man is encouraged to continue supporting his children on an occasional basis [e.g. P3 1723, 3996]. As Pamela lamented, however, some men simply disappear and do not return, leaving their wives uncertain about their marital status [e.g. P3 0546, 1501, 1856, 3821, 3959, 3766, 3998], and unauthorized31 to formally remarry [P3 1856, 2297]. While a married woman must first formally divorce before she can marry another man, a man can be married to several wives. When he only visits another woman during daytime, but continues to spend the nights with his wife, he is considered to have an extramarital girlfriend. When he starts to spend some nights at the other woman’s house, the man is considered to have two wives. These men divide their nights between the various households [e.g. P3 0766, 3891, 3913].

31 Some husbands send a notification to their wife after disappearing, informing her that their marriage has ended and granting her permission to look for a new partner [P3 0705]. Even without such formal notification, a chief can decide to allow an abandoned woman to divorce unilateraly if he or she finds this reasonable [P3 2297].
Men are generally perceived as instigating divorce\textsuperscript{32} quicker and more often than women [P2 1604; P3 3185, 3247–8, 3264–5, 3410–1, 3593, 3672], and as soon as they are slightly unsatisfied with her behaviour. According to some Mudzi women, men just find themselves another wife, and leave – usually in that order [P2 0125; P3 2889, 3854]. In practice, obviously, not all men are so quick to depart. One Mudzi man compared his (quarrelsome) marriage to football: “Sometimes you fall, but then you just get up and continue, still enjoying the game” [P3 2753]. Nonetheless, numerous Mudzi women relate that their ex-partners simply left one day without giving any reason, and never returned [e.g. P3 0546, 1040, 3766, 3772, 3900, 3902, 3962, 3963, 3994]. Not seldom did this departure coincide with childbirth [P2 0144, 0160, 1605, 1638, 1883, 1940; P3 0505, 0698, 0780, 0871, 1729]. Local custom prohibits couples from having sex in the months after delivery,\textsuperscript{33} which prompts some men to (temporarily) move in with another woman. Furthermore, as described earlier, various Mudzi men left their wife and her children when the responsibility of providing became too difficult [P2 1178, 1221; P3 1729], as did Rosemary’s fifth husband:

Barely half a year had her latest husband lived with Rosemary (49) in the small house that she shares with her three youngest children and four grandchildren. When times became harsh and food scarce, the man left the cramped house, and explained that: “I know how to cook, and I always manage to find food for myself, only not for the big family, that’s why I divorced.” [P2 1178]

Notably, one of the Mudzi men who did stick with his wife and her children throughout each hunger season was explicitly praised for this by other Mudzi women, which reveals how uncommon this is for men [P2 1624].

Other reasons for divorce offered by men include discontent with the disrespectful or quarrelsome behaviour of a wife [P2 0128, 1518, 2133; P3 1231, 3650, 3809, 3963], or her failure to produce (healthy) children [P2 0157; P3 0506, 3854, 4012]. From this last reason it appears that at least some men, or men under certain circumstances, value having offspring, even though this does not benefit their own lineage and does not seem to hold back many men from abandoning this offspring later in life. It is likely that providing a woman with (many strong) children confirms a man’s masculinity and may at least therefore be desired. A child, furthermore,

\textsuperscript{32} Like my use of the term ‘marriage’ – which in line with the local Mudzi use refers to both formal and informal unions, I use the term ‘divorce’ to designate separations of both formal and informal unions.

\textsuperscript{33} In southern Malawi there is no specified duration of the period of post-partum abstinence, but it generally lasts until the child can crawl and stand (Zulu 2001: 475–6). On average it is practiced for 6.5 months in this region (which is longer than in the Central and Northern Regions, where it lasts 3.1 and 4.9 months respectively) (GoM 2011a: 84). Intercourse can only be resumed after the performance of a ritual that I further discuss in Chapter 6 on sex and HIV. The length of the post-partum abstinence seems to be diminishing, possibly due to biomedical demystification of the perceived ancestral sanctions against defiance (Chirwa & Chizimbii 2009: 61–2) or an increased need felt by women to hold on to their partner (Zulu 2001: 477).
tends to solidify a relationship, and may be ‘requested’ by a man to both assess and strengthen his new partner’s commitment towards him [e.g. P3 0871]. As we shall see further on, children create a bond between otherwise unrelated co-parents that they can (legitimately but not necessarily successfully) fall back on even after break up. When many, or even all, of a couple’s children die, this may moreover be interpreted as bad omen, signalling bewitchment, disease, or both [e.g. P2 0040; P3 0555], and for this reason too be cause for divorce.

Women are considered to have more at stake and therefore try harder to make their marriage last [P3 3264–6, 3410–1, 3593]. They cannot, like men, easily acquire a new partner, but instead must wait for someone willing to propose to them [e.g. P3 3002, 3264-5]. If they have children it may be difficult to find another man prepared to take care of them. Women’s perceived need for men’s economic and physical support has already been described in depth, as has their need for marriage in order to be considered a respected community member. Furthermore, some Mudzi women rationalized that it cannot be known beforehand whether a new husband will be any better [e.g. P3 2795, 3900]. A few women mentioned fear of abuse or bewitchment as reason for not instigating divorce when unhappy with a husband [P3 2933, 3053, 3581].

When dissatisfied with their husband’s behaviour, some women therefore choose to accept it [e.g. P2 1604; P3 2999–3000, 3264–6, 3900, 3913]. Others try to change it through discussions with him, angry outbursts, or outright threats [P2 1208–10, 1499, 1796; P3 3790]. Some also pay a sorcerer to magically encourage their husband’s desired behaviour and discourage his disliked activities [e.g. P2 1405, 1484, 1910]. If these measures fail, women turn to their ankhoswe for advice and support (see also Schatz 2005) [P3 3283–4, 3410–1, 3449–50, 3579]. These ankhoswe then talk to the unruly husband on behalf of his wife. Mitchell (1962: 37) writes: “If marriages do not run as smoothly as they ought to, the marriage sureties [ankhoswe] are often put to some discomfort in trying to persuade, cajole and browbeat their kinsmen into more acceptable behaviour.” When the ankhoswe too fail to better the man, women are free to “chase away” their husband [P3 3371]. Although I have no means of knowing with certainty how often in total my informants had been abandoned and how often they had sent off a husband, the cases that I do know of seem to be equally divided between the two scenarios. Women’s frequent resort to divorce reveals their relatively good fall-back position: indeed, they maintain their entitlements to land, own a house, and often have means to generate an independent income if need be.34

Mudzi women’s wish to divorce most often stemmed from what they considered to be insufficient commitment from their husband to their household. “He stopped

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34 Women’s independent income-generating options will be further elaborated upon in Chapter 8.
taking care,” many say, some elaborating further that he just stayed at home, expecting to be catered to, while neglecting to help in the field, earn money, or maintain the compound [P2 0645, 1232, 1480, 1614, 1828; P3 0729, 1603, 3073–4, 3145–6, 3228, 3663, 3823, 3978, 3998; P8 0085, 0087]. Some divorced explicitly because they found a better provider [P2 0931, 1614, 1828]. About half of the women who decided to end their marriage did so because their husband began to have or persisted in having relationships with other women [P2 0177, 1409, 1480, 1756; P3 3439, 3663, 3766, 3790, 3809, 3893, 3978, 3996]. Women who declined relationship proposals often say they did so because the man was already married to another woman [P2 0275; P3 0418, 0532, 0609, 2236, 3438-9]. Livia (21), for example, told a married man who proposed to her: “I cannot manage to stay with a man with two wives because when buying relish it means you will be dividing it into two parts, when buying a *chitenje*, dividing it. I don’t want that” [P2 0275]. In line with Livia’s statement, women’s main argument to problematize polygyny and promiscuity is that it entails sharing a man’s resources (including physical labour) with his other partners [see also P2 0521, 1805; P3 0943]. “Then it becomes difficult to get enough,” explained Dora (42) [P3 3996]. Fear of AIDS, or diseases in general, too makes women apprehensive of promiscuous husbands [P2 1548; P3 2340, 2943–4, 3909], although, as we shall see in Chapter 6, this reason is often secondary to other considerations.

Notably, polygyny and promiscuity do not necessarily lead to divorce. Where the support provided by a husband remains substantial enough (e.g. from those employed in town or South Africa), women tend to overlook his adultery [P2 1561, 1893; P3 0841, 2329, 2340, 2468]. Other women, especially those who had some form of independent income, value their status as married woman more than they mind the reduced support from their polygynous or promiscuous husband, and thus prefer to stay married [e.g. P3 0417, 0706–7]. One woman said that she does not want to divorce her husband, who hurts her by spending much of his time (and resources) with his other household, not only because she prefers to stay respectfully married, but also because she loves him [P3 3913].

Additional reasons that women cited as grounds for divorce are violence [P2 1212, 1548; P3 0608, 3817, 3915; P8 0089], alcohol abuse [P2 0645; P3 1603, 3227–8; P8 0089], and signs of witchcraft [P2 1212; P3 0784, 3662, 3939, 3949].

In no case did a Mudzi woman complain about – let alone want to divorce – a husband who supported her sufficiently [e.g. P3 3225-6]. This, again, should not be interpreted as indicating that women are only after material gain. Rather, in a

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35 Possible exceptions are the one woman who instigated divorce after all of her eight children had died and a consulted diviner claimed that it had been her husband who bewitched them [P3 3939], and two adolescent girls who got so fed up with the insatiable sexual lust of their new husbands that they chose to move back into their parental home [P2 1586; P3 0757, 1462]. In these cases the husband MAY have been a good provider, but I do not know whether he indeed was.
harsh environment like that of Mudzi, a man who is willing to work in his wife’s field, diligently look for (scarce, arduous, and low-paid) labour opportunities, and sacrifice the fruits of this to his wife’s household is by definition a good (we might say loving and loved) husband.

Interestingly, relationship break-ups are instigated by Mudzi women whether or not they have an alternative source of income at that moment [e.g. P3 0523]. As we shall see in Chapter 8, women’s income-generating activities depend on their marital status, and not vice versa. It appears, from this and the above, that while economic motives are an important aspect of women’s reasons to end a relationship, these are certainly not the only nor necessarily decisive factors – as found earlier, too, regarding women’s reasons to accept proposals.

Whereas women of the prime-age group – those with young children – feel pressured to have a husband and are therefore at a relatively disadvantaged position vis-à-vis men, the tables turn when men and women approach the elderly age group:

Alma (66), whom I classified among Mudzi’s ‘best off’, has declined all proposals she received after her third husband disappeared with the money they had earned by selling their cotton. “Men only disturb you,” she feels, “they may not help you on your field, yet eat your harvest.” When chatting with her and her elder (widowed) sister one afternoon, they argued that they were better off without husband, explaining that: “We have children that take care of us. Now if we slaughter a chicken, we can keep it all to ourselves instead of sharing it with a husband!” [P3 2120, see also P2 1624; P3 1101, 3369–70]

Being beyond child-bearing and -rearing age, and sufficiently taken care of by their adult children, Alma and her sister were not considered a threat to the marriages of other women. They were therefore no longer harassed and pushed into new relationships by the envy of fellow village women. Men, on the other hand, have less physical strength to generate money or perform their traditional tasks of building and maintaining the compound when they grow older, and can therefore less easily find a new partner [P3 1534]. Thus, while women’s need for a husband diminishes, men become more dependent on their current wives for access to field, food, and fireplace.

The longer relationships last, however, the less acceptable it becomes to divorce [P3 3308–9, 3427–8, 3478–9]. A woman who after many years of marriage wants to send off her husband is publicly criticized for “wanting to eat their children’s support alone” [P2 1624; P3 3427–8, 3478–9]. As discussed earlier, marriages in this area were never sealed by one single ceremony, but rather by a series of events throughout the union. In this light, only couples that survive the ravages of time – that begot children together, planted seeds and picked the fruits together – may be perceived as really married. During the years-long ‘testing period’ or preamble to real marriage, a break-up is justified for many reasons, but the longer a couple stays together, the more solidified and unbreakable their relationship becomes. Our long-wed neighbour, as several other Mudzi men, simply refused to go whenever
his wife got so fed up with his behaviour that she wanted to divorce, pleading that he had stood by her side for many years and had nowhere else to go [P2 1204, see also P3 0702, 1804, 2028, 3314–5, 3328-9, 3583, 3849, 3992]. Some wives left it at this, in some cases saying that they “pitied” their husband for not having any place else to go to, therefore continuing to care for him. Others persisted and eventually managed to rid themselves of an unwanted, stubborn husband – by continuing to express their complaints to the ankhoswe, and ultimately paying the chief so as to enforce a divorce [P3 1534, 1603, 1614, 2028, 3998, 4018]. Tellingly, the few elderly women who were happy with their long-time husbands all are in the group that I classified as ‘best off’.

• Relationships as individual endeavours
Because the marriage bond in Mudzi is generally fragile, unreliable, and short-lived both men and women seem to consider it a vehicle for personal improvement rather than a shared endeavour – despite the common expression that marriage revolves around ‘helping each other’. There is great mutual distrust between spouses, much secrecy, and little solidarity (see also Forster 2001: 247). As noted and further elaborated upon in Chapter 8, women have ways to access money through other means than relationships with men. And when they do, married women tend to keep this or the exact amount they gather secret from their husband [P3 1903] (see also Peters 1997b: 203). Likewise, men too prefer to hide their exact earnings [P2 1618; P3 1903, 2943–4, 3310–1, 3468–9].

Saida (28, married, five children) does not know how much salary her husband receives for his job at a motel in the adjacent district, he just sends her some money every now and then. Saida explains that many spouses “amabisa” [hide from each other what they earn]. Otherwise, she says, their partner may be begging or even demanding too much of it. She herself did tell her husband that she took out a 10,000 MK loan, because she may need his help in paying back the instalments. [P3 1903, see also P2 0095]

This tendency of spouses to scrupulously protect their separate budgets has been noted throughout Africa (Guyer 1984, Peters 1997b: 203, Poewe 1981: 80, Richards 1939: 133, Sudarkasa 1986: 101, Vaughan 1987: 130).

In line with this, Mudzi spouses who both own land tend to cultivate these individually, each working in their own field [P3 0706, 1432, 3468–9, 4012; P8 0002]. Some husbands add their maize yield to the household granary, others sell all their produce as it is their wife’s obligation to feed them anyway – ideally sharing some of the revenue with her in return.

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36 Some women suggested that such men use traditional medicine to assure that their wives will not persist or succeed in enforcing divorce [P3 3315, 3615].
37 This amount was equivalent of 50 Euro at the time of the research.
Suspicion between spouses intensifies around harvest time, when their – individual or joint – labour in the fields becomes materialized, and thus snatchable. A general fear persists among Mudzi women that their husband will run off with all or part of their cotton revenues, which they as wives feel entitled to because they have fed him throughout the year or have even helped grow the cotton [P3 2791, 2943–4, 2951-2, 2999–3000, 3310–1, 3468–9, 3613]. Various men indeed disappeared after receiving the cotton proceeds, some under the pretense of a fight with their wife, only to return after having spent all money [P2 2024; P3 0550, 3088–94, 3766, 4018] (see also Bryceson et al. 2004: 26). Rosemary (49), for example, complained that her husband:

“... already sold his cotton [which she helped him to cultivate on his field] and he didn’t give me any money. I [also] helped him to grow tomatoes, but he sold them by himself. And then he left me. ... His aim was to eat alone what we harvested. He now says that he wants to be back with me but I told him that I don’t want to. As of now he has sold everything including [some of] our maize.” [P3 3088–94]

Not only cash crops generate tensions, maize does too. Although the maize stored rarely suffices to feed a family until the next harvest, men and women alike try to gain some personal benefit from it before it all disappears. When knitting one afternoon towards the end of the hunger season, Molly (26) remarked:

“We are about to start eating green maize. During harvest time many women put some maize in a tin with clothes on top, cheating their husband [by saying] that she is going to wash her clothes or blanket at the pump, while going somewhere else to sell. And with the money they just buy biscuits or *mandasi*3 but not relish because her husband may ask where she got the money. And the husband also steals some maize to sell and with the money they go to buy *kachasu* [a locally brewed gin]. They all forget that they were sleeping without eating any food.” [P2 1274]

As forecasted by Molly, in the weeks that followed numerous married women and men secretly came to offer us maize for sale, stressing that we should not tell their spouse [P2 1504, 1565, 1582, 1583, 1590, 1611,1635, 1761]. Gertrude wrote down:

I saw Hamra [age 58] carrying a tin as if she was going to fetch some water while coming to sell some maize and it was 8kgs 200 MK. She told me that: My husband is the one who told me to sell the maize in order to buy pain killers because he is not getting better, but please tell him that it was 100MK not 200MK. Tomorrow I will come to sell for 500MK, I want to buy a *chitenje*, but please don’t tell him. [P2 1583]

Several days later, Hamra’s husband showed up with a tin of maize too, and Gertrude wrote:

[Hamra’s husband] came to sell 12kg = 370 at 30mk/kg. Then he told me that now I am getting better, I cheated my wife that I am not getting better because I didn’t want to help her harvesting and I wanted to have a chance of coming to sell maize here, he laughed. [P2 1611]

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38 A ‘*mandasi*’ is a local pastry.
Husbands and wives can never be sure of their spouses’ commitment to their partnership and not rely on his or her sustained support. This reinforces and is reinforced by each spouse’s prioritization of their individual agendas. In response to this reality, Mudzi villagers found ways to cover their needs, in more or less subtle ways, both within marriage and by changing or even combining partners. This navigating of both men and women between different partners is further analysed in the following section.

Relational overlap
There is yet another aspect that makes relationship practices in Mudzi risky in a context of high HIV prevalence. Besides quickly entering into sexual relationships with often-unknown partners and the frequent exchange of partners, there is a high incidence of concurrent partnerships. In Chapter 2 I mentioned that overlapping sexual relationships greatly facilitate the transmission of HIV and are considered an important driver of the AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa.

I have also mentioned that a reliable quantification of sexual concurrency is difficult to obtain. As one indication of the level of sexual concurrency, the 2004 MDICP survey found that in Balaka 32 percent of women and 24 percent of men said they had been in a polygynous marriage (Reniers & Tfaily 2008: 1816). However, the definitions of marriage and polygyny that were used are not mentioned, and the reliability of the data is only sparsely problematized. As far as I know at least one-fifth of Mudzi’s husbands do not spend all nights with their Mudzi wife. We know with certainty that one-tenth of all Mudzi women were, at the time of our fieldwork, simultaneously involved in sexual relationships with at least two and sometimes more men. All these numbers, both those from Balaka in general and Mudzi in particular, refer to active sexual relationships. I will argue further on that such active concurrent relationships, the amount of which is likely to be underestimated anyway, are only part of a larger constellation of partnership overlap.

In line with the unclear demarcations between chibwenzi and banja relationships, the distinction between formal polygamy and informal extramarital relationships is vague. Mudzi villagers are relatively quick to classify a relationship as marriage – in practice, as soon as a man starts to spend some nights at his partner’s house. Following local terminology, then, many concurrent relationships should be called ‘polygamous’ rather than ‘extramarital’. More specifically, these relationships must be called ‘polygynous’ – as only men can actually spend their nights at various houses. Women may maintain multiple sexual relationships, but in theory cannot spend a night at their partner’s house as he has none.39 Besides this practical

39 I have not heard of cases in which a man invited other women into the house of his wife (although the migrant men who built their own house in town or Mudzi sometimes did sleep with women other than
obstacle, it is culturally not considered an option for women to be married to several men simultaneously. For ease of speech I will use here the term ‘polygyny’ to refer to men’s involvement in concurrent sexual relationships, whether these concern formal marriages or not. Similarly, for lack of a better term, I use the word ‘polyandry’ to denote women’s involvement in concurrent relationships with men, even though these relationships can never be simultaneously classified as marriage. With this, I follow Jane Guyer (1994), who coined the term ‘polyandrous motherhood’—a term I will discuss further on.

• Polygyny
It seems to be often assumed by social scientists and development practitioners that formal polygyny is an institutionalized, common, and accepted form of marriage in southern Malawi. Traditionally, however, only chiefs were accustomed to marry more than one woman at a time.40 Today, when Mudzi men formally marry they are instructed by the chief and their anchoswe not to marry any other woman [P2 2042]. Indeed, men who are involved in multiple relationships can be brought to the chief’s court, although in practice this rarely happens [but see P2 0448; P3 2308]. In the two court cases I heard of in Mudzi, the husband was blamed for the troubles occurring in his marriages or between his wives, as he had done wrong by marrying several women [P2 1208; P3 2308].

Despite this formal discouragement of polygyny, it is generally felt by Mudzi villagers as elsewhere in Malawi41 that men are promiscuous by nature and easily attracted to other women [e.g. P3 2786, 3674, 3947]. Similar to many other places worldwide, a man’s masculinity is partly measured by his dominance over women and the number of sexual partners he ‘conquers’ (Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009: 33, 35; Field 2009: 34; Kaler 2003). Male promiscuity is excused by the belief that men die if they cannot release sperm when aroused (Van den Borne 2005a: 308). As mentioned, especially when a wife has just given birth and is traditionally proscribed from sex for several months, many men tend to look for a new partner, whether as permanent substitute or temporary supplement [P2 0144, 0160, 1605, 1638, 1883, 1940; P3 0505, 0698, 0780, 0871, 1729]. In the next chapter on sex and HIV I elaborate further on local justifications for multiple and concurrent relationships.

In the literature on gender and AIDS, men tend to be perceived as the authoritative partner in heterosexual relationships (Arnfred 2007: 145, Kaler 2004a: 286), and

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thus as the main culprit when it comes to high-risk sexual behaviour (Higgins et al. 2010). In response, some authors have pointed out that men are victims of cultural gender expectations as much as women, which may push them to prove their worthiness as a man through fearless risk taking and sexual bravery (Kaler 2003, Scalway 2001, Shefer et al. 2005) [see P3 2134]. The frequent occurrence of men maintaining multiple heterosexual relationships is generally fitted within either one of these readings – that of men as sexual perpetrators or that of men conforming to models of masculinity. Our Mudzi data suggest an additional or alternative interpretation – that of polygyny as a male survival tactic. Because the marriage bond is highly unstable in this matrilineal and matrilocal setting, men can never be assured of sustained access to the female domain of house and homegrown crops. As mentioned, it is only after a long and fruitful marriage that a man can become reasonably protected against divorce and consequent eviction. Without that, it is through maintaining ties with multiple women that a man can diminish the risk of one day finding himself without a roof to sleep under and field to be fed from (see also Arnfred 2007). If one woman ends the relationship, a polygynous man can simply move to the house of another partner. By maintaining relationships with several women, furthermore, a man reduces the risk of sleeping with hunger. If the maize stores of one partner dry up, he may still find food at another partner’s house [P3 3854, 3895]. Such multiple ties need not all be formal marital relationships. They may even not be sexual relationships – although they generally either were, or potentially could be in the future [e.g. P2 1007, 1225, 1531, 1594, 1724, 1847, 1864; P3 0568]. I call such (not-yet, not-anymore, or only sporadically sexual) liaisons ‘semi-relationships’ and return to this later on.

Overall, as discussed, women dislike sharing their husband with other partners, but his polygyny – whether in the form of actual marriages or casual sex encounters – is not necessarily a reason for divorce. In general a woman only considers ending a polygynous relationship when the resources that she can access through her partner become too diluted. Hence, in practice a man can only maintain concurrent sexual liaisons if he has enough resources to keep all partners satisfied enough to avert divorce. Notably, in some cases women see advantages to sharing a husband, as in the case of the elderly man whose ill health severely deteriorated over the months of our fieldwork until he eventually died. Despite his weakness he managed to weekly move between the houses of his four wives, who were relieved not having to care for him every day and night [P2 0098; P3 0593, 0766].

• ‘Polyandry’
Colonial records hold that the Yao traditionally believed that a woman could cause death or injury to her husband if she slept with another man while her spouse was on a dangerous mission, such as a hunting, raiding, or long-distance trading trip (Alpers 1975: 18–9). Interestingly, this is demonstrated by the fact that a woman
was hailed for her apparent abstinence if her husband returned home safely. Rather than taking a woman’s monogamy for granted, or extorting it by force, ‘polyandry’ thus seems to have been recognized as possible, maybe even as reasonable, although social mechanisms existed to restrain it.

Of the women who during our fieldwork period were caught having sex with a secret lover, only the ones who were married to another man received punishment from the Group Village Headwoman. These women were to pay her a chicken for their offence [P3 2306, 2663]. The other woman, who was caught in action with the husband of a fellow Mudzi woman, was not fined, because, the Group Village Headwoman explained: “as an unmarried woman it was her right to accept a man’s proposal” [P2 1940]. Although not formally reprimanded, this last woman did face severe harassment from the other Mudzi women after being caught [P2 1940]. Of the two husbands who caught their wife cheating on them, one just angrily grabbed his stuff and left [P2 1408], while the other grabbed a machete and slashed his wife’s head – leaving her unable to carry water for weeks [P2 0320; P3 0584, 3988]. The man then returned to his home village, where he allegedly moved in with one of his former girlfriends [P3 0861].

I do not know what drove these two particular woman (and the others who allegedly did so before) to endanger their marriage by sleeping with another man. One of them (aged 21) had been married for three years without becoming pregnant, which may explain her choice. Both spouses had no other children from other partners yet, and their failure to conceive was commented upon and joked about. Whatever the case, in the months after this woman was caught and left by her husband, her belly finally grew. Even though she now had no husband while expecting a baby, she was more cheerful than before – which surprised me at the time. As I became more perceptive about the interpretation that good or real womanhood derives from motherhood and not wifehood, an interpretation so essentially different from the Western view with which I grew up, her changed state of mind became understandable to me. Romantic attraction may have played a role too in these and other instances, as it did in the case of the woman who confided to us that she had a lover whom she really liked besides her husband who sent regular remittances from South Africa.

Studies based on the MLSFH data found that in rural Malawi female promiscuity is considered justified if a man does not satisfy his wife sexually or financially (Tawfik & Watkins 2007: 1091, Watkins 2004: 682). I already quoted one Mudzi woman who justified her extramarital relationship by exclaiming that she could not be expected to abstain from sex during the long absence of her migrant husband [P2 1539, 1600]. According to her, other Mudzi women with husbands far away turn to lovers for sexual satisfaction too [P2 1600]. Notably, even though it is physical affection that these specific women look for rather financial support, they too receive money or gifts from their extramarital boyfriends [P2 1600, 1602; P3 2247], like
all women involved in sexual relationships. This confirms the arguments that male gifting is an inherent feature of all sexual relationships, and that material support is not only given, longed for, or demanded when a woman is in dire need.

As mentioned, maintaining multiple relationships is complicated for married women who have a husband in and around their house. Unsurprisingly then, most of the Mudzi women who maintained multiple relationships were not married, which, for some, was a deliberate strategy [P2 0914, 1007; P3 2707]. It is common knowledge that men tend to give more during the chibwenzi stage of a relationship than they do once married. Several informants compared chibwenzi relationships with a political campaign, in which men try to charm and win over their prospective partner, particularly by gifting freely [P2 0914; P3 3898]. By not accepting marriage (but only chibwenzi) proposals these young women created the opportunity for themselves to continue their involvement in various sexual relationships. Notably, these women were quite exceptional, both in (pretty, voluptuous) looks and (sociable, outgoing) personalities. This may have caused the many proposals they received from men (although one of the women confided to Gertrude that it was probably a result of the traditional medicine she applied for this specific purpose [P3 2859]). The steady supply of ‘campaigning’ men made them relatively secure in terms of sustained access to resources, which made it unattractive to marry and depend on only one source of support, and which made it worth putting up with other women’s scorn. If cleverly manoeuvred, informal concurrent partnerships can indeed be highly beneficial to a woman:

After two failed marriages Livia (21) was living with her parents again, together with her two young daughters. She longed for some independence from her mother, who she felt was too meddlesome. A number of potential marriage partners had crossed her path, but so far none had actually settled for her or been considered suitable by her. Instead of waiting for that one steady partner who would build her a house, Livia began to assemble inputs from her various past and current sexual partners. One of her ex-husbands, the father of her second child, was prepared to make bricks for her. A boyfriend was willing to buy her a bag of cement. Another one gave her some money to hire a builder. In this way, Livia managed to bit by bit construct a small, one-roomed, grass-thatched house that she could proudly call her own. [P2 0275, 0337, 1890; P3 2302]

Notably, one of the men who offered support to Livia was an ex-husband. The couple had married soon after Livia found herself pregnant, and the young man even paid the chief to formalize their union. Before their baby was born, however, he left Livia to return to his previous wife in another village [P2 0371]. Without rancour Livia explains that the young man had tried but simply did not manage to take care of two households [P3 0504]. Occasionally the couple still meets: she contacts him by (borrowed) phone or letter to ask for assistance [P2 0924; P3 0507], when he sent a message that his wife was hospitalized she looked him up [P2 1041], and once he even took her to a restaurant when they ran into each other at the trading centre [P2 1007]. Or he visits, making such promises as burning bricks for
her new house, and seducing her to have sex with him in her maize field [P2 0186, 0328; P3 0609, 0878]. Next, I further elaborate upon such lingering semi-relationships that seem to be common but tend to remain unnoticed when researchers look only for active sexual relationships.

• Semi-relationships

As appears from the example of Livia, sexual relationships do not always have a clear-cut and definite end. Often a semi-relationship continues to exist, in which a man and woman perform marital duties for each other on an irregular basis, whenever one of them sees fit. Although during our formal interviews women never mentioned their ex-partners as sources of support, many received money, soap, or food from men they had divorced [P2 0328, 0371, 0762, 1135, 1139, 1225, 1264, 1531, 1594, 1612, 1811, 1832, 1847, 1864; P3 0507, 0847, 1043, 2083, 3821; P8 0061]. These men fathered at least one of their children, and as such had an on-going responsibility that could be appealed to [P2 0924, 1103; P3 2297]. Women went to beg support (sometimes returning empty-handed), sent the child to beg for support, or were visited by their ex-partner who brought some money or gifts. Interestingly, the mothers (and in one case the father [P3 1723]) of ex-partners also at times brought food and other gifts for their grandchildren, or were (successfully) approached by the child’s mother for support [P8 0067, 0069]. Material benefits found through men are thus not necessarily restricted to the duration of a relationship. At best the support provided by men – and their relatives – lasts even beyond courtship and marriage.

Jane Guyer (1994), based on fieldwork among the (patrilineal) Yoruba in Nigeria, has developed the fruitful concept of ‘polyandrous motherhood’. She defines it as a liaison of women “cultivating co-parental ties with more than one father of their children” (Guyer 1994: 230), elaborating that “although a woman cannot have concurrent husbands she can have concurrent recognized fathers to her children. … In terms of resource access and daily needs for herself and her children a woman may be managing several men at once” (Guyer 1994: 250). Since marriage bonds are unstable and generally temporal, Guyer argues, it is only through childbearing that a man and a woman can create more lasting ties.

Scholars of patriarchal societies tend to argue that such polyandrous motherhood (whether or not they actually use this term) is a subversive act by some women to diminish male authority over their household and life, and so enhance their autonomy (Haram 2004, Helle-Valle 1999, Meekers & Calvès 1997: 363). While this may be the case, polyandrous motherhood not only occurs in situations of male domination. To a great extent, the concept also suits our Mudzi data, as many women have children from various fathers and benefit from the resultant multiplicity of support sources that this offers them. A woman with children from only one man has a stronger argument to demand support from him specifically [e.g. P2 0724, 1405, 1435], but the risk that this one man fails (or dies) is larger than the
possibility that several men will all fail at the time of need. The acknowledgement that temporary sexual liaisons may result in life-long sources of potential support is highly relevant for the transactional sex debate. It adds to our understanding of women’s generally quick and easy acceptance of relationship proposals as well as unprotected intercourse.42

However, for the case of Mudzi, the term of polyandrous motherhood has a somewhat too strong connotation of intentionality. The great majority of Mudzi women seems to prefer marriage over casual partnerships, and hopes that each child’s father will turn out to be a sustainable match with her [e.g. P3 0457, 0703, 3817]. Here, polyandrous motherhood is not a strategic livelihood choice, as, for example, Liv Haram (2004) found it to be for Meru women in urban Tanzania. Notably, as pointed out by Haram (2004: 224) too, a sequence of reproductively successful relationships may turn out negatively and reduce Mudzi woman’s livelihood security rather than increase it. As a matter of fact, several of the Mudzi women whom I classified as worst off seem to have ended up in this group because of their bad luck with sexual partners, who each left them with another child to care for but without the necessary support to do so. Rather than resulting from an intentional, preconceived plan of action, Mudzi women’s involvement in concurrent relationships seems the unintended result of their ‘judicious opportunism’.43 Trying to make the best of each opportunity that arises may lead to the unplanned situation in which several relationship ‘projects’ are managed more-or-less simultaneously (although the woman concerned may not consider them simultaneous, as she alternately prioritizes the one relationship that seems the best bet at any particular moment).

On its own, furthermore, the concept of polyandrous motherhood does not allow for a recognition of the fact that men, at least in Mudzi, also benefit from maintaining ties with various women, whether those ties are actively sexual or not. It increases, as mentioned, the reliability of a man’s – otherwise always uncertain or restricted – access to shelter, nsima, and sexually available women. When there is something to be fled from, say quarrels with his wife, or something to be gained with another partner, a man may decide to capitalize on his sexual network of potential relationships and (temporarily) shift between them:

When Salika (39) was pregnant of her sixth child, the child’s father – who did not father her other children – left her to marry another woman. From that moment on, Salika considered herself, and was by others in Mudzi considered, to be divorced. Although the marriage is by Salika and others recognized to have ended [banja latha], in fact the sexual relationship continues on an on-and-off basis. Especially when Salika has just received money from her brother working in South Africa, the man tends to show up with a token of support, be it dried fish or half a chitenje. Under the pretence of “coming to see his child,” he moves in and takes

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42 The details of sexual intercourse are the topic of Chapter 6.
43 See Van der Sijpt 2010 for an eloquent elaboration of women’s judicious opportunism in such cases
up where he left off. Each time, however, the man disappeared within a few weeks, once more leaving Salika ‘unmarried’ [osakwatira]. She has now seen enough of his behaviour and says she will not accept him back again. [P2 1629; P3 2319, see also P2 1795; P3 1729, 2404]

For men, it is most feasible and efficient to maintain only loose ties – or, as I call it, semi-relationships – besides one active relationship. A semi-relationship can be left latent until either the opportunity or the need arises to bring it (back) to life. Compared to active relationships, which entail regular contact and input, semi-relationships cost fewer resources, of which men too tend to have little. A co-parental tie may be particularly suited for occasional reinvigoration as the shared child creates a bond that can always be called upon, by either parent, without further explanation. This is not to say that all semi-relationships are by definition between co-parents. They may, for example, also be preludes to potentially new sexual relationships, or simply concern once-active sexual relationships gone astray, as in the case of Jeneti:

A year after she was abandoned by her first husband, Jeneti (37) was visited by an unfamiliar man who proposed banja to her. He straightforwardly explained that he wanted to leave his current wife for being too talkative, and therefore needed a new home to move to. Jeneti warned him that her first husband had left her because five of their six children had died within a few months after birth. The proposer did not mind, and moved in with her soon after. When Jeneti started to fall ill, he began to stay away intermittently, each time reappearing without further ado, simply taking up his role as husband again. Through word of mouth she heard that he was proposing to other women. At the time of our interview, Jeneti had not seen or heard from him for over a year. [P3 3854]

This example shows the pragmatic ‘wife-hopping’ of some men. In this case, however, there is no mutual child that the man can fall back on as the reason for his reappearance and wish to reunite [see also P2 1853, 1882]. As both marriage and divorce tend to be uneventful, an absent man can quite straightforwardly reappear and resume his role as husband, and a woman can quite unproblematically reaccept as her husband the man she, and the community around her, had come to think of as an ex-husband [P3 1729].

The men in the examples above did not maintain concurrent active sexual relationships – which only few men can afford to do. Rather, they, as do many other men, continuously switch between various partners, regularly returning to ex-partners [P2 1845, 2133; P3 1326, 1729, 1927, 2404, 2886, 3854, 3996]. Relationships, whether involving shared parenthood or not, thus can and are often picked up again, (re) activated for as brief or as long as it lasts.

As may be expected from the general vagueness of relationship categories, exactly when an active relationship turns into a semi-relationship, and vice versa, cannot be well defined. In its extreme, a sexual relationship can be confidently considered active if a couple spends all meals and nights together. On the other side of the spectrum are permanently inactive relationships – which, as far as I can see, exist only in the case that one of the partners has died. All other terminated
relationships can potentially be reinvigorated. Even a man who took off with all of his wife’s cotton revenue, or left her fending for their many young children during hunger season alone, cultivating the fields all by herself, may later show up again and try to reunite with his (ex-)wife, though not always with success [P3 0608]. What I envision to be a true semi-relationship, right in the middle of the spectrum, concerns the association between a man and woman that is not considered an actual relationship by themselves or by the wider community, but does entail (irregular) interaction to maintain a tie that either one can fall back on in times of want. Such informal interaction may entail contact through cell phone [P2 0867, 0764, 0924, 1041; P3 0507], paying a visit [P2 0178, 0186, 1096, 1504, 1832, 1853, 1882; P3 2568, 2802], men bringing or sending uncalled-for gifts [P2 1435, 1864, 2133; P3 1235], women requesting financial or other material support [P2 0328, 0630, 643, 0924; P3 0507, 3821], men requesting or women offering to wash clothes [P2 1760; P3 1879], men requesting or women offering food [P2 0518, 1446, 1474; P3 1558, 1935] – tokens, thus, of one’s potential performance as a formal partner. Such relationships may occasionally entail sexual intercourse, as this is one of the aspects that represent a formal partnership and can thus be used to confirm and maintain the semi-tie. It is important to recognize the existence of such semi-relationships, wherever located on the spectrum between fully active and definitely inactive partnerships. It reveals that many men and women, in Mudzi at least, are engaged in (potentially extensive and overlapping) networks of latent relationships which become sexual on an on-and-off basis, either to merely confirm the semi-tie or (temporarily) (re)activate a relationship [P2 1546, 1638, 1724, 1882; P3 1735, 2404]. Survey questions on sexual relationships are likely to miss out on such semi-ties as these are not considered and counted as actual relationships by informants.

In conclusion, the term ‘polyandrous motherhood’, however helpful, is too narrow a concept for the case of Mudzi. It is but one component of a larger spectrum of relational practices that I believe is better captured by the concept of ‘semi-relationships’.

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Promiscuity is facilitated by the advent of cell phones, one Mudzi woman complained (see also Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009: 46). Because of it, men and women can now contact each other easier and more secretively, even when their spouse is nearby [P2 0130, also P2 1482]. Several Mudzi villagers, men and women, own a cell phone, despite their little access to cash. Almost all wives and mothers of men in South Africa were given a phone by their migrant husband or son. At harvest time, when people have some money to spend, the mobile network providers offer cell phones for a reduced and extremely low rate, at 1500MK (7.50 Euro). Call credits (minutes) are sold in small and affordable units, starting from 50MK (0.25 Euro), and are for sale throughout the rural areas. Calls can also be made without spending credit, by hanging up before the person who is phoned can answer the call, which is termed “flashing”. The one phoned can see the number that tried to reach him or her and choose whether or not to spend credit to call back. Villagers who do not own a phone can borrow one from others. The service of charging a battery (at 30MK – 0.15 Euro) is offered at the nearest marketplace, by an entrepreneurial couple who invested in a second-hand car battery, which they themselves charged at the nearest trading centre.
Another helpful approach to understanding relationship practices has been developed by Swidler & Watkins in their 2007 article on transactional sex in rural Malawi. They interpret occasional sexual unions as on-going patron-client ties of dependence. These are thus perceived of as a form of social insurance in a highly insecure setting, rather than as merely driven by male sexual desire and women’s acute poverty. This tallies to a large extent with what I have described here, as it captures well the long-term insurance character of (on-and-off sexually active) relationships and the mutual dependence between men and women. Contrary to what I found in Mudzi, however, it assumes that relationships are structurally unequal, with men depicted as ‘patrons’ and women as ‘clients’. Men’s involvement in sexual relationships is argued to be motivated by a need for followers to expand their powerbase. This may be the case for a minority of men, say some relatively well-to-do men living in Balaka town (with whom various Mudzi women would surely like to have a sexual patron-client relationship). But in most of Mudzi’s relationships the man’s socio-economic position is not significantly better than his partner’s, and therefore the power balance is more delicate and the interdependence more equal. In the next chapter I further elaborate on Swidler & Watkin’s valid argument that sexual ties function as an important form of social capital.

Deconstructing the discourse of destitution

Earlier I noted that most Mudzi women justify their acceptance of sexual proposals by claiming that they had been in pressing need for support. Data collected through other means than self-reports revealed, however, that this claim did not always hold. In this section I argue that women’s widespread reference to acute destitution resonates with conventional gender expectations, and functions to dignify potentially status-threatening choices.

As described, being an unmarried woman in Mudzi is generally disadvantageous to one’s social status. So too, however, is being involved in sexual relationships with many men (whether simultaneously or serially), which may lead to accusations of immorality and uhule – prostitution [P2 1424, 1796; P3 2340, 2560, 2939–42]. Several married women said they preferred staying with their unsatisfactory husband in order to avoid the risk of ending up divorcing and remarrying multiple times, thus losing their community’s respect and support [P3 2340, 2987, 3264–5, 3831, 3923]. During our stay in Mudzi we saw various examples of the potential reprisals against perceived sexual misconduct from women, such as the following [see also P3 0758]:

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45 See also African feminist Oyeronke Oyewùmí (2002: 6), who argues that in many African cultures the idiom of marriage is a way of describing patron-clients relationships.
Livia (21) experienced the negative consequences of her promiscuous image when the two
men who each planned to marry her were discouraged to do so by other Mudzi women saying
that Livia was a *hule* who likes men too much. [P2 1645, 1756, 1796, 1882; P3 2495]

When Pamela (27) was caught having sex with a married man, other Mudzi women wildly
screamed that her thatched hut should be burnt down, mentioning in particular that this was
not the first time for Pamela to be caught red-handed in adulterous sex [P2 1940]. For some
after time the incident, the relatives living near Pamela did not speak to her and called her a
prostitute [P3 2560]. Pamela’s brother who worked in South Africa declared that he would no
longer send her support because of this shameful behaviour. [P3 2331, 2650]

In their search for livelihood security, women must thus carefully navigate
between the support that can be accessed via a sexual relationship with a man or
several men, versus the sources of support that may become blocked when getting
involved with that man or those men. In principle, relationships enhance a woman’s
social status, because (to-be-)married women are respected by the community. Yet
each relationship also entails the risk of eventually degrading a woman’s social
status, as it may leave her without a partner again and with an extra stain on her
reputation. Joyce (24, two children) verbalized her concern about this:

Joyce divorced her first husband because they quarrelled a lot. After eight months she received
another relationship proposal, which she accepted “to be respected by other people.” But this
man is also not behaving as she feels a loving husband should, which worries her because it
may indicate that he will leave her soon. Then she will have to find a third husband while she
is still young, which, according to her, does not reflect well on her social image. [P3 3923, see
also P3 2793, 2939–42, 3264–5]

Due to the highly unstable nature of sexual relationships in Mudzi, women
regularly find themselves without a partner. Preferring, for the reasons described,
to get involved in a new relationship, they risk damaging their social status. The
following fragment from my field notes exemplifies again how involvement with
men can be detrimental to a woman’s entitlement to support – but, notably, also
how this damage can be diverted:

We heard an ambulance not far away. Soon Jasmine [57] came by, telling us that a three-
year-old grandchild of Alma [66] had died at Balaka hospital (coughing, fever, vomiting).
Jasmine blamed the child’s mother, because she had been going around with men. Indeed
Alma herself had complained about this too, telling the girl that she had already lost her sister
to this behaviour, should learn from it, see now you lost your child because of it… When
Hamra [58] passed by, she disapproved of Alma having said this, arguing that “everybody
knows the girl is an orphan, she had nobody to take care of her, she had to move around [meet
with men] to find support.” [P3 2063]

Just like Hamra defended the deceased child’s mother, many women defended
their own sexual behaviour by pointing to their need for support [P2 1580, 1653, 1901;
P3 1132, 1462, 1572, 1730, 2560].

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47 The ambulance of Balaka hospital was mainly used to bring home the corpses of patients who had died
at the hospital.
When Pamela (27) and Emra (25) were caught having sex with the husband of another village woman, both justified their deed by declaring that they had needed help in taking care of their child(ren). [P2 1901]

One of the women knitting behind our house asked Jane [17] why she has so many boyfriends. Jane replied that when she still lived with her aunt (who took her in after her mother died), she did not have any boyfriends because this woman bought her soap and body lotion. However, when she recently moved to her grandparents in Mudzi it was made clear she had to find her own soap and lotion as they cannot manage to buy it for her. And to obtain money for this, Jane explained, she needs boyfriends. [P2 1580] Her father, who lives with a new wife in another village and is sometimes visited by Jane, had complained about Jane’s improper behaviour of engaging with boys. She riposted by enquiring whether he would then supply her with all that she needed. Her father has since remained silent on the topic. [P3 1572]

It appears from these statements that a woman’s need for support is generally considered a valid – even the most valid – argument to justify her involvement in sexual relationships (see also Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009: 52, Helle-Valle 1999: 378–9, Van den Borne 2005a: 121). Conversely, when such need for support was lacking, criticisms of women’s involvement in sexual relationships were especially harsh [P2 1581; P3 1236, 1917, 2202, 3536–7] – indirectly confirming the perceived validity of the poverty argument:

Shortly after her husband’s death, rumours abounded about the Group Village Headwoman being in a relationship with a married man from a neighbouring village. Her relatives fiercely complained about it, saying: “She has sons in South Africa who send her money. Why does she need to do this?” [P3 2255] … “I think she accepted the relationship because she wants money from him, you know that man has a lot of livestock. Her husband who died left a lot of money, her children from South Africa send a lot of money, but she still wants a husband. She has her own grandchildren who can make a toilet, a fence.” [P2 1661] “… it is a shameful story.” [P2 1767] “… she is setting a bad example.” [P2 1787]

In summary, a woman’s social status and consequential access to community support are at risk when her involvement in sexual relationships is considered to go against proper female behaviour. To avoid the potentially negative impact that sexual choices may have on their social status, women can, and do, tactically emphasize another aspect of proper female identity, namely the reliance on male support. In their study on fish-for-sex trade in Zambia, Merten & Haller (2007: 70) write of “a context of plural norms,” which allows women to redefine as traditional and thus legitimate their sexual practices that may otherwise be disapproved of. Although these authors’ exact topic, analysis, and conclusion differ somewhat from mine, this concept of co-existing divergent norms that can be employed and readjusted according to need corresponds with my argument here. Comparably, Helle-Valle (1999: 389), in his analysis of the various prevalent attitudes towards transactional relationships in Botswana, speaks of a “diverse ethical landscape.”

48 As will be further elaborated upon in Chapter 6, Mudzi villagers, as many other Malawians, believe that a child gets ill when its mother has sex with another man than its father.
This diverse ethical landscape contains a blend of historical and modern-day sexual mores, none of which are dominant, that are combined in different ways by different actors to construct their perspective. The cultural construction in Mudzi that men and women have specific, separate roles within the household, and that women are entitled to the support that men are designated to provide only when enrolled in a relationship can be conveniently used by women to safeguard themselves (or others) against suspicions of indecency. Rather than reflecting actual levels of poverty and dependence, women’s widely applied discourse of destitution thus serves, to some extent at least, to defuse the potentially harmful relationship choices that external circumstances encourage them to make.

Discussion and conclusion

The data presented in this chapter indicate that material motives are an important aspect of women’s considerations concerning their relationships with men. Interpreting this from a Western perspective, however, easily leads to a misunderstanding of the issues at stake. In most Western settings, the only legitimate reasons for involvement in sexual interactions have come to be romantic love and strong physical attraction to a particular individual (Helle-Valle 1999: 387). Meanwhile, engagement in sex for material gain is typically equated with prostitution and morally taboo (Bloch 1989: 166–7, De Zalduondo & Bernard 1995: 158, Helle-Valle 1999: 387). Within this framework, a woman claiming that economic grounds underlie her sexual choices must either be willfully wayward or unwillingly pressed by dreadful external circumstances. Advocates of the transactional sex paradigm empathetically opt for the last.

The fact that Mudzi women so commonly mention their need for support as the basis for engagement in sexual liaisons indicates, at the very least, that they – contrary to advocates of the transactional sex paradigm – do not consider material reward in relationships as something immoral or shameful. Rather, it seems to suggest that material benefit is considered a highly valid, perhaps even the most appropriate, reason for sexual involvement with men – which is confirmed by other Mudzi data presented in this chapter.

Our data furthermore indicate that the common discourse that destitution drives Mudzi women to accept relationship proposals does not always tally with daily life practice. Women also engage in relationships because it is simply customary to be wed; in order to be a respected community member; to avert suspicion of husband-snatching or prostitution; to accomplish tasks that only males, and particularly husbands, are supposed to carry out; and for physical and emotional affection.

An interesting divergence thus appears between discourse – that which was expressed in the interviews to me and often towards each other as well – and practice. Obviously, such a divergence is not unique to Mudzi. In order for any human
to communicate something, or even think about something, it must be ‘caught in an idiom’. What is expressed, therefore, is necessarily a stylized portrayal of reality. The particular ways in which such portrayals are styled, nonetheless, tend to reflect a society’s normative templates. I argue, building on the data described in this chapter, that in Mudzi one important template entails the conceptualization of sexual or marital relationships as essential to survival and, related to this, as essentially utilitarian.

This template may well be a result of the long-term prioritization, widespread throughout Africa, of the lineage bond over conjugal bonds. The harsh ecological, economic, and political circumstances that rural Malawians face and have faced for decennia may have facilitated its reproduction. As argued, Mudzi women become socialized to value what Hunter (2010) calls ‘provider love’ more prominently than ‘romantic love’. Having internalized a value system in which sexual relationships are primarily considered practical vehicles for individual and household development (and in broader perspective for lineage reproduction), women’s relationship choices are likely to indeed be motivated to some extent by material considerations. A society’s normative templates can thus directly impact actual behaviour. But, as just noted, they do not determine behaviour. The fact that women so frequently claim that their sexual behaviour is economically driven probably also results from the social desirability of this assertion. Subconsciously, this may be what women distil from the varied considerations that are at play in their relationship choices. Templates thus also influence how personal behaviour is self-reflected upon, perceived of, and framed. In other cases, women’s emphasis on the poverty argument as reason for their engagement in a (series of) sexual liaison(s) seemed a tactical choice, probably to avert negative alternative readings by fellow villagers. Besides directly impacting actual behaviour and influencing how personal behaviour is reflected upon, normative templates may thus also be consciously applied to make socially acceptable those behaviours that are otherwise potentially harmful.

In conclusion, deducing from women’s self-reports that they are so marginalized, economically and socially, that their survival depends on assistance, which men are only willing to provide in exchange for sex, conceals more than it reveals. Most importantly, it conceals the role played by cultural conventions, the strong symbolic value of men’s material care, and the level of agency that women display as they navigate to optimize access to male support while safeguarding their social status.
Safe or unsafe – that’s the question: Sex and HIV

Introduction

The overall question that this book aims to answer is whether economic empowerment of poor women will lead them to make safer sexual choices. This question follows from the increasingly widespread assumption among development professionals that it is poor African women’s dependence on male economic support that keeps them from practicing or demanding abstinence, faithfulness, or condom use, thus putting them at high risk of HIV infection. Whereas the previous chapter dealt with women’s choices concerning the partnerships in which sex takes place, the current chapter zooms in specifically on the choices that Mudzi women make concerning sexual intercourse itself. This chapter explores one component of the overall research question, namely the aspect of safe(r) sexual choices – more precisely, the local conceptualizations of ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ sex. In brief, I argue that Mudzi women’s perceptions of what constitutes beneficial or harmful sexual practices diverge from what is branded as ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ sex in formal public health messages.

Among social scientists, policy makers, and development practitioners alike the concepts of safe and unsafe sex generally relate to the timing of sexual debut, the consistency of correct condom use, and the number and types of sexual partners (GoM 2010b: 37–9, UNAIDS 2011: 25). Safe and unsafe sex are thus narrowly defined as relating to specific health outcomes, particularly unwanted (e.g. teenage) pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In the daily life experiences of Mudzi women, however, sex is perceived to be much more than a potential source of unwanted pregnancies and STIs. In this chapter I elaborate upon the additional meanings – both positive and negative – that Mudzi villagers attach to sexual activity. Multiple short- and long-term pros and cons are (consciously
and subconsciously) weighed by Mudzi women to make choices concerning their sexual practices. As will be described in this chapter, HIV infection is but one consideration amidst many others. To understand the comparative weight given to the risk of a fatal HIV infection, this chapter will first assess the considerations and negotiations of Mudzi women concerning sexual practice in general, and subsequently those related specifically to HIV and AIDS.

In order to sufficiently grasp the attitudes of contemporary Mudzi villagers towards sex, it is relevant to explore how sexuality has been conceptualized and valued throughout Bantu history. The contemporary understandings of this conceptualization permeate daily life dealings with gender in general and sex in specific. Before turning to my findings from Mudzi, I therefore begin by describing the traditional construction of sexuality as a central aspect of Bantu cosmology. Following, I assess how this ideology of sex shapes (but also is shaped by) the daily life practices of today’s Mudzi villagers. After reviewing the multiple interpretations, valuations, and practices of sex in daily Mudzi life, I turn to HIV and AIDS as relatively new considerations when it comes to engaging in sexual activity. Assessing whether and at what cost HIV is preferably prevented, it appears that while some attempts are made to reduce transmission probabilities, HIV prevention is generally given low priority. The reasons for this low prioritization are assessed in the last section of this chapter.

Notably, by discussing how women weigh the pros and cons of sex I do not mean to insinuate that Mudzi women actually make conscious calculations each time they consider having sex. In this chapter, I try to dissect the various interrelated, overlapping, and at times opposing factors at play in creating and reproducing habitual – in this case sexual – behaviour. Human behaviour is rarely consistent: there are no mathematical rules to be found in which such-and-such choice within such-and-such situation will always lead to such-and-such decision. Mudzi villagers, like people everywhere, have multiple, often divergent, and at times contradictory motivations, which they combine in different ways at different occasions without much thought. A similar argument was made in the previous chapter on women’s tactical use of prevalent gender norms to navigate their daily lives. The intersection of an age-old deferential attitude towards sex with the new biomedical fatality of it, as described in this chapter, offers another interesting case to assess how diverging discourses can coexist and be tactically employed in varying ways within different contexts.

Sex

Sexual ideology in Bantu history
Throughout history, Bantu groups have been preoccupied with safeguarding fertility as this was considered the first requisite for clan survival (Saidi 2010, Wembah-
Rashid 1995: 52). In an attempt to ensure sufficient, healthy, and strong offspring, numerous sexual regulations were put in place, presumably by the ancestral spirits on behalf of the Supreme Being (Van Breugel 2001: 172). Community harmony and continuity were believed to depend on observing the sexual norms and taboos as this appeased the ancestor spirits and assured human reproduction (Bryceson et al. 2004: 20, Lwanda 2004: 30). Thoroughly educating both boys and girls on these sexual regulations was therefore perceived of utmost importance.

Sexual education for youngsters took place primarily during a pre-adolescent initiation ceremony. The terminology used for the female *rite de passage* is comparable among many of the Bantu-descendant ethnic groups throughout Central Africa, indicating that this practice must date back from before the Bantu's initial dispersion from the Congo basin several thousands of years ago (Saidi 2010: 101). As the continuation of a matrilineal clan depends particularly on women's fertility and hence sexuality, more emphasis was placed on girls' sexual instruction. As a result, the initiation ceremonies for girls were more elaborate than those for boys, and have persevered longer and among wider populations than boys' *rites de passages* (Morris 2000: 113, Saidi 2010: 121). The prevalence of female initiation rites has in general been associated with a valued social status for women, as such rites indicate that importance is attached to a solid preparation for girls' role-to-be (Brown 1963: 849). The various initiation rites during women's lives in Malawi have been argued to function to strengthen the matrilineal bond between women, who make great fun of men and their sexual drives during the rites, so positioning them as outsiders (Bennesch 2011: 92, Morris 2000: 95).

Over time many Bantu-speaking groups in Malawi and beyond have, under various patriarchal influences, evolved into patrilineal, virilocl societies. However, as established in earlier chapters, the Yao of southern Malawi have remained largely matrilineally and matrilocally organized. Until this day, initiation ceremonies are performed for both boys and girls. The perseverance of this cultural practice among the Yao may to some extent be related to their adoption of Islam from Arabic trading partners towards the end of the nineteenth century. Within this version of Islam it was common practice to ceremonially initiate boys, which allowed the pre-adolescents’ initiation rites of the Yao to be easily incorporated into the new religious lifestyle, under changed Islamic names but with largely unaltered content (Lwanda 2004: 31, Msiska 1995: 70, Sicard 2000: 296). Lwanda (2004: 31) argues, furthermore, that maintaining cultural practices became a significant means to resist colonialism. The Yao in particular resented the colonial

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1 It is particularly on historical (ethnographic, linguistic, and archaeological) data on these female initiation rites that Christine Saidi (2010) bases her claim that all Bantu-speaking people share a matrilineal history (see also Amadiume 1997 and Diop 1989 [1963] for such claims about the entire African continent).
regime which had deprived them of their main source of wealth and power by abolishing slavery, whereas other ethnic groups appreciated the protection found at Christian missions against the Yao slave raids (see Chapter 2). Bantu-descendants who converted to Christianity are today less likely than their Islamic counterparts to perform pubertal initiation ceremonies\(^2\) (Munthali & Zulu 2007: 154–5), which were considered heretical by missionaries and therefore strongly discouraged (Bennesch 2011: 40, Richards 1969 [1940]: 27).

Yao girls, as the boys, are communally initiated at an early pre-puberty age, usually before the age of ten (Mair 1951a: 60, Morris 2000: 92, Msiska 1995: 70–1).\(^3\) The female initiates were and are held in seclusion with their fellow girl initiates for a certain period of time (some claim it could last up to years in the far past, and today is usually only between two and four weeks: MHCR 2005: 37, Wembah-Rashid 1995: 49), and instructed about the proper ways to behave as an adult women.\(^4\) The girls are told to be generous, kind, and hardworking (Morris 2000: 96). They are taught how to observe personal hygiene, how to dress and sit properly (MHRC 2005: 36, Munthali & Zulu 2007: 159–60). Furthermore, they are instructed to always respect and obey the elders of the community as well as their future husbands (Mair 1951a: 62, Morris 2000: 96, Msiska 1995: 71–2, Munthali & Zulu 2007: 160, Richards 1969 [1940]: 67).

The central theme of the initiation ceremonies is, however, the act of sex. Uninitiated youth are strongly forbidden to engage in sex, as a pre-initiation pregnancy was considered among the worst of threats to ancestral protection of the community (Morris 2000: 96, Richards 1982 [1956]: 33–4, Wembah-Rashid 1995: 49). During initiation, girls are explicitly and elaborately told and shown, through songs and dances, how to perform coitus so that mutual pleasure and timely offspring can be ensured.\(^5\) Sex, it is stressed to both male and female initiates, is vital for good personal health, a solid marriage, community harmony, and clan reproduction (Morris 2000: 70, Poewe 1981: 66–7). In other words, sexual activity was conceptualized as each woman’s duty towards herself, her husband, and most importantly her community (Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009: 19, Wembah-Rashid 1995: 48).\(^6\) As essential as female procreation was for the community, as important,

\(^2\) Munthali & Zulu (2007: 154–5) found a strong link between religion and the likeliness of having been initiated. Among Muslims (all of them Yao) 80 percent of boys and girls had been initiated, while among the studied Christian groups 22 to 28 percent of boys and 32 to 40 percent of girls had undergone initiation.

\(^3\) When later these girls start to menstruate, they go through another, less elaborate, individual ceremony (Davison 1997: 46, MHRC 2005: 38-9, Morris 2000: 92).


by extension, it became for an individual. Only after giving birth were women considered full members of society, and permitted to establish their own household, thresh their own grain, partake in initiation and pottery rituals, and eventually be granted a position of power (Saidi 2010: 164). During their initiation, girls were (and still are) instructed to never deny sex to their husband unless they are menstruating (MHRC 2005: 38), just delivered a child, miscarried, or induced an abortion7 (Richards 1969 [1940]: 88, Van den Borne 2005a: 51). At the conclusion of these rites de passage, the newly initiated were encouraged to put into (sexual) practice what they had learned so as not to forget8 (Forster 2001: 251–2, MHRC 2005: 37, Munthali et al. 2006: 51, Rimal et al. 2004: 30–1) [see also P3 1154].

In an early overview of ethnographic data on Bantu marriages, Torday (1929: 257) notes that most of the studied groups neither expected nor valued a bride’s virginity at marriage (see also Mitchell 1962: 38 for Yao specifically). Smith & Dale (1920: 38) quote a Bantu informant who, when probed for a local translation of the word ‘virgin’, jokingly answers that a woman who never had sex would be in his language called ‘a fool’ (in Saidi 2010: 148). Writing about Bantu descendants in Zambia, Richards (1969 [1940]: 15) accounts that women who reject men are criticized for having ‘arrogance of the womb’. As matrilineal and thus female procreation is so highly valued, women’s sexuality seems to have been stimulated rather than restricted (Horne 2001: 307, Saidi 2010: 151).

This is not to say, however, that sexual activity in general was unrestricted, which Caldwell et al. (1989) suggest in their much cited (and critiqued) theory of a distinct and internally coherent African system of sexuality (discussed in Chapter 1). The Bantu considered sexual intercourse to be not only a biological undertaking, but also a spiritual one through which mystical powers were released.9 This made it necessary sometimes to refrain from sex while at other times to engage in it in strictly prescribed ways.10 During the process of pottery and iron making, for example, all involved had to abstain from sex (Saidi 2010: 133, 137), as must close

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6 It may be in this light that Niehaus (2007: 852) has argued that for both men and women in rural South Africa “celibacy and singleness were deemed to be more dishonourable than promiscuity.”

7 Writing about the Bemba, a group of matrilineal Bantu descendants in Zambia, Audrey Richards (1969 [1940]: 15) asserts that married couples were expected to have intercourse every night except during these taboo periods, and normally more than once a night.

8 To what extent this still occurs is unclear (e.g. Chirwa and Chizimbi 2009: 15–6). Lwanda (2004: 32) argues that this practice is likely to be kept hidden by rural practitioners as it has been widely condemned by health professionals and urban elites for potentially spreading HIV (for examples of this condemnation see GoM 2010b: 39, Liwewe et al. 2009, MHRC 2005).


10 This is related to the belief that sexual activity creates a ‘hotness’ that is harmful to those who are sexually inactive, or ‘cold,’ e.g. young and old people. I will not go into this hot-cold dichotomy that underlies many sexual rules as I believe it is not necessary for the main point I seek to make. For an analysis that goes beyond the usual description of this explanatory model, see Drews 1991 (in Dutch).
relatives and counsellors of youngsters during their initiation rites (Mair 1951a: 60), parents during their child’s illness (Van Breugel 2001: 203), and the relatives of a deceased person until the prescribed mourning period ends (MHRC 2005: 61). Such ritual abstinence was assumed to help avert misfortunes as small as cracking pots or as big as lethal epidemics. Extramarital sex, furthermore, was considered a taboo at any time, and thus also subject to supernatural punishment from the ancestral spirits (Saidi 2010: 150, Van Breugel 2001: 170, 199–200) [P8 0033–5]. When committed by either spouse during pregnancy, the punishment would entail protracted childbirth and possibly the baby’s and/or mother’s death (Mair 1953: 98, MHRC 2005: 48, Torday 1929: 283, Wembah-Rashid 1995: 54). When committed during other periods, a mystical, potentially lethal illness would be inflicted on those near to the perpetrator, generally his or her spouse or children (Peters et al. 2007: 48, Van Breugel 2001: 169). These ailments, called mdulo, tsempho, ndaka, and kanyera – of which the symptoms\(^\text{11}\) to a great extent resemble those of AIDS – are also risked by a man who transgresses the taboo of having intercourse with a woman who is menstruating, recently gave birth, miscarried, or had an abortion (Forster 2001: 253–4, Kondowe & Mulera 1999: 5, Lwanda 2004: 30, Peters et al. 2007: 48–55, Van Breugel 2001: 192).

While sex was curbed during certain precarious, often transitory, situations (Van den Borne 2005a: 51), it was required at other times – to protect, heal, or cleanse (one of) the sexual partners or someone close to them. For example, one act of ritual intercourse was considered mandatory between new parents soon after childbirth to strengthen their baby and protect it from harm\(^\text{12}\) (Drews 1991: 90–1, MHRC 2005: 84–5, Richards 1982 [1956]: 30, Saidi 2010: 148, Zulu 2001: 475–6). A new widow or widower too had to have ritual sex, with a specifically designated partner (a relative of the deceased or someone hired to do the job) to cleanse off death (Mair 1953: 97–8, MHRC 2005: 64, Richards 1982 [1956]: 34, Saidi 2010: 152). A chief and his wife needed to perform ritual intercourse in the bushes where they planned to found a new village (Saidi 2010: 148). Traditional healers, furthermore, may prescribe their clients to have (sometimes incestuous) intercourse to accomplish their wishes, which may range from curing infertility to becoming rich (Kondowe & Mulera 1999: iv) [P2 0013, 0662; P3 0506]. Sexual intercourse has thus been attributed with strong – positive and negative – potencies, which must be carefully channelled by observing the regulations laid down by the ancestors, to avert illness and other misfortunes, preserve social stability, and, most essentially, assure community survival.

\(^{11}\) These symptoms include thin hair, weight loss, diarrhoea, ‘miasmic’ appearance (Kondowe & Mulera 1999: 5), feverishness, and sickliness [P8 0033, 0039].

\(^{12}\) If the father was no longer available, the child’s mother could also have ritual intercourse with any other man (MHRC 2005: 54), in some cases a man especially hired to provide this service (Van Breugel 2001: 184).
To what extent these sexual norms and taboos have ever been scrupulously observed cannot be ascertained. What is handed down from one generation to the next, especially when done through ritual ceremonies, often entails ideology rather than actual practice. One example of how reconstructions of history are often reflections of ideals rather than realities was already discussed in the previous chapter: the claim by many Mudzi elders that marriages were more stable in the past than today, which is unsubstantiated by other data (see also Kaler 2001). It seems that these elders’ memories are coloured by prevailing ideas about proper marital conduct and a moral condemnation of contemporary youths’ failure to conform to these. What is today presented as tradition, as “the ways of our ancestors”, may never have been actual practice. What is communicated during the initiation ceremonies as constituting proper behaviour is just that: a contemporary interpretation of how things used to be and therefore should be. Furthermore, ‘traditional’ messages about ideal behaviour not only inform actual practice (to some extent at least), but are also shaped by it. An example of this, described above, is the fact that Islamic elements, including new Arabic names, were added to initiation rites when Yao chiefs strategically adopted the religion of their thriving trading partners. Another example touched upon earlier is the fact that many ethnic groups have shifted or are shifting from matrilineal to patrilineal ‘traditions’, as a result of slave marriages, contact with patrilineal Zulu descendants from Southern Africa, and with Western, patriarchal missionaries, colonial administrators, and post-colonial development professionals. Traditions are thus not static remnants from one pre-historic day of origin – they evolve over time, are reinterpreted and adapted, abandoned, and (re)created.

Various observers of Malawi have noted a discrepancy between the ideological sexual norms and taboos presented as traditions, and actual practice – generally interpreting this as a weakening of adherence (Bennesch 2011: 18, 72, 83, Bryceson et al. 2004: 20, Drews 1991: 94, Van Breugel 2001: 177, Van den Borne 2005a: 54). It has been suggested that this weakening is related to a waning of the moral authority that was formerly vested in the elders of a community (Undie & Benaya 2008: 134). These community elders were responsible for ensuring that the cultural customs of their ancestors (as perceived by these elders) were honoured and preserved. Ever since young men gained access to paid employment, however, the power balance is said to have increasingly shifted from the elders to the male youth (Lindsay & Meischer 2003 for Africa in general, Mandala 1982: 35 for Malawi). Their contact with other secular and religious worldviews through labour migration, education, urbanization, and modern mass media have likely contributed to a crumbling – though not a vanishing – of the felt need to behave as presumably prescribed by the ancestral spirits. The Zambian Bantu descendants studied by Drews (1991: 94) noted that taboo-violating behaviour is no longer punished as consistently as it used to be in the past – which may well be related, as both cause
and consequence, to a slackening in the observance of traditional rules. Chirwa & Chizimbi (2009: 61) found the same to be said throughout Malawi. In Mudzi, several elderly blamed external development agencies and post-Banda presidents that introduced and promote concepts like ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’, and ‘human rights’ for a progressing disregard from younger generations for the advice of their elders, and so their communities’ traditional guiding principles13 [P3 0435, 0953, 2543, 2586, 4027]. According to them, contemporary boys and girls argue that “this is our time” and “we have rights” to emphasize and justify their sexual freedom.

It is not my intention to resolve whether or to what extent observance of sexual traditions has weakened. I have presented a reconstruction of the Yao ancestors’ norms and taboos concerned with sexuality so as to assess what is impressed upon contemporary men and women as ‘the way it should be’ – irrespective of whether this is representative of the way it actually was in the past. This reconstruction should therefore be taken as an impression of the various issues at play, particularly the strong cultural emphasis on female fertility.

Sexual practice in Mudzi village

In rural areas like Mudzi (contemporary versions of) traditional practices are still discernible. Boys are circumcised14 and undergo a one-month initiation program while girls are secluded for two weeks to be initiated into adolescence and adulthood [P3 0214, 1669]. Another custom traceable to early Bantu history (Saidi 2010: 101) and still performed in Mudzi is the ceremony held during a woman’s first pregnancy to prepare her for delivery [P2 1846; P3 1880]. The traditionally prescribed abstinence15 after childbirth and during menstruation too continues to be observed [P2 0144; P3 1951, 1967], as is the taboo on adding salt to food when menstruating [P3 1880].

Other norms and taboos seem to be taken less seriously. Despite clear instructions, during initiation ceremonies and beyond, to always respect and obey elders, many Mudzi youngsters fling to the winds the advice and requests of their (grand) parents [P3 0771, 0953, 2263, 2543]. Another restriction that is not (and may never have been) strictly observed is marital fidelity, as we have seen in Chapter 5. Although

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13 Bennesch (2011: 72–83) and Chirwa & Chizimbi (2009: 79) have also noted this discourse throughout Malawi. Both suggest that it may have rather been the disappearance of Kamuzu Banda’s intensive and brutal disciplinary regime (keeping a close watch on people’s behaviour; scaring them from going out at night; and forbidding, among many other things, women from wearing trousers or skirts above the knee, and men from having long hair or earrings) that triggered ‘loose’ behaviours rather than the introduction of these Western concepts per se.

14 Before the introduction of Islam, Yao boys were partially circumcised. When the initiation rites were Islamized, it became customary to remove the whole foreskin instead of only the outermost skin of the penis (Msiska 1995: 73).

15 As noted earlier, there is no fixed rule about the length of post-partum abstinence in southern Malawi, but on average it is practiced for six and one-half months (GoM 2011a: 84, Zulu 2001: 475–6).
a child’s illness is often (sometimes semi-jokingly) interpreted as a sign of its parents’ promiscuity [P2 1498; P3 1817, 2560; P8 0023, 0035–7] – indicating that the belief in a mystical link between infidelity and disease continues to prevail – numerous Mudzi men and women engage in concurrent (semi-)relationships [P2 1084, 1300, 1345, 1408, 1567, 1636, 1645, 1656, 1695, 1893, 2187; P3 1038, 1186]. A recent study on risk perception during pregnancy among Malawian Yao also suggests that ancestral sanctions against extramarital sex continue to be feared. One major concern was found to be the supernatural harm that can be caused through the infidelity of either partner (Launiala & Honkasalo 2010: 405). But, as further discussed below, and as also found by an in-depth study of multiple and concurrent partnerships throughout Malawi, a number of extenuating circumstances can be called upon by both men and women to justify their involvement in such relationships (Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009). Van Breugel (2001: 200, 208) furthermore writes that Malawians increasingly attempt to circumvent potential punishment from the ancestral spirits for sexual ‘misbehaviour’ through the use of protective medicine. Whether this solution to ancestral restrictions truly is new may be disputed, but in Mudzi such herbal measures were indeed discussed and presumably used – for example by women who wanted to avert their child’s illness after having slept with another man than the child’s father [P3 1208, 1967; P8 0024, 0037].

Concurrent (semi-)partnerships occurred so frequently in Mudzi that Gertrude considered it key in explaining the high number of weak and ill children [P8 0023, 0036]. The high incidence of concurrent partnerships despite traditional restrictions against it is likely to relate, whether as cause or consequence, to exculpations that have been constructed for both male and female promiscuity (see also Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009, Maganja et al. 2007, Wamoyi et al. 2010). As established in the previous chapter, women’s involvement in multiple relationships can locally be excused on economic grounds. The pretext constructed for male promiscuity is rather of a biological nature, as Malawian men and women alike presume that men are promiscuous by nature16 (Bennesch 2011: 146, Smith & Watkins 2005: 654) and may even die if unable to release their sperm when sexually aroused (Van den Borne 2005a: 308). This is difficult to reconcile with the prescribed months-long abstinence after childbirth, hence justifying many fathers to seek temporary or permanent new sexual affairs. The innate sex drive that is attributed to men, like the need for economic support that is ascribed to women, help to explain the fact that despite strong ancestral discouragement, multi-partner relationships can take place on a large scale. The fact that older generations (including those who turned into ancestor spirits) also involved

themselves in such sexual ‘misbehaviour’ has been used as justification too (see also Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009: 32–3, Van Breugel 2001: 260–1). Some other studies have suggested that the Islamic approval of polygyny is at times referred to by Malawian men and women to justify (only) men’s involvement in multiple sexual relationships (Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009: 19,31; MHRC 2005: 20). We have however not heard reference to such religious justification during the many conversations we had with and overheard between Mudzi women.

The fact that males are assumed to be driven by an innate desire for sex does not mean that women are denied feelings of sexual lust. In line with the traditional emphasis on sexual enjoyment for both partners, several comments from Mudzi women show that female sexual desire is explicitly acknowledged. When mentioning reasons for entering into sexual relationships in general, numerous women mentioned lust [chilakolako], or the veiled term ‘human nature’ [chilengedwe], along with the more pragmatic motives discussed in Chapter 5. Although rare, on a few occasions women hinted more openly at their own feelings of sexual desire:

Makuta (32) is financially sufficiently provided for by her husband who migrated to find work in South Africa. When she came to borrow Gertrude’s bicycle to visit her boyfriend in a neighbouring village, she explained about her extramarital relationship: “Imagine, four years of not sleeping with my husband! I cannot manage to stay without sex for so long.” She had complained to her husband about this over the phone, and he had joked back that he would cut off his penis and send it to her.

Another Mudzi woman told Gertrude that she could not sleep because of “some feeling in her body”, and that she, lacking a man to satisfy her desire, considered taking a maize cob to help herself.

Other research in rural Balaka found that women’s extramarital relationships are, among other things, motivated and justified by sexual dissatisfaction with their husbands (Tawfik & Watkins 2007, also Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009). Saidi (2010: 151), in her book on women’s social position in early East-Central Africa, argues that throughout Bantu history women have been “raised to be free agents in their sexual lives.” This is confirmed by statistics that indicate that in Balaka district only 1 percent of men and women feel that a husband would be justified to beat his wife if she refuses to have sex with him (GoM 2011a: 393–4). My data show, however, that whereas some of the miyambo [traditions, cultural values] promote women’s sexual agency, others work to curtail it:

Several young women, at least some of whom had enjoyed sex during the courting stage of their relationship, complained after marriage to us and other women about the unrelenting sex drive of their husbands. Eventually, several of these women decided to divorce because of it, as did Jane (15): “I have run away from my husband [in Balaka town] because he was just sleeping with me often. I hadn’t realized that marriage is different from chibwenzi. Then you see each other sometimes, and then not for some days. But now, this boy wants sex all the time! Sometimes up to five times a day! I can’t manage.”
The fact that these women chose to divorce so as to elude unpleasant sex demonstrates their perceived right to a satisfying sex life, and their ability to act upon it. This confirms Saidi’s (2010) claim about women’s high degree of sexual autonomy. It also demonstrates, however, the limits to this autonomy. The women felt unable to reduce the frequency of their sexual encounters to better meet their own desires through any other means than complete dissolution of the relationship. They were reluctant to negotiate about their partner’s sexual behaviour, possibly because they had been socialized not to disobey or deny sex to their husband.

Hence, while raised to be active sexual agents and encouraged to make sex enjoyable for themselves, women are restricted in their agency by the other norm: to not obstruct their husband and his sexual desire (see also Bennesch 2011: 83, MHCR 2005: 38). The question that remains is whether this has always been the case, or resulted from the relatively recent strengthening of (young) men’s social position due to their access to financial capital and other earlier described patriarchal forces.

For women, giving in to male sexual lust seems, besides a cultural obligation and personal pleasure, also to be considered an important instrument for harnessing male support. It is a major aspect of women’s obligations within the marital gender contract, and the performance of it in theory obliges men to live up to their side of the contract. According to some Mudzi women chatting at the pump one afternoon, the many children born in their area are a result of the fact that women believe they can only hold on to a partner by giving him the pleasure of sex often [P2 1402]. Other comments indicate that overall, women have no doubt that withholding sex from a man will directly push him into the arms of another woman [P2 1620; P3 1324, 1563, 2251].

Besides satisfying male (and female) lust, women often consider sex necessary to solidify a relationship as it provides their new partner with a child of his own – which is particularly desirable when either partner already has children from a previous partnership [P2 1534; P3 0871, 1268, 1290].

Not long after the youngest of their two children was born did Chikondi (28) decide to divorce her husband – who was a generally fine man but who would beat her severely when drunk. As a divorcée she faced the increasingly offensive suspicion from her fellow village women, who feared that Chikondi would now be hunting for their husbands. Therefore, when a stranger proposed marriage to her one day when walking to the market, Chikondi allowed the man to move into her house that very same evening. Her new husband objected to only feeding the children of another man, and insisted that Chikondi would soon bear him a child too. Chikondi therefore refrained from using birth control measures and indeed found herself pregnant without much delay. Nine months later she gave birth to twins, and six months after that her husband decided to move back to his previous wife. “Men these days are a problem,” Chikondi sighed. “During the first days they say that they love you, that they will take care of you, and stay with you until you die. Then they start saying that they want to have a child. Then you get pregnant, working in the field with a big belly, afterwards running home to cook for him. But soon after, they leave you. Then the next one comes, and the same happens…” [P3 0871, 3817]
Through purposefully conceiving a child with her new husband, Chikondi weaved him into her patchwork household. By doing so she hoped, as she did before and expects to do again, to increase her chances of keeping the new man attached to her household. This attachment, as described in the previous chapters, may last even after the sexual relationship formally ends (see also Guyer 1994, Luke 2003: 74, 77). Conceiving a man’s child creates a bond, with the father himself but also with his relatives, that can be called upon as long as the child must be provided for. It thus forms one of those much-wanted potential sources of support to fall back on in times of need – although, as described in Chapter 4, these potentially supportive bonds do not always materialize [e.g. P2 0924; P3 3821, 3897].

Not only men value offspring, however. As described earlier, procreation is also vitally important for women, whose (self-)identity largely depends on their status as mother. Besides conforming to the cultural ideal of motherhood, and turning a sex partner into a potential provider, conceiving leads to children who will hopefully take care of their mother once grown up. Mudzi women who were encouraged to give up a child, for example to have it taken care of by its father or to kill it as sacrifice to become rich, explicitly argued that they did not want to do so because the child is their future source of support [P3 0784, 1899, 3949, see also P3 2491, 3823]. “He may go to South Africa,” one woman dreamed out loud about her baby boy, “and send me blankets” [P3 1899]. Unsurprisingly, considering the emphasis on procreation and encouragement of sex during initiation rites, over one-third of the Mudzi women who can recall the year in which their first child was born (N71) became mothers before turning 18, and some were as young as 14. Most unsolicited comments from Mudzi women about sex revolved around its reproductive qualities. Generally, sex is directly associated with becoming pregnant [P2 0123, 1527, 1540, 1638, 1832, 1866; P3 1370, 1735]. When sex does not lead to pregnancy, herbal medicines and folk healers are sought to bring about conception [P2 1702; P3 0502, 2895]. When these measures remain ineffective, women may (secretly) turn to another man (who is either paid for this service or not) in an attempt to conceive. If a couple that fails to produce live offspring does not divorce by itself, they are pressured by their parents or community elders to pursue new, hopefully more fruitful matches [P3 3854, 4012].

While pregnancy is desirable in many cases, in several others it is not. The small minority of young women who are serious about finishing school, for example, do not want their ambitions shattered by having to stay home caring for a baby [P2

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17 Local witchdoctors (are believed to) advise clients who request to become rich to kill their child, or have incestuous sex [e.g. P2 1212, 2166-7; P3 0506] in order to accomplish their wish.

18 This number is based on self-reports. The real number is likely to be higher, as we know of at least two women who during the formal interview omitted to mention a child they conceived years before their first marriage [P3 1046, 1099].
Young women who prefer the generally more profitable *chibwenzi* relationship over a marital union would rather not have this lifestyle jeopardized by a baby either [P2 0914, 1845; P3 1249, see also P2 1811, 1940; P3 0860, 2249, 3001–2 about the unlikeliness of men being attracted to women who bore many children]. Conceiving a new baby while still nursing another is culturally disapproved of (Forster 2001: 253, Wembah-Rashid 1995: 55–6), so having a young child is generally felt to be a reason for not wanting a new pregnancy yet [P2 1515, 1736, 1756; P3 1248, 1951, 2059]. Mudzi women with older children, furthermore, regularly expressed their unwillingness to have to care for even more – especially after having been abandoned earlier by several men after conceiving [e.g. P2 1403, 1498, 1534, 1772; P3 1735, 3978–80]. Elderly women may feel ashamed to become pregnant [e.g. P3 0871].

As sex is for Mudzi women so inextricably bound up with conception, this potential consequence is an important consideration when deciding whether or not to become involved with men. Desperately wanting to avoid pregnancy leads some women to temporarily refrain from any sexual relationship – particularly girls who hope to secure a future livelihood through education, and women who are fed up with men leaving them with ever more mouths to feed. Abstinence, however, is not the only, nor the most desirable, means to reduce reproduction risks. Mudzi women who are unwilling or feel unable to completely abstain from sex, yet prefer not to conceive, can use either traditional and modern folk medicine or biomedical contraception. Those who find themselves with an unwanted pregnancy can undergo clinical abortion (fairly costly at 3000MK) or can (and at a large scale do) turn to herbal folk healers or self-medication with poisonous substances available at the local shops, such as washing powder [P2 0485, 0643, 0902, 0914, 1500, 1515, 1544, 1702, 1756, 1845].

In sum, more than with anything else, sex is in Mudzi intrinsically associated with reproduction – which is in line with the age-old emphasis on sex as vital for community survival. Fertility, procreation, motherhood, and children are in general highly valued, and important reasons for women to engage in sexual relationships with men. Nonetheless, there are also numerous circumstances under which individual women may prefer to avert conception or terminate a pregnancy.

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The most commonly used (traditional folk) method consists of a string tied around the waist with a knot for each year that one wishes not to conceive [P2 349; P3 0871]. Because of its visibility this measure can, however, only be used when a woman’s sexual partner approves of her birth-controlling intentions [P3 0871]. The same goes, albeit to a lesser extent, for biomedical contraceptive pills as these have to be kept somewhere in the house and be taken in each day, which may be difficult to conceal. The pills can be obtained for free at any of the three health clinics frequented by Mudzi villagers, but I know of no one in Mudzi who used them [P3 0593]. The head nurse of one of these clinics confirmed the general low use of birth control pills, and explained this as resulting from women’s fear to forget a daily dose, and the potential risk of a disagreeing husband finding out [P3 0982]. Mudzi women themselves mentioned...
Obviously, then, other reasons to engage in sexual activity play a role too. Similarly, as described in this section on sexual ideology and practices, even though infidelity is traditionally discouraged through threats of ancestral punishments, in day-to-day practice both men and women regularly engage in concurrent sexual relationships. Conformity to the traditional ideals of procreation and faithfulness is thus recurrently compromised by other needs and desires. Our data, as presented in this section and the previous chapter, suggest that women’s other motives to engage in sex besides reproduction include satisfying lust, conforming to the (new?) cultural ideal of female subordination to male sexual desire, and wishing to cultivate a partnership with a man for both social and economic reasons.

Whereas pregnancy as a consequence of sex is considered negative in some situations but positive in many others, the risk of contracting a disease as a result of sexual contact is considered negative at all times. In the next section this consideration of risking a sexual transmittable infection, particularly HIV, when having sex is further elaborated upon.

HIV and AIDS

When mentioning fear of infection as reason for refraining from sexual intercourse with a particular man or at a particular occasion, Mudzi women use the term ‘matenda’ [P3 0505, 0742, 1558, 1599, 2941, 2943-4, 3147, 3475], which is the general word for ‘diseases’ [singular nthenda]. Gertrude, as well as other researchers of ChiChewa-speaking people, however, usually translated this word as specifically meaning ‘AIDS’. Further comments from informants indicate that they indeed often, though not necessarily always, referred particularly to matenda a Edzi (literally ‘the diseases of AIDS’) [P2 0741; P3 1491, 1501, 1572, 2134, 2943-4, 3147, 3868, 3919]. In the past it had been other sexually transmitted infections like gonorrhoea and syphilis that were feared for their potential fatality [P3 3861, 3547] (Lwanda 2004: 33). However, since the introduction of Western medicines these are now easily curable – and thus less frightening – diseases (Watkins 2004: 679). Consequently,

a widespread fear of permanent infertility being inflicted by these pills [P3 0721]. Alternatively, women can, and more often do, opt for birth control injections that last for three months [P2 1300, 1594, 1756, 1761, 1838; P3 0748, 2734], which are also freely available at the health clinics. These do not depend on daily adherence, and can be kept hidden from a sex partner, if needed. Nonetheless, these are also feared by some to cause sterility, illness, or even death [P3 2867, 3481–2]. Condoms are rarely used [P2 1594; P3 0871, 1186], as will be further explained in the next section on HIV and AIDS. Women who are certain never to want another child can choose to have a surgical operation (but only when having no less than four living children, as prescribed by hospital regulations) or drink a locally brewed sterilizing concoction [P3 0871, 1280, 1290].

Researchers tend to interpret the word matenda as a euphemism, used to avoid utterance of the stigmatized word ‘AIDS’ (e.g. Bryceson et al. 2004: 13, 29, Peters et al. 2007: 40). However, the widespread and uncomplicated use of references to HIV and AIDS in Mudzi, for example in jokes
HIV is at present the main sexually transmitted virus to be feared. In this second half of the chapter I therefore focus in particular on the extent to and ways in which Mudzi women take into account the risk of HIV infection when considering having sex.

To this end I first establish that Mudzi women (and men) prefer not becoming infected with HIV for a number of reasons (which differ somewhat from the generally assumed reasons). Following, I assess the ways in which HIV transmission is (and is not) avoided, finding that despite a general hope to not become infected, prevention is often not actually a priority. In the last section I assess explanations for this low prioritization of HIV prevention in the daily lives of Mudzi women.

Fear of infection

It may seem obvious but should not be taken for granted that a research population, or a group of individuals within it, necessarily feels the need to avoid HIV infection. In this light, the study results of Launiala & Honkasalo (2010) are noteworthy. Assuming that malaria would be perceived as a major risk during pregnancy, as it is life threatening to both an expecting mother and her unborn child, they intended to study how rural Malawians manage this risk. To their surprise they found that this risk was not taken seriously and consequently few measures were taken against it. In Mudzi, women expressed an explicit preference for not contracting HIV. One woman said she dreaded being diagnosed with HIV because she feared that she would then spend all her time “just waiting for death” [P2 1655]. Several other women worried that their children would be left uncared for if they were to die [P3 2943–4, 3147]. Most concerns about HIV infection, however, related to the stigma that continues to surround it:

[P3 1573, 1598, 1625, 2770], when scrutinizing someone’s unkempt appearance [P3 2770] or sexual behaviour [P2 0741, 1404, 1542, 2187; P3 0435, 2709, 2867, 3868–9], when discussing someone else’s or one’s own sickness [P2 1271, 1524, 1719, 1871; P3 1419, 1730], or the death of relative [P2 1287; P3 1280, 1326, 3868], suggests that the topic is not necessarily hushed up (anymore) (see also Watkins 2004). I have no decisive answer to why the word matenda is generally used to refer to the potential sickening effects of sex (see also Van den Borne 2005a: 54–61 about multiple local readings), but I can make some speculations which seem reasonable within the context of our findings. Firstly, matenda may not necessarily refer to AIDS alone, but have been used also before AIDS entered the scene, and refer more generally to the fact that one can get a disease through sexual intercourse – as seems to have been the belief for many centuries. In the last century STIs were especially rampant, after having been introduced by colonial Europeans (Lwanda 2004). Furthermore, AIDS in itself is not a disease, but a syndrome that inhibits the body from fighting against infections and thus causes it to increasingly fall ill. Rather than having a distinctive ‘face’, AIDS expresses itself through a myriad of illnesses. Hence, the phrasing that someone suffers from ‘diseases’ is actually quite accurate for AIDS. Alternatively, or additionally, the word may simply be an abbreviation of the full expression matenda a Edzi [disease of AIDS], which is at times used too [P2 1548; P3 1419, 3919]. As educational messages about HIV and AIDS invade daily life in Mudzi on such a scale that they have become inescapable and omnipresent, AIDS needs only to be referred to as “the disease”, and anyone will understand what is meant. Use of the word matenda may, however, also be a remnant from earlier times when AIDS was surrounded with greater shame than it is now – by which I do not mean to imply that this shame has entirely disappeared.
“I am afraid to go for blood testing. If I will go and am found positive, definitely everybody in the village will talk about me”, one woman (24) said [P2 2080, see also P3 1523]. Another woman, Evelin (29), justified her reluctance to get tested by referring to a fellow village woman whose positive sero-status had recently become a public secret, and who for some time thereafter had been ignored by everyone other than her close relatives. Women had stopped talking when she approached the water pump, gossiped behind her back, and refused to share food and utensils with her [P2 0359; P3 1598, 2584]. Facing such hardship Evelin considered it impossible to live ‘positively’, which, following campaigns that encourage such an attitude, she understood to be a requirement when infected with HIV. [P3 1523, 2583–4]

Besides instigating loneliness at a time of emotional distress, the exclusion that results from the AIDS stigma bears severe material risks. An HIV-positive woman (34) from one of Mudzi’s neighbouring villages, told me how her fellow villagers had successfully argued to the chief that she should not receive a coupon for subsidized fertilizer “as she would soon die anyway” and therefore would not benefit from increasing yields [P8 0091]. Until recently at least, little reciprocity could be expected from someone headed for the debilitating, lingering death caused by AIDS. He or she would be in increasing need for support rather than be able to give any, making it unappealing for others to invest in the maintenance of a good relationship. The same has been found by Nombo & Niehof (2008: 241) in rural Tanzania, who summarize:

Different from the idealized view that social capital helps households maintain their livelihoods and strengthens their resilience to future shocks and stress, many of the HIV/AIDS-affected households were found unable to cope with HIV/AIDS impacts, because social capital itself is not resilient in a context of high HIV/AIDS prevalence and widespread poverty.

In this light, even arousing suspicion of a positive HIV status can be detrimental for one’s potential access to support, and is thus anxiously avoided.

Comparing data from rural and urban Zambia, Virginia Bond (2006) found that AIDS stigma is most severe where resources are insufficient to help all in need. The intensive care that AIDS patients need, often for a long period of time, makes them an almost unbearable burden for (potential) caretakers who are already limited in money, food, and time. According to Bond, these (potential) care providers tend to frame the painful decisions they must make about the allocation of resources in a language of attribution and blame (2006: 192).

As described, promiscuity and infidelity have throughout Bantu history been classified as sexual taboos. Breaching these taboos was believed to provoke supernatural sanctions, many of which were health and life threatening. For over a century, Christian and Islamic leaders have preached against sexual ‘perversity’ too. Therefore, when public health campaigns introduced HIV and AIDS as resulting

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21 In the next chapter I elaborate upon this important concept, defining it as ‘the ability of individuals and collective actors to mobilize resources through their social network’.
from ‘dangerous’ sexual practices, including infidelity and promiscuity, this must have been fairly easy to grasp for Mudzi villagers and others throughout Central Africa (Watkins 2004: 679). Comments from Mudzi men and women indicate that HIV infection is indeed strongly associated with promiscuous sexual behaviour [P2 0144, 0309, 0741, 1272, 1404, 1524, 1542, 1811, 2187; P3 0602, 1326, 1791, 2527, 2665].

Eveles (88): “One of my daughters died because of AIDS. All her children died before they reached their first year; that is how my daughter realized that she was infected. She had a husband who moved around a lot, sleeping with many women. It was he who infected her.” [P3 1326]

Jasmine (57): “Have you seen Suset? She is just getting thinner and thinner. She used to have a lot of boyfriends, that why she is not looking healthy.” [P2 1271, 1524]. … “Livia likes men too much. She will die of AIDS just like her sister” [P2 1542].

Ada (18) was left by her husband just after bearing her first child. He had simply disappeared one day without a word. Her anger about his deceit was still fresh and bitter. “I think that he did not come back home because we were not able to sleep together [have sex] as our child is still young. He has now moved in with another woman, but soon she will also be pregnant and give birth to a child, and then he will leave her too and move to another wife. Later on he will have many wives, and die before he reaches 30 years!” she smiled grimly. [P2 0144]

Sofia (25): “I met my ex-husband on the way back from Balaka, and he gave me a cabbage. But he does not look good, very thin. He likes women too much. … He travels a lot, so maybe he is having girlfriends everywhere” [P3 2527]. Jasmine, the man’s mother, on another occasion listed that at that moment her son had a pregnant wife, a pregnant girlfriend, and two ex-wives with two and four children respectively, of whom Sofia is one. Worried, his mother added: “He is just getting married everywhere without fearing matenda.” [P2 2187]

It appears that HIV prevention messages fit in well with a local, age-old, and over-time-reconfirmed adage against sexual licentiousness. This adage, however, happens to be one that is widely accepted as a command that, despite its veracity, cannot always be lived up to. In other words, the new threat of AIDS has been merged into the realm of an existing and still-upheld norm against sexual transgression that is (accepted to be) at odds with lived experience. Notably, the norm itself is not challenged: it continues to be subscribed to by virtually all, just like the need to protect oneself against HIV infection is widely subscribed to. Yet in practice, below the surface of genuine agreement, failure to comply is considered normal.

In line with this, Isak Niehaus (2007) has argued that it seems unlikely that AIDS stigma is related to the apparent transgression of sexual normative behaviour, as is usually assumed. He argues that if this were the case, then the other sorts of inflictions caused by such behaviour should generate the same degree of discrimination, which they do not. Instead, he suggests that it is the horrendous physical decay and deadly end caused by AIDS, and the resultant status of HIV-infected persons as ‘dead while living’ that trigger fear and stigmatization. My findings, like those of Bond (2006) and Nombo & Niehof (2008), suggest that it may indeed be the terminal nature of AIDS that explains the differential attitudes towards this and other STIs. However, rather than stigma stemming from a fear of
the zombie-like look of patients, it may be their prospective inability to provide future support and the drain they pose on caretakers’ resources. Furthermore, it seems too farfetched to completely dismiss the thesis that an association of HIV and AIDS with sexual immorality causes stigma, because the discourse on this association is widely practiced at village level.

This analysis suggests that a double standard prevails in Mudzi. On the one hand, sexual transgression is widespread and clandestinely justifiable on many grounds. On the other hand, however, when the threat arises that a community member may become a severe burden due to AIDS-inflicted diseases, accounts of sexual culpability (and with this ‘stigma’) quickly surface. Possibly, as argued by Bond (2006), this sexual culpability discourse serves, whether consciously or subconsciously, to cover up and cope with one’s inability\textsuperscript{22} to offer the communal solidarity that is traditionally prescribed.

It appears that Mudzi villagers have good reason to dread HIV infection – because of its inherent death sentence, but even more so because of the (emotional and material) exclusion that it triggers. Suspicion of being HIV-positive is therefore preferably avoided – which, notably, is not the same as avoidance of infection itself.

\textit{Efforts to prevent}

- Formal public health efforts

The knowledge that public health experts deem necessary for individual avoidance of HIV is widely at hand in Mudzi, as it is found to be elsewhere in Malawi and many other parts of sub-Saharan Africa (see Chapter 2). Until recently, formal HIV-prevention efforts in sub-Saharan Africa focused almost exclusively on informing the public about the existence of a new fatal virus, and ways to protect themselves against infection (Barden-O’Fallon et al. 2004: 131, Hardee et al. 2008, Kalipeni et al. 2007: 1015–6, Nguyen & Stovel 2004). Policymakers seemed to assume that, firstly, lack of knowledge about HIV and AIDS was the main contributor to the continued spreading of the virus, and, secondly, that people automatically stop having unsafe sex once they understand the risks involved (Barden-O’Fallon et al. 2004: 132, Hardee et al. 2008: 6). As a result of the widespread awareness campaigns, by the end of last century virtually all Malawians had at least heard of AIDS (see Chapter 2). When my Mudzi informants were subjected to an unexpected test on their knowledge of HIV and AIDS – during an event that was announced

\textsuperscript{22} I doubted whether to use the word ‘unwillingness’ instead of ‘inability’ here. As noted in this chapter and further elaborated in the next, the few resources (including time) that Mudzi villagers can dispose of are often strategically invested, particularly in relationships that are potentially reciprocal. Villagers could choose to allocate their resources to help community members suffering from AIDS, but tend to choose not to – hence my inclination to use the word ‘unwillingness’. However, as I hope to be making clear, such decisions tend to be instigated by a lack of sufficient resources and a need to survive – hence my final choice of the word ‘inability’.
as a workshop about growing trees – they could all flawlessly recite the awareness and prevention messages that reach them via radio broadcasts; posters decorating the walls of each health facility, restaurant, grocery and liquor store; and external development interventions, like the ‘tree workshop’ [P3 0600, 0602, see also P3 0435, 1280, 3540-1]. Their formulations largely followed the exact wording used in the educational materials, e.g. “HIV ndi kachirombo kamene kayambitse matenda a Edzi” [HIV is a virus\(^{23}\) that causes AIDS].

Despite the fact that knowledge of HIV and AIDS seems to be impressively accurate in Mudzi as it is found to be throughout Malawi (and beyond), the number of new infections per year in the region continues to increase\(^{24}\) (GoM 2010b: 71). Of all pregnant women who attended antenatal services at the health clinic near Mudzi over the past year, 12 percent were found to be HIV positive.\(^{25}\) Among those who came for voluntary counselling and testing (VCT), infection rates were much higher – almost 24 percent of men, and nearly 22 percent of women [P3 0982]. Mudzi women’s life histories attest to these high figures with frequent references to close relatives dying in prime-age, some of their deaths explicitly attributed to AIDS [P2 2187; P3 1280, 1326, 2063, 3868].

As also noted in Chapter 2, the extensive awareness and behaviour-change campaigns have led to high levels of knowledge of HIV and AIDS, but not stopped the virus from spreading. The messages transmitted through these campaigns often stress one or several facets of the so-called ‘ABC’ recommendation, which stands for Abstain, Be faithful, or use a Condom (Barden-O’Fallon et al. 2004: 131, GoM 2010b: 64, Mbugua 2009). Abstinence is, however, difficult to reconcile with the great value that Yao men and women, as many others, traditionally attach to procreation and the act of sex itself. Furthermore, as assessed in the previous chapter, (prime-age) Mudzi women for a number of reasons want to attach a male partner to them and their household, and sex is an essential means to achieve this. For many within and outside Malawi, therefore, abstinence is not a realistic option.

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\(^{23}\) The ChiChewa word kachirombo literally translates as ‘small wild beast’ and is also used to denote insects, germs, parasites, bacilli, and bacteria (Steven Paas ChiChewa/ChiNyanja-English dictionary 2004). One young Mudzi man (23) told us that men are not supposed to fear wild beasts, so neither should they show any fear for the ‘small wild beast’ of HIV [P3 2134]. Reducing the number of sexual partners or using condoms would be considered as exhibiting such fear.

\(^{24}\) In absolute terms, the number of new infections in Malawi is estimated to have been almost 70,500 in 2010, and prospected to be almost 80,500 in 2012 (GoM 2010b: 71). The HIV incidence rate has been and continues to be highest in Malawi’s Southern Region (ibid: 19).

\(^{25}\) HIV testing has become a standardized component of antenatal care in Malawi, and is found to be experienced as mandatory by pregnant women and their partners (Angotti et al. 2010). It has furthermore been found that fear of stigma and discrimination when found HIV-positive keeps large numbers of women from accessing antenatal care, or their husbands from letting them (Chikonde et al. 2009, Turan et al. 2008). It seems probable that especially women (or partners) who have reason to believe they are infected forego antenatal care to avoid being tested. If this is the case, then the HIV prevalence of 12 percent is likely to underrepresent the actual percentage of pregnant women living with the virus.
Fidelity as a preventive strategy is difficult too, as it is only effective when both partners are faithful, and can thus only be applied when partners sufficiently trust each other – which in Mudzi is often not the case [P2 1370, 1405, 1440, 1600, 1605; P3 0806, 1572, 1639, 1776, 1888, 1998, 3860]. As described in Chapter 5, despite many women’s expressed desire to form a team with their husbands (“helping each other to develop our household”), most partnerships are ad hoc, unstable, and short-lived. Rather than forming a team with a shared goal and future, Mudzi couples in general seem to expect and accept that, in the end, each fends for him- or herself. Throughout Malawi studies have pointed out that distrust is a common feature of relationships between men and women, and husbands and wife in particular (Bryceson et al. 2004: 27, Forster 2001: 247, Smith & Watkins 2004: 649). Forster (2001: 247) suggests that this has long been the case, referring to old songs that women sing when pounding maize together, which are highly critical of male laziness, drunkenness, and womanizing habits. The risk of AIDS, he argues, has compounded the mutual distrust. Bryceson et al. (2004: 27) indeed found that women blame men for bringing HIV to the family, more specifically for their drinking habits and their tendency to go after other women when drunk. Men, on the other hand, blame women for coming home with the virus after having been looking for food or money, insinuating they often find it by providing sex. Findings from the MLSFH project confirm a discourse of distrust and blame among rural Malawian women and men. Women are particularly worried about their own husbands infecting them, as men are considered promiscuous by nature. Men, in turn, are most worried about contracting HIV from their extramarital partners (Smith & Watkins 2004: 649). When distrusting one’s partner, fidelity is an illogical and possibly risky strategy to protect oneself against infection.

The last option offered by formal HIV-prevention campaigns is condom use. However, in Mudzi, as found elsewhere in Malawi26 and sub-Saharan Africa,27 condoms seem to be rarely used during sex,28 despite their free availability at the nearest health clinics. On numerous occasions Gertrude or the village women themselves brought up the topic during casual conversations, and each time women were clear about their non-use of condoms, including with extramarital boyfriends [P2 1084, 1585, 1594, 1697, 1736, 1757, 1831; P3 0871, 1263, 1558, 2253]. Whenever they further elaborated upon this, they explained that they do not use a condom during sex because their partner does not like it, or he at least did not bring it up [P2 1585, 1697; P3 1263, 1280]. Responsibility for condom use (and especially non-use) was thus by-and-large placed on men. A common argument heard throughout

28 Condoms in Mudzi seem to be used mainly by young boys who make footballs out of them [P2 1831; P3 0624, 1371].
Malawi and beyond, and reiterated by Mudzi men too, is that “one does not eat a sweet in its wrapper either” [P3 1263; P8 0081]. Condoms are believed to take away the ‘sweet taste’ of (skin-to-skin) sex, and a woman who suggests using them would therefore be perceived as wanting to deprive her partner of his sexual pleasure. “If you ask about condoms,” Livia (21) explained, “boys say you don’t love them” [P3 1263]. In the literature on condom use in Malawi more elaboration can be found on the general aversion to it. Condoms are so strongly associated with AIDS, promiscuity, and distrust that neither men nor women seem even tentatively willing to use them. For women it seems most stigmatizing to possess condoms or even suggest using one (e.g. Van den Borne 2005a: 135) [see also P3 1294, 1665]. Associated with prostitution and promiscuity, Agnes Chimbiri (2007) writes, condoms are considered appropriate only in risky extramarital relationships, not within marriage. Condom use signals the inferior status given to a sexual relationship: not safe, not serious, not intimate (Chimbiri 2007: 1104, Tavory & Swidler 2009: 181, Van den Borne 2005a: 135–8). The suggestion to use a condom within a steady relationship is considered by both men and women a reason for break-up, as it is either taken as proof that the suggesting partner has been unfaithful, or accuses the other of infidelity. In order to turn casual sexual encounters at least into the form of a relationship, disassociate oneself from disrespectful prostitution, and increase one’s chances for the relationship to last, condom use is not brought up or even rejected. For a woman, as discussed, the wish for pregnancy may not only be at play within but also outside marriage, as it increases her chances for lasting support from the child’s father. Furthermore, the religious objection that condom use would be against God’s will prevails in

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30 Interestingly, a study comparing sexual attitudes among “Whites, Blacks and Indians” in South Africa found that only Indian males felt a strong incentive to forego the pleasure of skin-to-skin sex and use a condom because they are forced to marry a girl in case of pregnancy (Kaufman & Stavrou 2004: 388).

31 One young, educated, urban, Malawian woman that I know well had long protected herself against HIV infection by completely refraining from sexual relationships – although her purpose had been particularly to avoid pregnancy so as to be able to finish her studies. When she allowed herself to have her first boyfriend, already in her twenties by then, she prepared herself well and bought condoms. This was not at all appreciated by her boyfriend, who did not know how to interpret this shocking fact. The young woman had to do a lot of explaining but failed to restore her boyfriend’s trust.

32 In line with this, Schoepf (2001: 344) mentions studies finding that women who self-identify as commercial sex workers more likely than others to use condoms, albeit only with men they consider clients.


34 Trinitapoli (2009), however, found no overall correlation between religious affiliation and sexual behaviour in Malawi (although characteristics of a particular local congregation may impact the sexual behaviour of its members). In general, Muslim authorities in Malawi have been found to be more pragmatic towards ‘human weakness’ and therefore less averse to condom use than Christian religious leaders (Forster 1998: 538).
Malawi as in much of the rest of the world (Kaler 2004b: 106, Chimbiri 2007: 1104). Lastly, Kaler (2004b) points to the often-overlooked ‘long shadow’ of past family planning efforts, which were widely interpreted as hostile attempts of the Malawian government and international organizations to trim down the country’s or continent’s (poor) population. Persistent rumours hold that condoms are part of this conspiracy, possibly purposefully infected with AIDS or at least containing an ill-making oil [see indeed P3 1280].

Besides the ABC behaviour-change recommendations, testing and treatment services are increasingly offered by the government and international organizations as a means to contain the AIDS epidemic. According to the head nurse of the small hospital nearest to Mudzi, most men do not come for testing until they are very ill, at which point it is often too late for treatment (see also Parrott et al. 2011). She added that those few who are voluntarily tested while still feeling healthy are almost exclusively young men [P3 2725]. Women are in principle routinely tested for HIV when attending a health clinic for antenatal care. Those who test positive and do not qualify for anti-retroviral treatment (ART, further discussed in the next session) are offered drugs to reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission at birth. They are told to return to the clinic at least within 72 hours after delivery so as to receive the same drug for their newborn as well. According to the head nurse of the hospital nearest to Mudzi, however, many of the pregnant women who are tested positive do not return for that follow up: “You will only see them come back after a year or two, when they are pregnant again. Then after having their second child, that is when most of them die” [P3 2725–7]. It must be noted here that a 2009 study found that the drugs needed to prevent mother-to-child HIV transmission were out of stock in over 50 percent of health care centres in Malawi (GoM 2010b: 63). The study did not speculate whether this may be a cause or consequence of pregnant women’s overall low adoption of the prevention strategy.

The fact that they had been tested at pregnancy, for some of my informants, served as a justification to not undergo another HIV test [P3 0765]. Other women argued that they were not married at the moment and would go for a test when finding a proper husband – disregarding the fact that they were involved in non-formalized yet sexually active (semi-)relationships [P2 1697; P3 0752, 0765]. Not only unmarried women themselves left unacknowledged their (informal) sexual activity in the face of HIV risk. Even the health officer running the Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) centre35 nearest to Mudzi did so, at least when

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35 This is a different facility from the hospital referred to in the previous paragraph. The former is a tiny child and maternal health care facility where VCT services are offered, while the latter is a small hospital attending to all health problems (although referring many of the slightly more complicated cases to the larger hospital in Balaka town).
Gertrude, Livia (21), and I had ourselves tested there [P3  0807–22]. Right after I had told the counsellor that I was married, he asked me if I wanted to have any condoms. Gertrude and Livia told him they were unmarried, and did not receive an offer of free condoms. The counsellor’s differential response may suggest that only my involvement in sex could be openly and legitimately recognized, and thus built upon. Livia was meanwhile denied a chance to access free condoms to protect herself against HIV transmission from one of her many (potentially infected) casual lovers. Possibly, the man acted out of respect, because offering condoms to an unmarried woman would have meant insinuating that she might be involved in clandestine relationships. Or maybe he followed donor instructions not to offer condoms to unmarried youngsters as this might encourage illicit sexual activity (see also Ahlberg 1994: 234). Whatever the case, trying to match safe-sex promotion with the norm that (women’s) sexual activity only takes place within a formalized relationship seems very contra-effective, especially considering the fact that condoms are locally considered inappropriate within the marital context.

Despite a general reluctance to get tested, some men and women, like Livia, do muster courage to go for voluntary counselling and testing. For some women, as we will see below, testing (and thus accessing treatment when necessary) serves as a means to lower their risk of dying from AIDS as a result of their profitable sexual relationship with a unfaithful partner. However, these and other Mudzi women who, amongst each other or to Gertrude, said they would soon go for a test, usually kept postponing it. On a day-to-day basis other matters took precedence over the potentially life-saving but at the same time status-threatening trip to the testing centre.

Locally developed efforts
It appears, as found by other researchers in the region, that the HIV-prevention measures insisted upon by external development agencies are largely incompatible with the daily life realities of Mudzi women. Measuring behaviour change in line with the conventional ABC recommendations gives the impression that these women do little to protect themselves and others against HIV infection. This should, however, not be interpreted as complete paralysis or denial, as is sometimes assumed (e.g. Bryceson et al. 2004: 29). As Schatz (2005), Watkins

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36 When I told Gertrude that I wanted to have myself tested, she decided on her own to be tested too. I did not request this from her, or even suggest it to her.

37 I have not been able to figure out what exactly motivated Livia to join us when we went to be tested. Possibly, she had wanted to know her status, and had disliked both options of going alone or going with someone from within her close network. Maybe our example made it easier for her to actually go too. Maybe she just liked the prospect of spending some time alone with us, as walking to and from the clinic took over two hours. Maybe a combination of these factors triggered her (quite unusual) decision.

38 At a national level it is estimated that in 2009 4.5 percent of Malawian men and women aged 15–49 underwent an HIV test (GoM 2010b: 19).
At 13, Lovely (now 29) worked in the fields of one of the farm estates near Mudzi to help her mother provide for their household. At the estate Lovely met a young man, aged 18, who was kind enough to share some of his salary with her each time they were paid. Soon, Lovely found herself pregnant and the two decided to marry. The couple struggled to make ends meet and in the following years often went without sufficient food. Lovely gave birth to six children, three of whom did not survive. When her brother-in-law migrated to South Africa and found waged labour, her husband decided to join him. The couple sold their maize stores to buy a passport and pay for the man's journey. Luckily, it did not take long for him to find employment – although he has never told Lovely what exactly it is that he does for a living. Since then, he has regularly sent her money, with which she can buy enough food and hire labourers to help her in her field. He even sent her a mobile phone that hangs on her chest like a necklace, on which he calls her every few days. Despite this overt commitment towards her, she fears that he will not be able to resist sexual temptations, following the general belief that men cannot go without sex for extended periods of time. “Those women in South Africa all want to have a Malawian man,” Lovely furthermore believes, “because they know that Malawians are hard workers.” Fearing that he will come back with ‘diseases’, Lovely spends part of the money that her husband sends to buy herbal medicines that keep him from cheating on her. [P2 1405, 1484; P3 0609]

Married Mudzi men who have migrated to South Africa are commonly assumed to have extramarital affairs, if not polygamous marriages, at their new homes [P2 1370, 1600; P3 0609]. Although these men’s promiscuity in South Africa cannot be ascertained, upon return to Mudzi for a brief vacation many – finally able to attract women because of their newly gained financial power – prove their infidelity with temporary sexual affairs within and around the village [P2 1561, 2166, 1636] (see also Chirwa 1997). The wives (and other sex partners) of migrant men are thus well aware of the HIV risks that they expose themselves to. However, despite the great HIV risk involved, and the high awareness of this risk, none of the migrants’ wives considered divorcing her husband. Instead, they encouraged him over the phone to stay faithful [P3 3860, 4006, 4019]. Several underwent or planned to undergo a HIV test after their husband had come home for a brief visit, arguing that they cannot know how he behaves ‘out there’ [P2 1370; P3 0752, 1371]. By finding out in time whether they had been infected, and accessing treatment if necessary, they hoped to contain the risk of becoming (too) ill. Furthermore some, like Lovely, paid folk healers for the service of safeguarding their husbands’ fidelity.

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40 Nine Mudzi women have a husband in South Africa, three others are married to a man working elsewhere in Malawi.
Apparently, the benefits of these women’s marriages outweighed the disadvantages, of which HIV risk is one (another sometimes being their residence at their husband’s natal village instead of their own, as described in Chapter 5). The benefits not only entail the direct material support that these women receive from their husbands, or can ask for in times of need. Their long-distance marriage combines a relatively secure livelihood and the respectability of being married, with a high degree of personal freedom. Contrary to women with a live-in husband, migrants’ wives do not have to stay at home to cater to a man. Furthermore, women whose husbands are present often complain that they never give money to be spent freely, only providing basic items that are needed in the household [P2 1618, 1643]. Women with absent husbands can spend the money that is sent to them as they please [P2 0118; P3 0996, 1858, 4019, 4105], although sometimes they are advised on this by their husbands (who are however not around to check whether their advice is indeed followed) [P2 1569; P3 0998, 1421, 1673, 3968, 4091].

Women consider themselves (and others) particularly at risk of HIV infection when “exchanging husbands too often” and when staying with a promiscuous husband [P3 2939–41, 2943–4, 3475]. As a result, fear of infection can be (and was) brought up by some women to justify their choice to remain with an unsatisfying husband [P3 2929, 2939–41, 3265, 3475], and by others to justify their decision to divorce an unsatisfactory husband [P2 1548; P3 1448, 2943–4, 3909]. Considering, however, the fact that none of the migrants’ wives actually eliminated this risk by ending the relationship with their – most likely unfaithful – husband, suggests that avoidance of HIV infection only becomes a decisive consideration when other factors valued in a marriage are unmet.

Women who prefer to stay married to their (suspected) promiscuous husbands rather opt for less radical measures to avert the unwanted consequences of his behaviour, as Lovely did by buying herbal medicines [see also P2 1910]. Many women, as described in the previous chapter, try to advise and encourage their husband to be faithful, or request their ankhoswe (marriage guardians) to do so. Some move on to more violent measures, generally directed at their husband’s lover [P2 1208, 1940]. However, as also described in the previous chapter, promiscuity is disliked by women primarily because it reduces the resources available to them (as these will be shared among multiple women), rather than because of a fear for HIV infection [P2 1561, 1893; P3 0841, 2329, 2340, 2468].

Several studies found rural Malawian men claiming to have become more selective in choosing sex partners, by turning to their social network for inquiries about the sexual history of their prospective sex partners to assess the risk involved (Kaler 2004a: 292–4, Peters et al. 2007: 43, Watkins 2004: 688–9), and preferring the less attractive, married, or very young – assuming such women are less likely to have had many sexual partners and be infected (Forster 2001: 251, Kaler 2004a: 292–4, Smith & Watkins 2005: 655). As discussed in the previous chapter, some
Mudzi women too take time before accepting or declining a proposal so as to inquire about their proposer’s personal background and characteristics. If it is found that he proposes to many women, this is generally considered a drawback – although not necessarily or solely because of the HIV risk that is involved, but rather or also because of it is taken to indicate a bleak prospect concerning relationship stability and profitability. Many girls and women, however, accept sexual proposals without lingering to gather such information, glad that someone has shown an interest in them and afraid that a delay would put off their proposer. Only when men seemed desperate to marry – which runs counter to the generally expected male behaviour – did women become so suspicious of ulterior motives that they decided to decline, taking it, not without reason, as a possible indication that he was HIV-positive and in urgent need of a future caretaker:

Wisikesi (30) received a marriage proposal from a man who had come to Mudzi to look for a wife. The man told her that he was cultivating so much cotton that he would be able to buy 100 bags of maize with the revenue, which he planned to resell once prices went up during the hunger season. Wisikesi did not trust his story, which sounded too good to be true, and refused to marry him. Recalling this incident, she and the other knitting women at our veranda commented that the man had afterwards continued to a neighbouring village, where another woman did accept his proposal. Instead of bringing her maize and money, however, the man became very ill and his wife is now just busy taking care of him. [P3 0538]

On her way to the nearest health clinic with a sick child, Sofia was proposed marriage by a passerby. The man said he had money and could take her child to the private hospital at Balaka, where services are much better than the free government clinics. Taking his hands out his pockets he showed her that they were full of money. Sofia had recently been abandoned by the father of her four children, and could certainly use some of that money. Nonetheless she refused his offer, because she found his eagerness suspicious. “Mwina ali ndi matenda” (Maybe he has diseases/HIV), she reasoned, “and therefore showed me all that money in advance” [instead of giving some after she accepted, which is more common]. [P2 1445]

These women, it seemed, did not in the first place fear becoming infected themselves, but rather having to take care of an ill, and thus non-supporting, husband.

My data thus confirm the often-unacknowledged finding that, despite apparent low levels of ABC adoption, rural Malawians do act upon the HIV risks that they face, albeit in locally adapted ways. Some resort to protective herbal medicines, try to persuade their husbands to be faithful, or have become more selective in their partner choice. This is not to say, as seems insinuated by some scholars, that women, within contextually defined limits, do their utmost best to avoid infection. The fact remains, in Mudzi at least, that avoiding HIV infection is generally not considered a priority (see also Dionne 2012).

Low priority of HIV prevention
Three factors seem to contribute to the low prioritization of HIV prevention in Mudzi. The first relates to the fact that there are many other, often more direct,
threats to life and livelihood besides HIV and AIDS. The second concerns the fatalistic perception of AIDS as an inevitable fact of life, and the third – a new factor – results from the free availability of an effective treatment. These factors add up to the relatively low weight given to preventing HIV transmission compared to the highly valued beneficial aspects of (unprotected) sexual activity. I will elaborate on each of the three factors in more detail here.

Firstly, in the experience of Mudzi villagers, AIDS is but one of many possible causes of death, or, put more broadly, one of the many potential problems of life [P3 1503, 2134]. Malaria, tuberculosis, and cholera frequently strike in Mudzi, in some cases with fatal results. In the year prior to our fieldwork, seven villagers had died of cholera. In 2001, a larger cholera outbreak killed many more in and around Mudzi. In the same year food shortages had been severe too, it is vividly recalled, and were the deathblow to several old, young, and weak villagers. Childbirth still takes many mothers’ lives,41 leading one informant to explain that the expression ali ndi pakati [she is in the middle/in between], commonly used to describe a pregnant women, refers to the fact that she is in a twilight zone between life and death, as she will soon either die or give life.42 It can be speculated that these various deaths resulted from a prior HIV infection, which affected the victims’ immune system and general health status. But as far as Mudzi villagers can see, they died from cholera, starvation, or delivery complications. The always-present threat of bewitchment, furthermore, haunts all villagers regardless of sex, age, or social status. Other, non-life-threatening difficulties faced on a daily basis have been described in Chapter 4, and are often of such an urgent nature that the possibility of dying from AIDS in some distant future becomes less relevant [e.g. P3 1501] (also Van den Borne 2005b).

A second factor contributing to the low priority given to HIV prevention stems from one of the initial interpretations of AIDS. Because the first victims were from among the better-off elites from town and migrants returning home with cash earned abroad, it made sense to classify their cruel death as bewitchment by someone less endowed and jealous (Lwanda 2004: 32). While villagers now basically understand the medical side of HIV infection, this traditional explanatory model is still called upon to explain why only some individuals become infected after unsafe sexual intercourse while others do not. This seeming randomness is taken to indicate that HIV infection ultimately is a result of witchcraft [P2 1018, 1332; P3 0610, 1491] (see also Niehof & Price 2008: 148–9). Bryceson et al. (2004: 31) found that 60 percent

41 On average, Malawian women have an estimated 1-in-36 chance of dying as a result of pregnancy-related complications (UNICEF 2008). The risk for rural women is likely to be higher.

42 The Steven Paas ChiChewa-English dictionary gives a different explanation, stating that the expression refers to the growing belly at the mid-point of a pregnant woman’s body.
Under normal circumstances (meaning here heterosexual vaginal intercourse, vagina sufficiently lubricated, and the partners free of genital ulcers) the probability of contracting HIV during unprotected sex with an infected partner is estimated to be as low as 1 in 1000 (Gray et al. 2001). Only in the early and late stages of infection, when the viral load peaks, is the likelihood of transmission relatively high (Pilcher et al. 2004). Genital ulcers and unlubricated sex may create opportunities for the virus to enter the body and therefore increase transmission risk by two- to tenfold (Geubbels & Bowie 2006: 116).

Of rural Malawian households they studied that experienced an AIDS death cited bewitchment as the cause of the deceased’s infection. Making sure not to arouse jealousy or otherwise offend fellow villagers helps to avoid bewitchment – but such offenses can also occur unwittingly or unwillingly, thus placing witchcraft beyond one’s personal sphere of control. Logically then, whether and when HIV or AIDS may strike is by many also considered beyond their personal control.

Women in Mudzi, moreover, believe that they can be unconsciously infected by men who come to have sex with them in their dreams. On several occasions women told Gertrude that they had dreamt of having sex with a certain Mudzi man. One had subsequently scolded the man in real life, warning him to never do this again [P3 0592]. Another woman expressed her worry about a potential HIV infection now that she had dreamt of having sex with a certain fellow villager [P2 0741, see also P8 0025]. The possibility of being subjected to intercourse while asleep and unaware must add to the feeling that avoidance of HIV infection is not just a matter of making the right choices, but of fate as well.

This anticipative attitude may be reinforced by the disproportionate attention that development agencies devote to HIV and AIDS compared to other health risks (GoM 2010b: 49). The massive scale on which educational messages invade daily life in Mudzi may well give the impression that AIDS is an omnipresent and inescapable threat. Campaigns that aim to alert the public and reduce stigma by emphasizing that anyone can become infected, further feed the perception of HIV as unavoidable and beyond one’s power to control (Bryceson et al. 2004: 70, Kaler 2003: 358) [P3 2080]. The longitudinal MDICP survey found a severe overestimation of the probability of HIV transmission after one act of sexual intercourse (Dionne 2008: 3, Kaler 2003: 356–8). Sixty-one percent of respondents were certain that one act of coitus with an infected partner leads to HIV transmission, and 38 percent believed the risk to be high. It is not unlikely that this overestimation results from the ‘bombardment’ of educational messages (Bryceson et al. 2004: 24) stressing the risk of infection but neglecting to inform about realistic chances of contracting HIV. In reality, HIV is one of the least contagious viruses around, with infection probability estimated to be as low as 1 in 1000. Several studies indicate that the overestimation of risk has led many Malawians to presume that they must surely be infected already, nullifying their need to change any high-risk behaviour (Arrehag et al. 2006: 107, Kaler 2003: 364).

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43 Under normal circumstances (meaning here heterosexual vaginal intercourse, vagina sufficiently lubricated, and the partners free of genital ulcers) the probability of contracting HIV during unprotected sex with an infected partner is estimated to be as low as 1 in 1000 (Gray et al. 2001). Only in the early and late stages of infection, when the viral load peaks, is the likelihood of transmission relatively high (Pilcher et al. 2004). Genital ulcers and unlubricated sex may create opportunities for the virus to enter the body and therefore increase transmission risk by two- to tenfold (Geubbels & Bowie 2006: 116).
In Mudzi, men and women alike expressed their acceptance of AIDS as a fact of life [P3 0435, 1280, 1367, 1503, 1989, 2134, 3549] (see also Bryceson et al. 2004, Kaler 2004a). Various villagers argued that “AIDS has come for us human beings, not for animals or trees,” indicating that they consider AIDS to simply be a part of the human fate [P3 1503, 1989, 2134, 3549]. “It is our time,” others said acquiescently [P3 0435, 1367]. Kaler (2004a: 289), also writing about rural Balaka, notes that depending on the situation, individuals may switch between this inevitability perspective and an agency perspective, which holds that AIDS risk can be purposefully reduced, as also described in the previous subsection. I will return to this switching between perspectives and discourses shortly.

The (partly) fatalistic attitude radiated by Mudzi villagers is not unique to HIV and AIDS, but cuts across many spheres of daily life. Comments from Mudzi villagers indicate that investing is often condemned as presumptuous, as it is taken to reveal an (unjustified) expectation of a positive outcome:

Whilst pregnant, Chikondi (28) did not dare to join the other Mudzi women in learning from Gertrude how to knit baby shoes and suits, because then “people will say that I know already that my baby will live, while it may be born and leave again after a few days” [P3 0869]. Another woman, who had no children yet but hoped to become pregnant soon because her husband was about to come home from South Africa, did knit baby clothes and was indeed ridiculed for her anticipation of a successful pregnancy: “What are you doing that for?? Maybe you will fail to give birth, and then you will have to sell all the baby items that you knitted!” the women around her laughed. [P3 1816]

The few young women who had set their minds on finishing school also faced discouraging comments, such as “You just wait, we will not see you become a nurse. Somebody will cheat you [get you pregnant]!” [P3 0619], and “Why don’t you just get married? Don’t you know that it’s useless? There are no jobs anyway.” [P3 1636]

It seems that Mudzi villagers are conditioned, by both tangible setbacks and social pressure, not to expect much good to come and consequentially to refrain from making investments in a (potentially) better future. The many uncertainties that they face on a daily basis, and constantly changing contexts in which they try to make a living require flexibility and anticipation, as well as a high level of acceptance. Anticipating HIV infection as a likely possibility and refraining from efforts to avoid it, fits well into the general compliant attitude.

The third factor contributing to the low priority of HIV prevention results from the recently introduced free access to treatment (see Chapter 2). Just like other

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44 The come-what-may outlook on life corresponds to the general experience of life as circular or seasonal rather than linear, as described in Chapter 4. Having witnessed two annual cycles, in Mudzi and two pilot sites, I got the impression that villagers were simply used to the fact that scarcity and abundance alternate. As much as hunger recurs practically each year, it is always followed by a period in which food is excessively available. How long this period of abundance lasts depends on external factors and personal investments, but it (usually) comes anyhow – making the season of scarcity easier to bear and accept.
fatal diseases in the past have become curable with Western medicine, HIV and AIDS now seem to have been made containable too. Once diagnosed with HIV at one of the local health clinics near Mudzi, patients are referred to Balaka hospital. If they are found to be in an advanced stage of infection, they are entitled to receive free antiretroviral (ARV) treatment as well as counselling about living with the virus. Mudzi men and women see fellow villagers fall ill, become weak and thin, bearing down on death. When starting treatment, however, most of the patients recover amazingly quickly, begin looking healthy and strong again, and taking part in community life as usual [P2 1536, 1871, 1884; P3 2583, 2665]. “As if she is not HIV positive,” one women approvingly commented about a fellow Mudzi woman who had recently started treatment [P2 1536]. Another woman chatting at our veranda once explained that “People are not afraid [of AIDS], because of ARV medication. They make you live for a long time.” [P3 1503, see also P2 1411, P3 3549]. When government health staff had instructed Mudzi’s Group Village Headwoman to address her people on various health issues including HIV and AIDS, she organized a meeting and duly urged her public to practice safe sex. Attempting to add weight to these words, she then warned that they must do so “because the hospital does not have enough ARV medication!” [P2 1336, see also P3 1572]. The existence of an obviously effective treatment that is available at no cost calms the senses, and counters the uncomfortable, externally demanded preoccupation with avoiding infection.

As discussed earlier in this section, rather than avoiding HIV infection per se, Mudzi villagers wish to avoid the impression of being HIV positive, as this would directly jeopardize their day-to-day survival (or at least their quality of life). Changing sexual behaviour in accordance with the ABC promotions may arouse suspicion because it associates one with the virus (UNAIDS 2003: 3), and may thus also for this reason be omitted. Fear of being identified with HIV furthermore keeps many from testing their blood, because once known it is difficult to conceal one’s positive status. Suset (23), for example, stopped breastfeeding her baby before it had reached the usual age for weaning – which was in line with the then-current health instructions for mothers living with HIV. Fellow village women quickly noticed this, and interpreted it as indicating an HIV-positive status [P2 1757; P3 2302]. To receive treatment, furthermore, patients must go to Balaka hospital every few

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45 Many hospitals in Malawi are not equipped to measure the viral load and number of CD4 molecules in a patient’s blood, which is the most accurate way to determine the stage of HIV infection or AIDS. Instead, doctors are advised to use a WHO checklist based on symptomatic criteria like unexplainable persisting fever, weight loss, anaemia, and tuberculosis (MoH 2008: 16–7).

46 Costs may be made for transport to the hospital, which is located 15 kilometres from Mudzi. A bicycle taxi costs 150 to 200 MK for one way, approximately 0.75 to 1 Euro at the time of the research. Alternatively the journey can, and often is, undertaken by foot, or on a privately owned or borrowed bicycle at no cost.
weeks for check-ups and new rations of AIDS inhibitors. When Jeneti (37) began to regularly travel to Balaka, under various pretences, it was soon speculated that she did so because of an HIV infection [P3 2583, see also P3 2302]. The regulation that patients only receive free ARVs if they bring with them a “witness” (as Mudzi villagers call it) or “buddy” (as development professionals call it), which is intended to stimulate openness, makes testing and treatment even less appealing. The chief of Mudzi A had been ill frequently ever since we arrived in his village. His wife told us that he once went to the health clinic because of this sickliness, but upon return he had torn up a referral letter to Balaka hospital as well as his complete health records book [P2 1332, see also P3 2727]. He died shortly after our fieldwork had finished. In line with the chief’s choice to deny his (apparent) HIV infection, several Mudzi women were explicit and resolute about their preference to remain oblivious of their HIV status as long as they feel fine, only facing the problems when they may arise [P2 1655; P3 0773].

Thus, on the one hand Mudzi villagers state that their fear of AIDS has diminished as a result of the availability of effective and free-of-charge treatment. On the other hand, however, few actually get tested so as to potentially access this treatment. Furthermore, while employing a discourse of accepting AIDS as part of the human fate and of HIV infection as beyond one’s personal sphere of control, sero-positive others are blamed for having brought upon themselves the curse of AIDS, and active attempts are made to reduce transmission probabilities when infection risk is considered high. The seemingly inconsistent ways in which Mudzi men and women try to deal with the many uncomfortable realities that they face on a daily basis reveal their necessarily pragmatic agency. These seeming inconsistencies fit within the notion of ‘judicious opportunism’, a concept that was coined by Johnson-Hanks (2005), discussed in Chapter 1, and will be further elaborated upon in this chapter’s conclusion.

Conclusion

In light of this study’s core question of whether female economic empowerment will lead women to make safer sexual choices, this chapter delved into the sub-question of emic perceptions of safe and unsafe sex. For women to make ‘safer’ sexual choices, they must firstly perceive of their current practices as unsafe, secondly feel incentives to change these, and lastly feel capable of changing them. Proponents of female economic empowerment as a means to halt the AIDS pandemic locate the main problem at this third requirement. They presuppose that women like those in Mudzi experience their sexual practices as ‘unsafe’ and would prefer to change this risky behaviour, but lack the means to do so. However, the data presented in this chapter, like that of the previous chapter, suggest that it is rather the first two requirements that remain unfulfilled, making the third of no consequence.
As concerns the first requirement I argue that what is understood to be safe and unsafe sexual practice differs between Mudzi villagers and the official public health view. In the latter, the criteria ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ purely concern the risk of HIV transmission, in a distilled and condensed form. In real-life experience, however, HIV and AIDS manifest themselves within a myriad of interrelated factors from which these cannot sensibly be disengaged. For Mudzi women, the unsafeness of a sexual practice may relate to the risk of contracting diseases, but also (and often more prominently so) to the risk of losing a partner, for example by denying him sex or demanding condom use. Safe sexual practice from a Mudzi point of view may include, for example, conceiving a child to create a lasting relationship of support. Playing it ‘safe’ in Mudzi terms thus refers to broader livelihood concerns, which may be negatively affected by what formal health experts recommend as ‘safe’ sexual practices.

An important aspect of playing it ‘safe’ – in Mudzi terms – is conforming to the community’s expectations for proper female sexual behaviour. As has been the case for many centuries throughout Central Africa, in Mudzi the vital importance of procreation and sex is drummed (quite literally so, as most instructing is done through the medium of songs) into the minds of youngsters during elaborate initiation rites, and repetitively brought back to memory throughout the rest of their life course. The *miyambo* [traditions, cultural values] that the youngsters are taught stress that sex is vital for personal wellbeing, the relationship between a husband and wife, as well as the community at large. Essentially, sexual intercourse is encouraged, provided that certain rules are observed.

To some extent, public health HIV-prevention messages coincide with these pre-existing rules that prescribe under which circumstances sex should be refrained from, especially where extramarital sex is concerned. Encouraging as this may seem, there are three (discouraging) remarks to be made about it. Firstly, the exclusively negative approach to sex in these public health messages may make them too far removed from the overall positive emic perception of sex to be taken seriously. Furthermore, the traditional norms prohibiting extramarital sex are formally subscribed to by all, yet informally accepted as not always achievable. This gives ample opportunity to sidestep formal HIV-prevention recommendations too. The third remark relates to the fluidity of the marriage concept that I have described in the previous chapter. This vagueness makes it difficult to discern when a certain sexual encounter would be categorized as extramarital, or, put differently, makes it easy to categorize a sexual relationship as marital (and thus legitimate and harmless) at any given time.

As concerns the second requirement, on incentives, I argue that on Mudzi women’s scale of the pros and cons of sex, HIV risk is a con with relatively little weight that is often outweighed by the many pros. Mudzi women certainly do acknowledge the risk of HIV infection as a disadvantage of sex. The practices that they consider to be
particularly risky in relation to HIV are a large number of subsequent partners, and marriage with a promiscuous husband. In neither case, however, does the perceived HIV risk necessarily trigger women to end the practice so as to protect themselves against infection – although some measures (often others than those advised by health professionals) may be taken to reduce transmission risk. Sometimes women do assert fear of infection as reason for refusing a sexual proposal, for reducing the number of sex partners, or for divorcing a promiscuous husband. This, however, seems to be the case only when few advantages of a relationship can be discerned. My data thus suggest that most women feel no urgent need to act upon the threat of HIV infection – in other words, only a minor weight is given to this consideration. As explained in this chapter there are various reasons underlying the little weight given to HIV prevention, including 1) the fact that AIDS is but one of the many threats that Mudzi villagers face, 2) a communally upheld claim that HIV cannot be effectively avoided anyway, and 3) the availability of effective treatment at low or no cost.

Besides the minor weight given to risk of HIV infection as a con of sex, there are, as mentioned, often multiple stimulators at play that encourage women to engage in sex. These stimulators include the high ideological value attached to sex as procreative, pleasurable, and mystically powerful. Sex, furthermore, has certain important practical advantages too, especially for achieving the valued status of motherhood. Furthermore, as explained in the previous chapter, women and girls can through sex access the various benefits attached to having a male partner – some of these for as long as the relationship lasts, or even beyond if pregnancies occur, as (relatives of) ex-partners may be pressured or feel inclined to provide occasional support for their children. Sex thus fits within both short- and long-term survival strategies.

Throughout this chapter, as in previous chapters, several inconsistencies or ‘double standards’ were revealed in Mudzi villagers’ dealings with the world in which they find themselves. The concept of judicious opportunism helps to understand their swaying attitudes towards sexual practices in general, and HIV risk in specific. Tactics are decided upon as opportunities – or problems – arise, and are adjusted or abandoned when perceived necessary or advantageous, as the context changes. In the case of dealing with HIV risk, it is sometimes preferred to downplay the severity of this risk, both towards others and towards oneself, while at other times there may be good reasons to acknowledge the risk and attempt to diminish it (or no good reasons not to do so). The choices that Mudzi men and women make are necessarily adaptive and constantly renegotiated to best fit a certain situation without blocking too many future options. These choices would therefore be difficult, if not impossible, to structurally transform into one static set of behaviours, such as that promoted by the professional health sector.
Overall, the data presented in this chapter show that sex is understood as much more than a potential source of HIV infection. The ABC prevention measures recommended by public health campaigns run counter to what Mudzi women have been socialized to consider proper female behaviour, as well as their perceived need to attach a man to them and the indispensable role of sex in that endeavour. Changing their sexual practices to be in line with what officials have branded as ‘safe’ often would do little good to women’s general livelihood security, and may even be detrimental to it.
Of cash flows and good friends:  
Money versus social capital

Introduction

The need for and exchange of money play important roles in the transactional sex paradigm that this study scrutinizes. The transactional sex paradigm implies that women’s sexual choices will become less risky if they have a sufficiently reliable and substantial source of income other than their sexual partners. What is overlooked in this (admittedly simplified) assumption, is that in resource-poor communities like that of Mudzi, money leads a ‘social life’ far more complex than suggested by its typical depiction as a neutral object of exchange. Arjun Appadurai (1986) has argued that commodities, like persons, are thoroughly socialized things. Tracking the ‘biographies’ of things can reveal much about the meaning and values that are attributed to them in different settings and by different actors. He writes: “Even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context” (1986: 5).1 In this chapter I track the social life of money in Mudzi, revealing the politics that surround it.

There are various entry points through which money flows into the larger Mudzi area (by which I mean to include the various small markets in the vicinity of the village). These entry points mainly consist of the salaries of employed husbands

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1 The actor-network theory developed by Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law suggests a comparable methodological approach to social science research, asserting that objects should be treated, and thus studied, as parts of social networks and as co-factors in shaping the social interactions of which they form a part.
living in one of the villages, financial support sent by partners or relatives based elsewhere, urban traders that come to buy up crops, and development projects and microcredit schemes. Only a limited number of villagers have access to these external sources, and usually only at limited occasions. Immediately after money enters the community through these selective entry points, it begins to circulate, also reaching the villagers who were not its initial receivers. The ways in which money is pushed and pulled around offer great insights into Mudzi women’s livelihood strategies and form the topic of the first part of this chapter. In particular, they reveal the drive to invest in social capital, which in turn reveals the great value that Mudzi villagers attach to social investment. The second part of this chapter therefore delves deeper into investments in and benefits of social capital, culminating in an assessment of sexual relationships as one important form of social capital.

Although there is no universally agreed upon definition of ‘social capital’, in its most basic form it is commonly conceptualized as a productive asset based in social relationships. In this study I take it to mean ‘the ability of individuals and collective actors to mobilize resources through their network of more or less durable social relations’. This definition pulls from two other uses of the term: Nombo & Niehof (2008: 242) and Adler & Kwon (2000: 93). The ‘social’ dimension of the concept appears clearly from its just-mentioned embeddedness in social networks. The label ‘capital’ reveals its economic aspect, in the sense that investments in it lead to (expectations of) returns (Lin 2001: 19 in Ferlander 2007: 116). There is a general consensus among social scientists that social capital is of vital importance for the day-to-day survival of resource-deprived populations, who tend to have few other ‘capitals’ (be it financial, physical, human, or natural capital) on which to depend (Grootaert & Van Bastelaer 2002). Following this view, the concept has come to be embraced in policy circles as an exclusively positive asset that can and should be built upon in order to empower the poor and help them climb out of poverty (e.g. World Bank Report 2001). Some authors have noted, however, that social capital may have harmful consequences too and need not always work out positively for all actors concerned (Adler & Kwon 2000, Du Toit et al. 2007, Portes 2003). As will become clear from the analyses in this chapter, social capital is indeed critical for survival in an insecure setting like Mudzi. Yet, precisely because the need to create and maintain social capital is so strong, it not only facilitates but also hampers individual and community progress. Furthermore, although at first sight social capital may seem an easily attained asset – within reach even for the poor with little other capital at their disposal – our data challenge this presumption. As already mentioned in the previous chapter and further elaborated upon here, in Mudzi a strong interdependence exists between social capital and access to other capitals.
Mudzi’s money management

Managing money
Most days the women living around us possessed no cash at all, not even the tiniest amount. This was partly because money is simply hard to come by and when procured, it is usually only in small quantities. It is too, however, because whatever money these women could get a hold of, was swiftly spent, which soon left them empty-handed again. In such an environment of monetary scarcity, simple facts that may easily go unnoticed by someone unfamiliar with bare poverty become highly significant. When someone in Mudzi turns on a radio, smokes a cigarette, or washes clothes, this is immediately noted and taken to reveal that the person in question must have had some money at his or her disposal – in these cases to buy batteries, tobacco, or soap [P3 1104, 1739, 2456, see also P3 2208], or that he or she for some reason received these items from someone who had money to spend. If the source or reasons are unclear, speculations abound [P2 0032, 0795, 1071; P3 2295, 2302, 2372, 2507]. Possession of money is thus not an ordinary occurrence; in Mudzi it is considered a remarkable and indicative phenomenon.

To gain some understanding of the ways in which money is handled at an individual level, I asked four Mudzi women to keep track of their daily incomes and expenditures (including non-monetary commodity exchanges) for three and a half months. The four women were selected on the basis of their literacy, unmarried status, prime age, and representation of various livelihood situations (one receiving regular allowances from a development organization, one occasionally brewing liquor for sale, one with an on-and-off partner, and one without any apparent source of income) [P3 1803]. The choice of these particular women was also derived from my curiosity about their livelihoods, as well as my sympathy for them. In three of the cases, furthermore, I wished to help them financially in a discreet way – hence without signalling too openly that I felt they needed my help, nor arousing jealousy among other villagers who would (rightfully) have demanded support too if I had given the money freely. I realize that paying the women for this assignment interfered with getting a clean picture of their usual incomes and thus expenditures. However, I feel it would have been unethical not to compensate them for a tedious job that will most likely never bear them any fruits. By paying them only once within the three and a half months period (and once at the end) I aimed to minimize the ‘disruption’. Turning a disadvantage into an advantage, the provision of a salary gave me insights into the women’s financial decisions after receiving a relatively large sum of money. The fact, furthermore, that the money was quickly spent [e.g. P3 2372, 2390], led me to believe that the disruption of the usual course of affairs was relatively mild, as it lasted only a short time. The data thus collected provided a far from exhaustive but nonetheless informative insight into the ways in which money flows in and out of the community, but particularly
also into the ways in which it is circulated around within the community. These ‘money and commodity flow’ diaries largely confirmed in detail what I observed, but also revealed some important dynamics that I would not have noticed otherwise.

Suset is one of the four women who kept a diary for me, from which I deduced the following impression of the ‘social life’ of money:

Suset (23) is one of Mudzi’s young mothers, unmarried at this time of the study. Like her grandmother, who raised her and lives next door, Suset brews liquor for sale whenever her budget allows her to buy ingredients. During her late teens, Suset had been in a steady relationship with a young Mudzi man, from whom she has a now three-year-old daughter. When one day this man found Suset with a liquor customer inside her house, he suspected that she was cheating on him and ended their relationship. Two years later, Suset gave birth to another daughter, from a man who had not told her that he was already married elsewhere and had no intentions to leave his wife for her.

On the day that Suset starts keeping track of her income and expenditure, she has no money. That day she receives a bar of soap from her grandmother so that she can wash her baby’s diaper. The next day, a customer comes to pay the 30MK\(^2\) that he owed her for the liquor he drank earlier. Immediately, Suset spends the money by going to the mill to have some maize ground, and by buying a spoon of paraffin, one box of matches, and a piece of sugar cane as snack on her way back from the mill. For three subsequent days, she does not ‘find’ any money, and eats the maize she has just ground, accompanied with okra or pumpkins from her field. On the fourth day she decides to sell the husks that were left over after grinding the maize to the village’s pig-rearing group for fodder. She had hoped to use the husks to brew liquor, but lacks sufficient money to buy the other ingredients. To the 20MK that she earned with selling the husks she adds 50MK that she begged from her grandmother (who that day received Orphan Care money\(^3\)) and buys soap for washing clothes and her body. Several days later, the father of her first-born child comes by and gives her toothpaste to apply on a wound that the child has on her head. He also gives four bars of Ufresh soap, and some Vaseline body oil. Some days later he even gives one kilogram of goat meat, which she shares with her grandmother and sister who lives on the other side of their grandmother’s house. The father of Suset’s last-born daughter also comes by that week and gives her some paraffin that lasts almost three evenings. In between, Suset earns 50MK by carrying maize from the field of the sister of her grandmother – a woman I categorized as one of the best-off villagers (see Chapter 3), and 100MK by picking cotton for a farmer in one of the larger villages nearby. In most cases the small amounts of cash that she ‘finds’ are quickly spent on supplementary food, soap, matches, and paraffin. All of these are bought in small quantities: just enough cooking oil and salt to spice up one meal, a spoonful of paraffin to light up one evening. Meanwhile Suset keeps on the lookout for someone who is able to lend her a more substantial amount of money to buy ingredients for a new supply of liquor. Eventually a regular customer from an adjacent village lends her 300MK, to be repaid without interest. When weeks later I pay her 2000MK for the work of keeping the diary – for Suset an unusually large lump sum of money – she first pays off small debts that she had outstanding to various fellow villagers. She then gives 200MK to her grandmother “for soap” and 30MK to her sister for relish “because she has none.” In the days that follow, Suset buys nice food for herself (dried and fresh fish, tomatoes, onions,

\(^2\) Approximately 0,15 Euro’s at the time of the research. Please keep in mind a conversion rate of 200MK as approximate equivalent of one Euro for the remainder of this excerpt of Suset’s diary.

\(^3\) Households that have been registered as taking care of one or more orphans can go to receive a monthly allowance of 1500MK (7.50 Euro at the time of the research) from a NGO based at the nearest trading center.
cooking oil, and salt) as well as ingredients to brew liquor. When her grandmother says she craves beans, Suset buys her these. Her sister comes to beg tomatoes, and later soap to wash her children. Suset buys her the tomatoes as well as a bar of the cheapest soap. Various people beg her to loan them tiny amounts of money, 10MK to 200MK, to which Suset complies. By selling the liquor she brewed, she receives bits of money on some of the subsequent days, ranging from 50MK to 500MK a day. She spends this income on tomatoes, dried fish, sugar cane, bread buns that she shares with her grandmother, soap, painkillers, matches, and batteries for her radio. She also buys medicines for her grandmother. Again, some cash is lent out to fellow villagers, while some other loans are paid back. [P8 0049–0064]

While the 2000MK I gave to Suset were soon gone, she benefitted from it for an extended period of time because she invested it in such ways that it could be accessed again later. By buying ingredients for liquor, she put herself back in business, which supplied her with a profit return spread out over many days – even longer than her stock lasts as many customers drink ‘on tick’, paying whenever they have some money at hand. By gifting soap and food to her grandmother and sister, Suset invigorated their reciprocal relationship, thus increasing her chances for support in future times of need. Lastly, by loaning out small amounts of money to various people, Suset assured herself of access to (repayment) money when required, and furthermore increased the likeliness of being granted a loan herself when in need. She still had to spend days without any money – when no liquor was paid for, and no loans were paid back. But she had some maize to eat, and, at the time of the diary keeping, a field of vegetables and legumes to accompany it.

Soap has an exceptional position in Mudzi, as it seems to have throughout much of Eastern and Southern Africa, if not beyond (e.g. Burke 1996). Money that men give to their sexual partner, or that women share between themselves, is often denoted as ‘ya sopo’ [P2 0626, 1041, 1131]. Ndalama ya sopo is best translated as ‘soap money’. (The noun for ‘money’, ndalama, is dropped, and only the grammatical form of the connecting ya (meaning ‘of’) indicates that it actually refers to ndalama.) This does not mean, however, that soap is always bought with the money that was indicated as ya sopo. In many cases the expression seems to function rather as a metaphor [P2 0637, 1007, 1131; P3 2077]. For example, when abandoned by the father of her four children, Sofia (25) exclaimed: “Now where am I going to find money for soap?” [P2 1405, see also P2 0563, 1131; P3 3455–6]. In theory, food comes from women’s own fields, and soap is, then, considered the one basic necessity for which money is needed (and can thus be claimed) [P2 1252; P3 0495, 0505, 0703, 0705, 0744, 1428]. Although ‘ya sopo’ is not always actually used to purchase soap, the metaphor does point out the centrality of soap amidst all other basic necessities (see Burke 1996 for an interesting analysis of this historical grounds for this). Indeed, soap stands out by far as number one on all women’s non-food wish list [P2 0637, 0924, 0944, 0957, 0961, 0974, 0992, 1007, 1082, 1110, 1131, 1461, 1920, 2030, 2042, 2080, 2081, 2114, 2119, 2135; P3 0407, 0699, 0701, 0703, 0705, 0732, 0738, 0780, 0968, 0991, 0968, 0999, 1124, 1264, 1462]. Lack of soap is taken to indicate a shamefully severe level of destitution [P2 1667; P3 2805] (see also Burke 1996). When discussing with Gertrude how best to remunerate the village women whom we interviewed, she insisted that soap would be most appreciated, despite the fact that the hunger season had started. In the money and commodity flow diaries, soap was the only commodity of which the different brand names were (almost consistently) mentioned. Based on these data I contend that soap is not considered a luxury item by itself (only nicely scented and wrapped soap is) – contrary to the interpretations of some transactional sex scholars (e.g. Luke & Kurz 2002: 20, Silberschmidt & Rasch 2001: 1820, Swidler & Watkins 2007, Wamoyi et al. 2010). Swidler & Watkins (2007: 147–8,151), for example, interpret soap as a (small) luxury and based on that argue that women who receive or desire soap from a sex partner cannot be very poor (assuming that the very poor would only request foodstuff).
nothing was ready for picking in Suset’s own field, a neighbour would often share some of her produce. Otherwise, Suset and her children just ate maize porridge for a day, hoping that she would be more lucky in finding some money or food in the following days.

Suset’s diary shows that she has numerous potential sources of support to turn to. The strongest reciprocal relationships in terms of frequency of transactions are with the close kin living near her, especially her grandmother (who lives with two orphaned grandchildren) and her elder sister (unmarried mother of two children at the time of the diary keeping). With other women in her direct neighbourhood Suset at times shares relish (raw from her field or already prepared), and borrows or loans money. Further down in the village live the paternal grandmothers of her daughters, who Suset at times approaches for meeting somewhat larger needs of the children, for example health care expenses. On several occasions these women came by themselves to gift food, soap, or clothes for their grandchild [P8 0069]. The fathers of Suset’s children, living with their wives in other villages, too gifted or could be begged for support. These men gave in on some occasions, while scolding her away at other times. When a field officer of a microcredit agency visited Mudzi to inform villagers about loan options (formally intended to be invested in business), Suset decided to accept his offer so she could afford a desperately needed new roof on her house. She paid back the loan and interest through her liquor brewing, gifts from ex-partners, and loans from fellow villagers, especially from the paternal grandmother of her first child, whose husband runs the one small grocery store in Mudzi.

The diaries of the other women are not much different. They mainly show, time and again, that when money comes in, it is readily spent. That this is common practice throughout Mudzi was particularly well demonstrated when villagers received payment for their cash crop, cotton, which yielded about 15,000MK$ on average. Within days after selling most of Mudzi’s farmers had spent all of their profits [P2 1326; P3 2637, 2681, see also P2 1232, 1246, 1248, 1254; P3 2588]. Part of it was used to repay debts that had been made earlier in anticipation of the upcoming wealth, for example for alcoholic beverages (mostly by men) and meat (various villagers slaughtered a goat or cow, selling the meat to their fellow villagers who were to repay after selling their maize or cotton) [P2 1839, 1987, 2185; P3 2499, 2573]. The remaining money was spent on clothes, dried fish and other luxury food, soap, body lotion, umbrellas, cell phones, iron sheets, transport to relatives, school fees, and folk healers’ services and medicines. This was a perfect time to spend, as most villagers had money at the same time, so purchases were unlikely to trigger much begging, jealousy, or suspicion about the source of one’s wealth. Some villagers bought maize to add to their own yield. A few men simply disappeared

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5 Equivalent to approximately 75 Euro at the time of the research.
with their (own or household’s) profit, only to return emptyhanded some days later. Throughout the village men and women began to play cards, contributing money or maize to the jackpot \[P2 1683, 1698, 1761, 1789, 1794\]. In short, the cotton money soon vanished.

It seems, from both the diaries and our observations, that a Mudzi woman tends to spend her money in three hierarchically organized ways: firstly to purchase a limited number of household necessities and supplementary food for her own household and to a lesser extent for those closely related to her; secondly to lend it out (without profit margin) to persons in her wider social network; and lastly to pay off debts she has made earlier with those same social connections. A recent study quantifying cash transfers in a Malawian village community confirms the high frequency of these between village members, writing that the number of informal transactions “dwarfed” the number of transactions with commercial banks by a factor seven (Stuart et al. 2011: 2). In Mudzi, the informal borrowings usually consist of very small amounts, say 10 to 100 hundred Kwacha, or 5 to 50 Eurocents \[e.g. P2 0387, 0724, 1232, 1248, 1328, 1597, 1832, 1870; P3 0797, 0914, 0915, 1040, 1095, 2281, 2585, 3770; P8 0073\]. When receiving a relatively large amount of money, some women were quick to hire labour to help them cultivate their fields, even though shortly before and surely soon after they scrambled for food, which I will further elaborate upon below.

Most days, the diaries and our observations indicate, women just make do with what they have. If there is money, they eat nice food. If there is no money, they are (usually) satisfied with whatever the land around them offers. When money is so plentiful that a luxury like batteries can be afforded, they listen to the radio as often as possible for as long as the batteries last. Before and after that, they simply spend their days without radio sounds. Things become different when emergencies occur which require instant solutions – regardless of the availability of money. Most often these concern ailments of either the woman herself or one of her children. Such aching bodies are preferably ‘treated’ with a quick-fix painkiller (a ‘treatment’ often prescribed by medical doctors too when proper medication is unavailable or unaffordable). Suddenly faced with a need for money, women appeal to the various fellow villagers who had earlier borrowed a tiny bit of money from them. Chances are that at least one of them has or can access the few Kwacha’s requested at that moment.

Notably, the need for a painkiller seems to be considered a particularly legitimate reason to inconvenience others with requests for pay back – possibly because it radiates urgency, indicates need instead of mere desire, and portrays the money collector as victim rather than perpetrator. It excuses him or her for the request that could otherwise be interpreted as based on anti-social self-interest. A desperate need for painkillers is therefore at times deployed by women to conceal their actual reason for which they request pay back (or loan). At other times women requested
pay back to buy painkillers and actually used it for that purpose too, while they had money available to buy it themselves. This money was then used for other purposes. Apparently, being in real need of a painkiller is considered an opportunity to ask for pay back that should not be missed out on.

It seems that the continuous loaning and borrowing back and forth within the community serves as an informal storage mechanism. The money is out of one’s own hands, and so protected against temptations to, for example, spend it on a savoury alternative (e.g. dried fish) to whatever relish is in season and thus eaten each and every day for weeks at a time (e.g. green leaves, cow peas). More importantly maybe, it cannot be begged for or claimed by others who may need money for food, medical expenses, or funeral costs. Such money is out of direct reach, yet potentially accessible in times of emergency.

Social pressure to share
There are several reasons likely to explain why Mudzi villagers so quickly dispose of the little money they can find, which entail both ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. With push factors I mean the negative consequences of holding on to money, and with pull factors the positive consequences of expending money. One of the push factors hinted at already is a social dynamic that has been noted and described by anthropologists since the earliest studies in the region (e.g. Mitchell 1956 on the Yao, Richards 1939: 201 in Zambia) as elsewhere (Foster 1965, Geertz 1963, Hyden 1980, Kimambo et al. 2008, Scott 1976), which is the strong moral obligation to share [P3 1326]. Mitchell (1956) described how among the Yao of southern Malawi deficit households had a right to receive food and other assistance from surplus households in the same sorority group. More recently also it was written about rural Malawi that:

An ill person needs help; healthy individuals in the household or other households in the neighbourhood are expected and obliged to provide that help. A bereaved family needs to be consoled; other families in a collective are expected and obliged to do so. A household experiencing food shortage asks for help; the household with enough food is obliged and expected to share (Mtika 2000: 347).

Mitchell (1956) wrote that a villager who ignored or neglected this obligation would face criticism\(^6\) and eventually even exclusion – which would in turn deprive him or her from all social and economic security. During our fieldwork, we saw

\(^6\) Not only villagers who ignore the social norm to share face criticism and disgrace, all those who deviate from the norms that were presumably set out by the ancestors risk reprimanding from their fellow villagers. For examples from Mudzi of disapproval particularly of (suspected attempts to) personal advancement see P2 0123, 0142, 1056, 1572; P3 0404, 0588, 0619, 0785, 1224, 1253, 1264, 1470, 1503, 2026, 2777. For critiques on socializing with Gertrude and me as a perceived means to accessing resources through us, see P2 1534; P3 0677, 1253, 1264.
some examples of this ‘levelling’ mechanism at work [e.g. P2 0619, 1056], such as the following:

During our stay in Mudzi, one man in particular was at times scolded for insufficiently sharing his resources. The man must have been in his sixties, and had been struggling with illnesses over the past years. By the time of this study he was severely weakened, and he and his wife approached several folk healers to cure him. Most likely to pay for these expenses, the man sold some of his livestock and later received a sum of money from his son working in South Africa. A grandson living with him complained that despite finding a lot of money by selling the livestock, his grandfather did not buy any nice food for the household. Non-household members grumbled that the man had been sent a lot of money from South Africa, yet had not shared any of it by hiring fellow villagers to help him cultivate his field. When the man eventually got so weak that he could barely lift his hoe and asked a passer-by to assist him, the young man refused, reminding the old man that he had not helped others either when he had some money at his disposal. [P2 0755, 1018, 1127]

The claim to social support also appears from Suset’s expenditure pattern described earlier. When she had some money available, her close kin came to tell her what they lacked, needed, or craved for – subtly pressing her into sharing. As appears from the diaries and our observations, a lot of begging (kupempha\(^7\)) and sharing takes place between Mudzi villagers [P2 0762, 0895, 1502, 1719, 1801, 1900; P3 1018, 1110, 1324, 1429, 1436, 2595; P8 0071, 0073, 0075]. Having something, be it pumpkins from the field or more than a single dose of paraffin, means facing requests [e.g. P2 0095, 0519, 0737, 0865, 1439, 1446, 1481, 1855, 1881; P3 1476, 1942; P8 0047, 0075]. Villagers who still have maize when others run out are regularly begged for a cup or plate of flour [P2 0583, 0724, 1225, 1229, 1232, 1282, 1446; P3 4066, 4084]. Overall, those who have some tangible wealth can be sure that it will soon vanish as chances are great that someone within their reciprocal network needs a share of it, which cannot be reasonably withheld.

The closer a (kin) relationship between individuals in Mudzi, the greater their moral obligation to share. Such intensification of social obligations between closely related persons has been called ‘condensed morality’ by Pennartz & Niehof (1999: 206), following David Cheal’s theory on the moral economy of the household. Tellingly, when two women or households are close (in the social sense, although it often coincides with spatial vicinity too), this is in Mudzi indicated by the expression that they “often share relish” [“timagayirana ndiwo”] [e.g. P3 2762]. In line with this, when begging for support, the beggar tends to underline her relationship with the begged, emphasizing its closeness or claiming it to be close. For example, in situations in which women hoped to get some form of assistance from the mothers of their ex-partners, these were explicitly addressed as “mother-in-law,” or at least as “grandmother of my child” [P3 1942; P8 0069].

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\(^7\) The same word is used for praying to God or Allah.
Reviewing the studies then available on social responses to food shortages, Dirks (1980) discerns a universal pattern in which sharing initially increases, but diminishes drastically when actual famine sets in. Based on the studies he reviews, Dirks deduces that when the circle of reciprocal relationships narrows, the nuclear family remains intact longest as a “redistributive, protective unit” (1980: 30). Notably, however, the household or nuclear family is in Mudzi’s daily life reality not the blissful unit of trust, commitment, and solidarity that advocates of the ‘moral economy of the household’ and others often hold it to be. As I have argued in Chapter 5, many Mudzi men and women seem to consider marital unions as pragmatic endeavours for individual progress, despite a discourse on ‘helping each other’. Mutual secrecy about incomes and expenditures is the rule rather than exception, and stealing between husbands and wives is common. It may be argued that this is in line with the ‘un-closeness’ between many Mudzi spouses and therefore not necessarily contradictory to the moral economy assumed to be found in close personal relationships. However, theft by (adult) children of their parents’ properties also seems to frequently occur [e.g. P2 0730-4, 0741, 1009, 1154, 1187, 1204, 1305, 1580, 1639, 1650, 1991; P3 1551, 1731, 1753].\(^8\) Within one and the same compound, we saw some members became severely undernourished during the hunger season while others managed to remain relatively fat\(^9\) (see also Vaughan 1987: 32). Nonetheless, as just noted, the moral obligation to solidarity is found among closely related persons, and called upon by villagers in want when potentially lucrative.

One particularly effective means through which levelling is enforced, is the widespread fear of witchcraft (Austen 1993, Mitchell 1956). Witches (mfiti) are believed to be evil creatures that hunger for human flesh. To satisfy this hunger they secretly kill humans using magical spells, wait until their victim is buried, and exhume the body from its grave at night to eat its flesh. Magical spells can however also be applied by common people, with herbal or magical medicines purchased from a medicine man or women (sing’anga). These medicines may be applied to disadvantage others or advantage oneself – for example through protection against spells from others, curing ailments, increasing yields, or making someone attracted to you. Scary as mfiti may be, in daily life practice it is mostly these spells from fellow villagers and relatives that are feared. Greater wealth is assumed

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\(^8\) We have not heard of any case in which parents, or at least mothers, tried to personally benefit at the expense of their children, but reasons given to take good care of one’s children did reveal political economic considerations. These considerations pertained to the hope that children will in return take good care of their parents, or at least mothers, when these become old [e.g. P3 0784, 1899, 2491].

\(^9\) Obviously, this may in some cases have had to do with illnesses rather than nutrition per se, but at least in a few cases we have seen and heard that certain members (e.g. the employed husband and not his wife and children, or the matrilineal grandchildren and not patrilineal children) took or were given significantly more and nicer food.
to arouse envy among fellow villagers [e.g. P3 0785, 3498] and is therefore feared to provoke bewitchment (Van Breugel 2001: 265). Anti-social behaviour, such as refraining from sharing one’s wealth, may invite either accusations of bewitching, or bewitchment by others. In Mudzi, suspicions of witchcraft abound [P2 470, 489, 576-8, 869, 1018, 1332, 2116; P3 0405, 0610, 1911, 3497-8, 4009] and fear of bewitchment guides many villagers’ actions [P2 0738-9, 0750, 1706; P3 1190] (see also Bryceson et al. 2004: 37, Launiala & Honka 2011: 404). Villagers who became incurably ill and villagers who died, whether due to a disease or not, were by many assumed to have been bewitched, often as a result of jealousy [P2 0869, 1018, 1332, 2116; P3 0405, 0610, 1911]. “They may have had iron sheets [as roof], or a lot of livestock,” Gertrude explained to me [P3 0405]. One of Mudzi’s wealthier couples described in Chapter 3 had actually fled from their previous home village to Mudzi because of mounting accusations of witchcraft. According to the wife (36), it was again their relative success in producing sufficient maize and cash crops (cotton and peppers) that got them into trouble in Mudzi, as jealous neighbours bewitched her to become severely ill. She indeed grew increasingly thin, developed soars all over her body, lost much of her hair, and gave birth to a baby so weak that I fear for its life [P3 0610, 1064, 1138, 3497-8, 4009]. Because of her weakness and repetitive hospital admissions she has not been able to plant any cash crops this year: her neighbours got what they (presumably) wanted. In this woman’s own and others’ perception, it had been her households’ relative wealth that brought misfortune, ill health, and so an ascendance into poverty.

A further potential disadvantage of possessing material wealth is that this may be taken by others as a justification to exclusion from support. In Mudzi, this social repercussion was most obvious when villagers were to select beneficiaries amongst themselves for participating in an external development project or divide a communally received hand-out – hence when a substantial but limited resource without clear ownership suddenly arrived on the scene. Those unfortunate enough to be doing some form of business at that moment were argued to be in less need of support and therefore excluded from benefitting [P2 0878, 1270; P3 0838, 3751, see also P2 1127].

Kima (64) brews liquor whenever she has the money to buy the main ingredients and expects customers to be buying. She lives in a run-down iron-sheeted, brick-walled house that was built by the husband who abandoned her 24 years ago. Kima relates that whenever subsidized

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10 Interestingly, Nombo (2007: 104) found quite the opposite in rural Tanzania, where villagers actually refrained from sharing food because they were afraid of witchcraft accusations in case a receiver would fall ill after eating the gifted food.

11 In the next chapter I will focus in more detail on the (often negative) consequences of women’s independent income generation.
fertilizer coupons or other hand-outs are to be distributed, fellow villagers point out that she has an iron-sheeted house as well as the equipment to generate money, and therefore should not be amongst the ones receiving support. [P3 3751]

During our stay in Mudzi a development organization delivered free chickpeas to be distributed amongst all villagers. That day we met Hamra (58) – who for a short period was trading salt against money or maize. She complained: “I have not received any chickpeas. They [the villagers put in charge of distribution] say I did not receive because I am now selling salt. They are jealous because I have some money through that business, and say that I can just buy everything myself.” [P2 0878]

Having some form of wealth thus potentially blocks women’s access to other sources of support. Notably, however, not all business women were at all times excluded from receiving other forms of support. Nor were, for example, women with access to remittances from South Africa. As we shall see further on, maintaining warm connections with such women may be highly advantageous and therefore rather not risked by withholding support or privileges. Material capital, or obvious access to it, is thus not per se a ground for exclusion, but can be used as an excuse or justification for it. This is especially the case for women with weak social capital, as will be explained in the second half of this chapter.

Notably, the levelling mechanism works two ways: it thwarts villagers from having much more than others, but also from having much less than others (see also Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1998: 361). This latter aspect shows from the public disapproval of laziness – a much heard and feared accusation in Mudzi [P2 0282, 1056, 1144, 1315, 1820; P3 0486, 0497, 0611, 0614, 0729, 1173, 1245, 1326, 1425, 1763, 2340, 2364, 2994-6, 3217-8] – as well as of splurging for personal benefit. Selling non-surplus maize to obtain cash or eating large quantities of nsima, for example, are severely criticized [P2 1334, 1488, 1508, 1639]. If a begging villager can be held responsible for his or her need, for example because of perceived laziness or splurging, this too may be used as justification by others to later withhold support [e.g. P2 1232, 1334, 1508]. It follows from this that while wealth cannot easily be kept, it can neither be used excessively for own consumption – and thus must be shared.

Dealing with ‘push’ factors
The expenditure patterns of Suset and other Mudzi women already revealed some of the ways in which the potentially negative consequences of ‘having’ – the social obligations to share, the risk of bewitchment or accusations of sorcery, and the risk of being excluded from support – are managed. Money is quickly disposed of, and commodities are bought in small, unsharable and inoffensive quantities only (which is, obviously, also related to the tactic of quickly disposing the usually small amounts that come in).

I have already mentioned earlier the seemingly surprising fact that even food-short Mudzi women, when accessing a relatively substantial amount of money (for
example the 1500MK\textsuperscript{12} Orphan Care money or a several thousand Kwacha loan from a microfinance institute), tended to spend part of it by hiring fellow villagers to help cultivate their fields [P2 0439, 0505, 1246]. At first sight, spending precious money in times of hunger on hiring labourers for work that one can also do oneself may seem economically irrational. Considering it in light of the described social pressures to share, it proves actually quite sensible, even from an economic point of view. By paying fellow villagers to do some work, the women warded off begging from the hired villagers in particular, as these received a fairly large sum already, and from others in general because the money was out of the women’s hands. Furthermore, they averted feelings of resentment and the possible consequences by showing a commitment to sharing their sudden ‘bulk’ of wealth. Meanwhile, they benefitted from their own generosity as it relieved them from performing some hard manual labour.

A further widespread way of minimizing the potentially negative consequences of possession, no matter how small, is to try to hide it\textsuperscript{13} – as far as this is possible in a tightly-knit community like Mudzi [e.g. P2 0655, 1090, 1190, 1635, 1637, 1708, 1772; P3 0754, 2055] (see also Fafchamps 1992, Foster 1972, Vaughan 1985). For example, one of the liquor brewing women in Mudzi claimed that men like her place because it is located at some distance from the main road and paths: “Here they can drink alone, without meeting friends for whom they must buy drinks” [P3 1403]. As noted earlier, even spouses often try to hide from each other their (exact) income and expenditures [P2 0645, 1274, 1504, 1526, 1568, 1582, 1583, 1611, 1635, 1643, 1611, 1736, 1761, 2024; P3 0941-2, 1903, 3083-95], so as to avoid claims on it and not to arouse suspicion about its source. We know of some cases in which Mudzi women spent the little money they possessed exclusively on snacks at the market, eating them on the spot, returning home empty-handed (but full-stomached) [e.g. P2 1154, 1274]. Explicit questions from fellow villagers about money (and its source) are considered inappropriate [P2 1026], and often either dodged or answered with lies [P2 1026, 1481, 1545, 1717, 1981; P3 0952, 0975, 1134]. In line with these tactics to hide what might arouse envy, those who left for South Africa tended to do so unannounced and as secretly as possible, fearing that someone might make a magical attempt to shatter their money-making plans [P2 1706; P3 1190].

Thus, in anticipation of the various ‘push’ factors, possession of both cash and other goods is generally kept to a minimum, and what is possessed is often

\textsuperscript{12} Equivalent to approximately 7.50 Euro at the time of the research.

\textsuperscript{13} Reconstructing the survival strategies of rural Malawians during the severe famine of 1949, Vaughan (1987: 34) writes that the food that could be found was brought to the household at night so that neighbours would not see it, and eating was done indoors instead of outside as usual.
surrounded with secrecy, especially if it is something that can be shared and thus claimed by others. Such a persistent portrayal of poverty should, however, by no means be taken to suggest that Mudzi villagers prefer not to share. As appears from the above, a substantial part of the wealth that is disposed of is strategically shared to safeguard one’s social position and foster reciprocal relationships. In this way, money, with its potentially negative aspects, is invested in, and so transformed into, social capital. The fact that so much of the little wealth that villagers may get their hands on is directly redistributed among their fellow villagers reveals the high value attached to building and maintaining social capital. In the following part of this chapter I assess the central role of social capital in daily village life.

Social capital

The vital importance of social capital in Mudzi daily life

An important ‘pull’ factor to quickly spend money is its potential to be transformed into social capital. At the beginning of this chapter I defined social capital as ‘the ability of individuals and collective actors to mobilize resources through their network of more or less durable social relations’. Rural Malawians like those in Mudzi have few formal social securities that they can depend on. The Malawi state apparatus lacks the means and often also the political will to deliver to its citizens, particularly those in the rural areas, structural protection against hardship. Health care services are free of charge, but the clinics are understaffed and underequipped (medicines, if available, must be paid for). The police force is stationed far away from Mudzi and officers often lack money for fuel or request forthright bribes to perform their duties. Only one Mudzi villager, an elderly woman, receives a small government pension, for the services performed by her late husband as soldier during World War II. Six households receive a monthly allowance because they take care of one or several orphans. In sum, most villagers cannot rely on any formal system of insurance against misfortune. Meanwhile, the likelihood that misfortune will occur at any time in the near future is extremely high in an impoverished, neglected, and famine- and disease-prone environment like Mudzi’s. Informal safety nets are therefore of utmost importance for survival. The combination of an insufficiently equipped health care system with high levels of malnutrition and infectious diseases, for example, leads to

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14 I have discussed here how possession is often kept from the eyes of fellow villagers (although some exposure can be beneficial, as will be argued further on). It is also preferably kept hidden from external development agencies. In surveys that Mudzi villagers assumed to be undertaken to inform upcoming development interventions, or when interacting with outsiders whom they assumed to be in the position to direct handouts, they emphasized and exaggerated their deprivation.
frequently debilitating episodes of illness. During such a period an ill villager needs others to fetch water, collect firewood, and prepare food. While men can rely on their wives for this, women cannot expect their husbands to perform these female tasks. For this, they generally depend on other women in their household or neighbourhood. When money is required for medical treatment, or eventually a funeral, no household has the money at hand for this, and all thus depend on their social network to gather bits and pieces. In case a household’s maize stores become depleted, its roof collapses, or maybe just lacks matches to make a fire, it often only has the goodwill of others to turn to in order to find support.

A few formally organized social networks exist in Mudzi. Members of the same church or mosque, for example, offer support to each other particularly in case of death. Commonly, food or money is contributed annually after harvest to use for members’ funerals throughout the year, but also is collected at the time a death actually occurs [P2 1707]. During the burial, furthermore, prayers are sung by fellow congregation members. There is also a village-wide funeral club that transcends the religious background of the deceased. Here too members contribute both annually (100MK and some maize after harvest) and upon occasion (20MK). The money may be used to pay for funeral expenses that the bereaved family is unable to cover, for example the (Christian) coffin or the (Islamic) cloth that a corpse must be wrapped in. Male members dig the grave, while women members prepare a hearty meal for the digging men (and themselves).

In the year prior to our fieldwork, several income-generating clubs had been initiated by the Food Income Diversification Program (FIDP), a development program implemented by the Government of Malawi with European Union funding. Of these clubs, only the pig-rearing club was still in operation at the time of my fieldwork. The mushroom-cultivation club had been short-lived because cultivating the moisture-needing crop turned out to be highly unfeasible in a water-deprived area like that of Balaka District. The soybean-growing club dissolved when the treasurer had run off with the proceeds of the club’s first soy sale. Another type of formally organized groups in Mudzi are the networks formed in order to receive a loan from one of the microfinance agencies active in the area. Requiring the formation of such ‘joint liability’ groups is common policy among microfinance institutes throughout the developing world (De la Torre 2010: 19). The group is held communally responsible for timely payback by each of its members – the idea being that this peer pressure enhances the repayment of loans and interest, and the financial sustainability of the institutes. The microfinance institutes active in Mudzi and its surroundings demand an initial payment from each group member before distributing loans, or demand that the group saves contributions at each group meeting. In sum, all these networks are governed by formal and explicit regulations concerning, among other things, the investments that members must make and the benefits they can expect to reap.
Most social networks in Mudzi are, however, of an informal nature, constituting the casual relationships with relatives, neighbours, other fellow villagers, and (ex-)partners and their relatives. They may also include occasional outsiders like Gertrude and me, or field staff from governmental and non-governmental organizations, such as teachers, nurses, and development project implementers. These social contacts are not in themselves social capital. Only when they have been turned into relationships that can be called upon for support, whether human or material, can they be considered as social capital.

Such informal social capital manifests itself in myriad smaller and larger forms of reciprocal support. In Mudzi, these included watching each other’s children; visiting and caring for ill villagers; assisting in preparations for funerals and remembrance ceremonies; sharing relish, maize, money, and utensils; watering a fellow villager’s garden during their absence; assistance in the field or with building a house; offering shelter when one’s house collapsed; reading letters to the illiterate; or granting someone precedence at the water pump, e.g. when a woman left her baby alone in the house. Perhaps less obvious forms of assistance include helping a fellow village woman to find a (good) partner, for example by directing to her men who are searching for a wife, telling positive stories to men about women who want a partner, and giving honest advice to a woman about her proposer. Furthermore, registration to participate in a (profitable) development project often depends on the goodwill of certain gatekeepers in the community, as does being granted ganyu and receiving fair and timely payment for such work. More generally, whether a certain occurrence will be explained by others in favour or against the persons involved is likely to be related to their (positive or negative) relationship with these persons. Indeed, all the forms of

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15 For legibility, I have included citations for each of these forms of support in separate footnotes. For watching each other’s children: P2 0110; P2 1383, 1767.
16 P2 1421, 1423, 1491, 1495, 1805, 1810, 1853, 1874, 1890; P3 0758, 1594; P8 0004
17 P2 0071, 0160, 0175, 1435, 1493, 1497–8, 1510, 1512, 1565, 1577, 1707, 1745–6; P3 574, 0751, 1439, 1491, 2600, 2734
18 P2 0283, 1079, 1376, 1439, 1502, 1881; P3 1278, 1598, 1802, 2774; P8 0048
19 P2 0702, 0724, 1229, 1232, 1282, 1410, 1508, 1763; P3 1324, 2595, 4084; P8 0006
20 P2 1185, 1219, 1481, 1690, 2769; P3 3758; P8 0053, 0059
21 P2 1193, 1890; P3 0979, 1487, 1942; P8 0051
22 P2 0098
23 P2 1771, 1848; P3 2420, 2900; P3 2077
24 P2 1127; P3 0608, 1532, 2206
25 P2 1484
26 P3 2414
27 P2 0643, 0906, 1020, 1756; P3 2132, 3893
28 P2 1270; P3 0486, 2054
29 P2 0682, 1093, 1866; P3 1834
30 P2 0178, 1613
support mentioned here can also be withheld in the case of negative social capital. As we shall see further on, for example, few Mudzi villagers attended the funeral of a baby girl in the compound of a woman that they felt was absent too often at the funerals of others [P2 0071]. At another funeral, for the daughter of a young woman infamous for her many sexual partners, no one was willing to pray or sing [P2 1436]. In another example, I related in Chapter 5 how some women told harmful stories to men about the woman they had proposed to in attempt to obstruct the marriage [P2 1756; P3 2495]. In other cases, women who begged for some relish, maize, or money were turned down [P2 1135, 1334, 1965; P3 2331], and ill people were denied the quantity or quality of care they needed [P3 0758, 1744].

**Tactical investments in social capital**

As demonstrated above, goodwill is one aspect of social capital or ‘the ability to mobilize support’, as I have defined it. Such goodwill must be earned and fostered. Showing commitment to sharing one’s wealth – whether by distributing commodities, lending out money, or hiring *ganyu* labourers – is an important way of earning and fostering goodwill. Combined with the previously described risks involved in hoarding money, this helps to explain why money is often quickly out of each villager’s hands and circulated through the community.

Wealth and favours are, however, not distributed at random, simply to get rid of them and attain a general level of community goodwill. Assessing my data on who receives support and who is excluded, especially when shortages become more severe [cf. P2 1690], reveals the tactical dynamics that underlie the sharing of wealth. Lacking sufficient resources to help everyone in need, Mudzi villagers are selective in sharing and tend to invest particularly in relationships that are potentially reciprocal, as shown in the following:

Salika (39, five dependent children, abandoned) called her brother in South Africa and begged him to send her some money to contribute to the remembrance ceremony of the deceased husband of one of her neighbours – a woman much better off than Salika. She explained to her brother why it was so important to contribute: “because if something happens to us she is the one who can help.” [P2 1510]

In Malawi, as noted, community norms prescribe that those who have more must share their wealth, and that those who lack must receive support. Normatively, communal survival is thus privileged over personal development. In daily Mudzi life, however, personal benefits seem to often overrule a sense of normative altruism. Having little to share while desperately needing potential sources of future support urges villagers to carefully distribute their meagre resources in the most cost-effective way. This necessarily means investing in relationships that can most likely be yielded from at a later time.

In Mudzi, these ‘cost-effective’ relationships come in two types, which in the literature on social capital have been called *bonding* and *linking* social capital.
Putnam (2000) describes ‘bonding social capital’ as the social ties within a relatively homogenous group. ‘Linking social capital’ is a term coined by Woolcock (2000) to denote vertical connections between people at different hierarchical levels. For Mudzi villagers such linking social capital entails relationships with people who have relatively good access to resources. These better-off villagers are most likely to be able to reciprocate, although they may not always be willing to do so because they have little to gain from investing heavily in a reciprocal relationship with a poorer partner. Indeed, the support offered by the better-off Mudzi villagers often comes in the form of *ganyu* opportunities: they allow those in need to work in their field in exchange for money, food, or seeds.\(^{31}\) The bonding type of social capital in Mudzi consists of more-or-less equal relationships within a small cluster of closely related people, usually kin but in some cases friends, who are generally most willing to reciprocate in whatever way they can, although they often have little to share. Despite the low quantities and low frequencies of resources available, the likeliness of accessing these is relatively high, because each person’s need for future support makes them more responsive to requests for assistance. As Scott (1976: 27) remarked: “the more reliable a [subsistence option], the more resource-poor it tends to be” (italics in original). Investment in such bonding relationships was exemplified by the loyal, consistent giving-and-taking between Suset, her grandmother, and her elder sister\(^{32}\) that I described earlier.

Each Mudzi villager thus invests in reciprocal relationships with a small circle of close partners, and in relationships with a few people who are well positioned to mobilize resources. Consequently, the villagers who receive most support are not necessarily – and are even unlikely to be – those in most need. As exemplified by the above excerpt about Salika’s motivation to share assets with her better-off neighbour, access to support generates further support; social capital attracts social capital. As Du Toit et al. (2007: 534) conclude from their ethnographic study on social capital in rural South Africa: “to those that have shall more be given” (see also Lundberg et al. 2000 for Tanzania, Pinder 2004 for Malawi). Conversely, those without significant connections are doubly disadvantaged, because 1) they have little livelihood security, which 2) makes them uninteresting (unprofitable)

\(^{31}\) It is partly in this light that we can understand the warnings from some scholars that social capital may work to the advantage of some while marginalizing others (e.g. Adler & Kwon 2000, Cleaver 2002, Du Toit et al. 2007, Portes 2003).

\(^{32}\) These two women with whom Suset had the closest relationships of mutual support were by her classified as “grandmother” and “elder sister,” but this does not necessarily mean that they were her actual grandmother and sister as understood in Western terms. Her ‘grandmother’ may just as well have been a sister of her real grandmother, and her ‘sister’ may well have been a cousin. No matter their exact affiliation in Western terms, these two women were the people who Suset identified as most closely related to her in local kinship terms; all others had either died or migrated too far to retain regular contact with.
to assist (invest in). In the words of Cole (2010: 58): “poverty both signals and reproduces a lack of significant connection to others.”

Tactical investment in Mudzi is well exemplified by two episodes of illness concerning the children of women situated at the extreme ends of the social capital spectrum:

As long as her adult son was admitted at Balaka hospital, Mudzi’s Group Village Headwoman too resided there to take care of him. On her way to Balaka, she had been escorted by the chief of Mudzi A [P2 1801], and in the weeks following she was visited repeatedly by Mudzi women [P2 1805, 1810, 1874, 1890] – despite the journey of several hours walk. Visitors brought milk and bread for the patient (who himself was not a Mudzi resident) to regain strength [P2 1835; P3 2470]. When Amila – one of the poorest Mudzi women, without affluent connections – stayed at the same hospital to take care of her ill young daughter for some weeks, they were not visited even once. The girl was found in severe need of blood, but Amila had no one to turn to for donation. Eventually the doctor gave his own blood, and the girl survived. When later the girl was discharged, it took a lot of effort for Amila to persuade an uncle living in Balaka to lend her money for a bike taxi to take her still-weakened daughter home [P3 1744, see also P3 3861].

The discrepancy between these two episodes can be interpreted to have various causes, such as a general liking of the Group Village Headwoman and her son, and a dislike of Amila and her daughter. I contend, however, that it has mainly to do with the fact that pleasing the Group Village Headwoman is most likely a rewarding investment, while spending many hours walking and a handful of Kwachas on Amila and her daughter is unlikely to ever result in a materialization of Amila’s gratitude. This is not simply a matter of financial capital, of wealth versus poverty, as no one in Mudzi, not even the Group Village Head, seems able to accumulate much tangible wealth – but rather of social capital, of the potential to pull strings in times of need. The many hospital visits that villagers paid to the son of the Group Village Headwoman exemplify investments in the earlier-described linking type of social capital. The Group Village Headwoman’s traditionally high status as community leader, her blood relations with other traditional leaders in the area, her pivotal role in the allocation of benefits from government or NGO development projects, and her access to financial support from two sons employed in South Africa make her a desired reciprocal partner – even though she cannot be approached for each painkiller that is wanted.

The good (read: reliable or resourceful) connections that social capital consists of are partly a matter of circumstance: whether one has close relatives at all, or even a relative who is placed in a powerful position or who has migrated to South Africa is beyond one’s control (although social pressure can surely help in this last instance, and is certainly employed by some Mudzi women). In this sense, Amila was simply unlucky. Nonetheless, as mentioned, through actively fostering the connections that they do have, and where possible extending their network of potentially reciprocal relationships, women can exert some level of agency in
attempting to increase their social capital and thus their access to support in times of need.

Such investing in social relationships does not necessarily involve money or goods – which are out of reach for women like Amila, but can entail physical assistance too. Attending or assisting at funerals, for example, is an excellent way to actively foster social capital, and seems to be at every villager’s disposal. A closer look, however, reveals the limits to poor women’s agency to singlehandedly expand their support base (see also Cleaver 2002). For one, the time invested in, for example, fetching water and helping to cook for a funeral, cannot be spent on cultivating one’s field, doing ganyu or business, or, as in Agnessi’s case below, attending a training – and thus does come at a cost which not everybody can afford:

Agnessi (42, married) on several occasions chose to continue the tailoring course to which she had been admitted instead of attending the funeral of a fellow villager. When her daughter’s baby died shortly after birth, some Mudzi women refused to pay their condolences, in this way taking revenge for Agnessi’s prioritizing her own development over community solidarity. [P2 0071, see also P3 2743]

Agnessi chose not to be expelled from the (free) tailoring course, but was punished for this by a reduction in community support. Agnessi’s agency to improve her future support base was restricted because either way – investing in social capital at the cost of her education, or investing in education at the cost of her social capital – this support base would be affected. Other, seemingly futile and easily overlooked, factors too can restrict deprived women’s agency to uphold or improve their social support network. For example, attending funerals and other ceremonies requires wearing a reasonably proper outfit. Because of this, Agnessi, often lacking the soap to wash her one set of clothes, at times felt unable to attend [P3 3145], and was thus limited from actively and effectively increasing her social capital by a lack of access to resources.33

Notably, the few women with relatively secure livelihoods, such as those with husbands or sons steadily employed in South Africa, are less pressed to maintain good reciprocal community relations. Their fellow villagers are in greater need of their generosity than the reverse, so they have less to fear – provided that they exhibit a preparedness to share their benefits. As these women are less dependent on public opinion while at the same time reasonably sure of a favourable attitude from fellow villagers anyway, they have somewhat more space to manoeuvre and act as they please. I return to this point further on.

33 The downward spiral that women like Amila get caught up in can be halted or reversed, whether in the short or long term, for example by a son who grows up and finds employment at one of the large estates in the area [P2 1634], or selection by the village chief to participate in a development project as a token poor person, to demonstrate commitment to channel aid to the poorest of the poor as instructed by the development agencies [P3 0687, 4097].
Those who need reciprocal relationships the most are by default those who have little to share – the majority of Mudzi villagers. They must make sure therefore, as argued earlier, that those few meagre resources that they can dispose of are distributed in the most cost-effective way. They must furthermore make sure that they do not accentuate their shortage of and need for reciprocal relationships, as this would make them unattractive reciprocal partners and diminish their potential access to future support. In this light the aversion that some Mudzi women expressed against doing ganyu and working at a commercial estate\textsuperscript{34} can be understood: these are considered outright signs of lacking other sources of support (unlike selling of crops, starting a business, or working in town or even abroad, which signal that a woman has investment capital at her disposal). “People may think that you are very poor,” one woman argued [P3 2846] – in other words, fellow villagers may deem you unable to reciprocate and withhold support where possible [see also P3 0934].

The data discussed in this section demonstrate that social capital determines whether one is to be reckoned with in daily village life interactions, which in turn determines whether one can access the support one needs at the moment it is needed. While showing off material possession goes against community morals and can therefore be detrimental to one’s social status, health, and even life, displaying one’s connectedness attains quite the opposite. This may explain why, for example, some Mudzi women bragged to others that I – a presumably affluent and well-connected outsider, and thus potential linking social capital – was privileging them with gifts and money, even though this was not the case [P2 1227; P3 1182, 1244, 2485–7, 2884]. It probably also helps to explain why, despite the levelling mechanism, some women boasted fake long braids in their hair, a cellular phone, some furniture in their house, or corrugated roofing on their house. According to Parker Shipton, such wealth could be highly problematic because of “the potential for complaints and damaging accusations that underlies every saving or investment decision” (Shipton 1990: 367). My data seem to indicate, however, that showing off some level of ‘access to resources’ is actually beneficial to livelihood security.

Thus, to optimize their livelihood security Mudzi women must carefully balance a portrayal of poverty with an image of powerful connectedness. By doing so they minimize the risks that arise from possessing tangible wealth while maximizing the quantity and quality of potential future support sources. Sofia (25) described this dual strategy well when she once casually remarked that “those who are rich pretend to be poor, while those who are poor pretend to be rich” [P3 1937].

Notably, as we have seen in cases of HIV- and AIDS-affected community members, a language of culpability may be employed by villagers to exempt

\textsuperscript{34} This will be further elaborated upon in the next chapter on women’s income-generating options.
themselves from the social obligation to help those in need. If, for example, a fellow villager’s need can be argued to stem from laziness – a much-heard accusation in Mudzi [P2 0282, 1056, 1144, 1315, 1820; P3 0486, 0497, 0611, 0614, 0729, 1173, 1245, 1326, 1425, 1763, 2340, 2364, 2994–6, 3217–8], or from a ‘misuse’ of maize such as selling or excessive consumption [P2 1232, 1334, 1488, 1508, 1639], this may be used to justify a withholding of support. Logically then, such accusations are feared and where possible averted, particularly by those who most depend on the potential support of their social network. In the next chapter I return to this point.

Sexual ties as social capital
In the previous sections I have argued that the ability to pull strings when necessary is by far the most important (and feasible) asset for Mudzi villagers. The severe insecurity of their livelihoods makes it crucially important to create and continuously foster potential sources of future support. At any moment something may occur that triggers a further descent into poverty – unless one has set up a number of potential safety nets beforehand, of which at least one will function as hoped at the time of need. Obviously, the more potential safety nets a villager can set up, the greater the chance that at least one or preferably several can indeed be called upon when necessary. Forming sexual partnerships with men is one important way for women to set up such social safety nets.

Sexual relationships are a type of exchange relationship on their own and can fall both under the bonding and linking categories identified earlier. Several characteristics make sexual relationships particularly different from non-sexual exchange relationships. One is arguably that women can reciprocate the support they get from their partner not with money or commodities, but with a resource that they have freely available in limitless quantities, namely sex. Sex is, however, not really costless or limitless – as it may come at the cost of an unwanted pregnancy or STI; cannot be offered during times tabooed for sexual intercourse, for example when menstruating or in the months after childbirth, abortion, or miscarriage; and cannot be liberally distributed among endless numbers of men without social repercussions, particularly when married. Nonetheless, despite these potential costs and limitations, sexual intercourse can be a quick and easy way to access money, food, or other commodities – among others because there need not have been established a priori a long-term relationship of mutual reciprocity. The direct need or desire for what a man ought to give in a sexual relationship, even if this relationship entails just a one-time encounter, may compel a woman to discard the potential future costs of the sex act. Although some Mudzi women may at some times have engaged in such ad-hoc, one-time sex encounters [P2 0101, 1546, 1844], most partnerships lasted longer and so functioned as source of social capital, a source of potential future support in times of need.
The central role of social capital in survival among resource-poor populations has, as mentioned, been described many times, yet is often overlooked in the contemporary scholarly discourse on transactional sex. Only some scholars take into account the more general, long-term need of ‘being connected’ as motive for involvement in transactional sexual liaisons, among whom are Thornton (2009) and Swidler & Watkins (2007). Thornton theorizes that sexual networking, discredited in the public health arena as highly irrational amidst an AIDS epidemic, may be very rational if considered a means to create social capital and so improve many other aspects of an individual’s life (2009: 3). This concurs with the data from Mudzi that I assess in this section. Interestingly, he hypothesizes that having unprotected sex may be the ultimate means to consolidate a relationship, because it generates an impression of mutual trust and seriousness. Although I have no data to support this assumption, it may help to explain, in combination with the high value attached to social capital as described in this chapter, the continued high occurrence of unprotected sex in Mudzi and beyond. Swidler & Watkins (2007) build their argument on an extensive set of qualitative data from rural Malawi and argue that poor women’s sexual relationships should be considered a form of insurance against future hardship in line with the patron-client ties commonly observed throughout Africa (see Van den Borne 2005a: 105 for a similar argument about women in urban Malawi). They conclude that it is the high probability of future need for support rather than acute deprivation that leads women to engage in transactional relationships. This argument corresponds with my findings described in Chapter 5 concerning the indefinite character of many sexual relationships and the lasting support from ex-partners. The bonds that are created by engaging in a sexual relationship can often still be called upon on later occasions – which contributes to their indefinite (and infinite) character. Their argument also corresponds with the vital importance of ‘being connected’ as described in this chapter.

Swidler & Watkins (2007) describe the men that engage in transactional relationships as relatively affluent men who feel morally obliged or socially forced to share their wealth by providing for multiple women through sexual relationships with them. These men benefit from amassing female ‘clients’ because it strengthens their position as patron. In Mudzi, however, there were few relatively affluent men (and those who were seemed loyal to their long-time wives, which may be one of the very reasons for their relative prosperity, as explained in Chapter 3). Most women were sexually involved with men roughly as poor as themselves. Many of the relationships seemed more-or-less reciprocal: both partners begged and shared, gave and took. There are, in other words, no clear patron or client roles discernible. Men depend on women for a roof over their head and nsima on their plate, and women want men for additional labour power or material extras, a respectable status, and continuation of their lineage.
For an average poor man, as I have argued earlier, maintaining relationships with several women is a kind of risk management, whether deliberate or not. As detailed in Chapter 5, divorce is a highly common occurrence in Mudzi and instigated by women about as often as by men. Irrespective of which partner wants to divorce, it is the man who must leave the house, the field, and its produce. To counter this insecurity he must nurture substitute ties, whether openly or secretly, actively or passively, sexually or (still) platonically, to fall back on in case he suddenly finds himself without a home and someone to care for him. It is in this light that the often erratic but ongoing support from male ex-partners can be explained – as attempts to keep available as many refuges as possible.

As described in earlier chapters, the support that women can beg from relatives and fellow villagers is limited, because day-to-day provision is considered to be foremost a husband’s task (see also Vaughan 1987: 32). Consequently, an unmarried woman in need of support is expected to pursue marriage rather than exclusively depend on her (non-sexual) social network. Cultivating at least one sexual relationship thus strengthens a woman’s access to potential support – both through her partner as well as the wider community. Maintaining ties with multiple current, ex-, and potential future sexual partners increases a woman’s number of safety nets, as also argued by Swidler & Watkins. Ties with well-positioned men especially strengthen a woman’s social capital, as her reciprocal capacities are then considered strong and thus sought after by the wider community.

Furthermore, because of the cultural norm that men must provide for their wife or chibwenzi, sexual relationships with men are more ‘demandable’ than, say, a reciprocal relationship with a neighbour. A woman can more explicitly and more forcefully claim the support she desires or requires from a sexual partner than from any other social relation [e.g. P2 0095, 0776, 1252; P3 2138], especially if she has his children to care for as well [e.g. P2 0924; P3 1103, 2297]. Not surprisingly, considering men’s perceived duty to provide for their partner, a recent study quantifying cash transfers within a Malawian village community found that the cash transferred from men to women totalled well over double the amount that was transferred between men or between women, and over four times the amount transferred from women to men (Stuart et al. 2011: 2).

There is, however, as discussed in Chapter 5, a limit to the number of sexual safety nets that a woman can employ without damaging her respectable status and community’s goodwill, which would lead to a decline in her ‘total sum’ of social capital. Indeed, numerous Mudzi women said they refrained from divorcing quickly because exchanging partners too frequently would diminish the community’s respect for them. The exact trade-off point differs per woman and situation. If the support that can be derived through sexual relationships is particularly good, which seemed the case for some of Mudzi’s young, pretty women, this form of social capital may be privileged over and at the expense of other forms of social
relationships. Venesi (35) also is an exceptional example, whose case gives an interesting insight into the possible consequences of the female empowerment that some development professionals believe may reduce women’s involvement in risky sexual relationships:

Of all Mudzi villagers, it is probably Venesi who best understands how to play the game of accessing external development aid. By neatly showing up on time, and performing all tasks exactly as instructed, she made a good impression on the field officer of Concern Universal (the development institute most active in Mudzi), and was selected by him for subsequent development activities too. Each time she was selected, Venesi made sure to share some of the benefits that she accessed through the project with Mudzi’s chief, because this woman also had a part in the selection process. Furthermore, when taking out a microloan from Concern Universal (CU), Venesi was one of the few women who actually invested most of it in a business – as intended by the institute – and always managed to pay back the loan and interest in time. Her rapport with CU’s field officer became so good that he eventually appointed her as ‘volunteer teacher’ for the adult literacy project. Venesi receives a monthly allowance of 1000MK for this task, as well as regular training. When attending such workshops, she receives a travel allowance, lunch allowance, attendance allowance, and, if the workshop lasts several days, an overnight allowance. She saves most of this money by walking to Balaka instead of hiring a bike-taxi, eating some bananas instead of lunch in a restaurant, and returning home in the evenings instead of staying in a hotel in town. When the literacy classes had long ceased due to lack of interest from the (largely literate) Mudzi villagers, Venesi continued to be paid by CU’s field officer (who was aware that the classes had stopped, and probably well understood the lack of interest yet preferred not to inform his superiors about the failure of a project under his command). Venesi carried on attending the various workshops without disclosing that the project was no longer being implemented in Mudzi. Besides this regular and substantial source of income, Venesi has both a brother and a son working in South Africa who send her gifts such as a mobile phone. In sum, Venesi’s livelihood is fairly well secured, which makes her less dependent on the goodwill and potential support offered by the Mudzi community than most of her fellow village women. At the same time, the community is generally well disposed towards her anyway, because of her relatively substantial access to resources and good connections with migrants in South Africa, the village chief, and the development and microfinance institutes’ staff. On a few occasions women whispered to us that all of Venesi’s five children have different fathers, which I saw confirmed in the village birth register. According to the goings, Venesi had cheated on each man with her next lover. The gossip clearly did not bother Venesi, who during our stay dismissed yet another partner, arguing that although he worked in her field, he refused to perform ganyu as she requested to find money for her household. Soon after, she freely walked around with her new lover, a married man from the nearby trading centre. Everybody could see him come and go in broad daylight. Although her behaviour was commented upon and at times laughed about, it was never harshly disapproved of as it was in cases of some other women. [P2 0752, 1058, 1163, 1288; P3 1221, 1870, 2054, 2737; P8 0041]

The trade-off point for Venesi is apparently very high, because of her diversified access to reliable sources of support, which assured her of the community’s general goodwill. As she has managed to capitalize on non-sexual relationships with well-positioned men and women, she gained some leeway to behave as she pleases. Most other women, rather, must carefully balance the potential benefits from sexual relationships with those of a respectable status. As has been elaborated in Chapter 5 they tend to do so by commanding a discourse of urgent need for direct support
to justify their acceptance of sexual proposals and maintain a level of community goodwill.

Discussion and conclusion

In his famous article on “The anatomy of envy” (1972), George Foster posits that there are four universal ways in which all people, from societies rich and poor, try to avoid the negative consequences of envy from others. These four strategies, he emphasizes, are structured in a hierarchical order of preference (*ibid*: 175). The first choice of all who fear being envied would be to conceal the object of potential envy. When this seems impossible or inappropriate, the alternative is to deny that there is much to be envied about it. When this too appears inadequate, some of the desired object is symbolically shared, for example in the case of tipping a waiter to ‘buy off’ any envy that he may feel about his customer’s wealth. According to Foster’s theory it is only in the last instance, when all other options fail to sufficiently ward off the threat of envy, that people resort to actual sharing.

In Mudzi, as we have seen, concealment is indeed a widely applied tactic to avoid claims, envy, and the related risk of bewitchment. Sharing, however, is not a last resort, applied only when other tactics fail or appear unfeasible. Sharing is, within limits, desired, because it is an important means to safeguard one’s access to potential sources of future support, to maintain one’s social safety network, and to show off – in a sense – one’s credibility as a reciprocal partner. Not only fear of repercussions pushes villagers to share, but also hope for rewards (see also Colson 1974: 46, quoted in Lemarchand 1989: 40).

Throughout the past decennia social scientists have hotly debated the motivations underlying this ‘levelling mechanism’, which is found among so many poor population groups. Here, I focus on this discussion specifically in the African context, rather than include feudal Europe and Asia (where the debate originated with James Scott’s 1976 classic *The moral economy of the peasant*). I do so because it has been argued that the case of the African peasantry is unique due to a relative absence of exploitation by elite classes (Caldwell et al. 1989: 188, Hyden 1986: 679). The debate on the levelling mechanism among scholars of Africa polarized into one camp upholshing a romantic idea of supportive community networks geared towards the survival of all members (Geertz 1963, Hyden 1980, Kimambo et al. 2008) and an opposite camp insisting that all human behaviour ultimately derives from a self-interested striving for personal improvement (Bates 1983, Fafchamps 1992, Popkin 1979). What seems to have often been overlooked in this ‘moral versus opportunistic peasant’ debate is the fact that abiding by moral community norms of sharing may in fact be an important means to achieve personal benefit. In other words, as also argued by Cheal (1989) and Lemarchand (1989), a moral economy and political economy may be at play simultaneously. Cultural norms
guide villagers’ behaviour by pressuring them into sharing, but exactly how they share is to a great extent directed by tactical considerations aimed at individual survival. It can be said that villagers’ decision making is guided by a form of individual profit maximization. However, the ‘profit’ at stake concerns reducing one’s livelihood insecurity instead of accumulating personal wealth.

Material wealth has an ambiguous status in daily Mudzi life. Hoarding goes against cultural norms, and is likely to trigger disapproval as well as jealousies, and so threaten one’s personal wellbeing, as also argued by Foster. At the same time, however, material wealth entices reciprocal relationships – which can function as insurance against future despair. To overcome this inherent tension in accumulating material capital, villagers rather strive to accumulate social capital, which allows them to mobilize the necessary material capital (and other forms of support) when needed. Ideally, social capital exists in the form of both reliable (generally horizontal) and resourceful (generally vertical) reciprocal relationships. The former concern relationships with persons equally little endowed but generally highly willing to provide support when necessary, because they are equally in need of potential future reciprocity. The latter entail relationships with people better endowed but who are therefore less interested in actually providing support. As argued in this chapter, strong social capital generates further access to support, because it increases one’s potential capacity to reciprocate and thus others’ willingness to provide assistance or grant privileges. Conversely, a lack of social capital puts one last in line when fellow villagers decide how to best allocate the scarce and meagre assets that they have at their disposal, whether these entail material support or other favours such as inclusion in a profitable development project.

Livelihood security in Mudzi thus largely depends on the size and quality of one’s social network, one’s potential access to resources when in need, and one’s ability to pull strings when necessary. In such an environment, ‘economic independence’, as promoted by many development professionals, is a sheer fallacy and pursuing it could actually be detrimental to the villagers’ feeble livelihood security. As argued throughout, investments to instead expand and strengthen one’s social network are both more feasible and most likely more effective for improving livelihood security. Sexual relationships are pre-eminently suited as source of support because of the cultural expectation that a husband and wife ‘are together to help each other’. This conceptualization also characterizes casual sexual relationships, in which a woman can expect and even actively claim assistance from her partner, whether now or in the future. Having a partner furthermore increases a woman’s potential access to wider community support, as described in Chapter 5. Involvement in sexual relationships with men (if not overdone) is thus a major means for women to increase not only the quantity but also the quality of their social network and so enhance their potential access to support when in need.
Maintaining multiple potential sources of future support is so crucial for livelihood security, and sexual ties are so vital a part of this, that it is unlikely that Mudzi women will easily give up their relationships with (multiple) men. The long-term social capital that is found through sexual ties cannot simply be replaced by one single source of income generation, let alone by something as delusionary (within the Mudzi context) like ‘economic independence’, as suggested by some advocates of the transactional sex paradigm. In the following chapter I elaborate further on misconceptions about the perceived solution of providing poor rural women with income-generating options.
Decent wives and dirty money:
Women’s independent income

Introduction

The transactional sex paradigm that is critically assessed in this study builds on the assumption that poor women are forced to exchange sex for male support because they lack alternative means to generate an income. This ‘survival sex’ is considered a main driver of the AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, it is argued that, to halt further spreading of HIV, female poverty must be urgently addressed so as to reduce their dependence on sexual relationships with men.¹ In previous chapters I have looked at various aspects of the hypothesis that women will make safer sexual choices if they can access money independently from men. In this last ethnographic chapter I assess the presumed lack of options for women to obtain income, and the feasibility of improving women’s livelihood security through independent money making. As we move towards the end of this book, the analyses of the hypothesis’s various aspects increasingly come together. This last chapter is comparatively short, as several issues relevant to its analysis have already been described and discussed earlier.

Time and again Mudzi women emphasized, to me and to each other, their need for male support. Nonetheless, when I asked how they had survived periods without a husband, most shrugged their shoulders and said in a matter-of-fact way that

they had just worked hard in the field, and did ganyu (piecework) when in need of money [e.g. P3 0519, 0523, 1603, 3786, 3801, 3902, 3923, 3996]. Furthermore, during our stay in Mudzi, we saw many women take up small-scale business activities to make ends meet. Apparently, women are quite capable of obtaining money through other means than sexual relationships with men.\(^2\)

This chapter begins with a description of the various ways through which Mudzi women (could) manage to get money independent of men. I subdivide these ways into means to access money and means to make money. Under the former, I include selling crops and retrieving money through one’s social network or through external development schemes, and under the latter, I include business and wage labour; ganyu is somewhere inbetween social networking and wage labour. Although it may be debated whether the distinction between ‘access’ and ‘making’ is apt for these categories in general terms, I would argue that this distinction is relevant for the Mudzi case. Its relevance appears from the fact that the means I have grouped under ‘accessing money’ are less stigmatized for women than those under the category of ‘making money’. In the second half of this chapter, I elaborate further upon the ambivalence towards women’s independent money making. Overall, the analyses in this chapter help to clarify the choices that Mudzi women make between getting resources through relationships with men and through other means.

**Women’s income options**

Despite women’s insistence that it is men who must provide them with money, there are various means through which Mudzi women can acquire money too – independently of their sexual partner(s). As noted, women can access money through selling their crops, participating in microcredit schemes or other forms of development aid, and receiving or begging support from relatives or fellow villagers. They can furthermore hire out their labour to other farmers, and make money by enrolling in waged employment, or engaging in a small-scale business. The advantage of obtaining money through their own means, women feel, is that they can buy what they want at any moment they want, without having to beg a husband and waiting to see whether and when he will comply [P3 0544, 0743, 0780, 1277, 2416]. However, an independent income for women often comes at a cost, as will be described in this chapter. In the following, I explore the potential of each of the options for women to acquire an independent income, but also the difficulties, disadvantages, and social consequences involved in this.

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\(^2\) It is important to recall here that in Mudzi (and much of Africa – see Chapter 5) women and men are in control over the money that they make themselves. Whereas elsewhere women’s incomes are often found to be indirectly controlled by husbands, which may work as a disincentive for women to generate money, this is not the case for the Mudzi women concerned.
Accessing money

• Selling crops

Just after harvest, when the granaries are well stocked, women can easily acquire money by selling or exchanging some produce from their fields [P2 0279, 1680; P3 1630]. During this time, many sell small quantities of maize almost on a daily basis to buy other types of food, soap, salt, oil, paraffin, painkillers, household utensils, clothes, or beauty products; or pay for services like the maize mill or transport [P2 1088, 1565, 1572, 1583, 1590, 1665–6, 1689, 1736, 1777, 1818; P3 1630, 2226, 4075, 4088]. Other food crops, like groundnuts or sweet potatoes, are also grown first for home consumption, but also used to access money when desired or required. Livestock like goats and chickens are kept by relatively better-off villagers, and sold sporadically – as their numbers are limited – when needing a relatively large sum of money, particularly to buy fertilizer [P2 0342, 0719, 1103, 1444, 2128; P3 1021, 1091, 1124]. The crops or livestock may be sold to the few fellow villagers who (temporarily) have some cash, for example obtained through waged employment or remittances from South Africa. These local buyers either consume what they bought right away, add it to their own stock for later consumption, or store it to sell when scarcity returns and prices rocket. Crops can also be sold to middlemen for commercial buyers who pass through the villages looking for merchandise, or have a seasonal stand in one of the nearby trading centres. Larger livestock may be sold to butchers who either make rounds through the area or are sought out by the sellers.

Even before harvest, men and women anticipate their coming prosperity by taking out loans that are to be repaid with maize after harvest [P2 1216, 1358, 1488, 1500, 1601, 1612, 1626, 1777; P3 2588]. This is publicly regarded as foolish because of the low rates offered: during our fieldwork period, borrowers received only 1000MK for a 50kg bag of maize, which was worth up to 4000MK some months earlier and later [e.g. P2 1392, 1623, 1855; P3 1553, 1630, 1742, 1764, 2030]. Yet, few villagers managed to resist the temptation to acquire some ready cash in this way during the hunger season.

During the harvest season, food prices are at a minimum as the supply is high and demand low. Nonetheless, despite their meagre yields and the low prices offered, most Mudzi villagers engage in such selling of non-surplus food crops (see Shipton 1990: 367 on the commonality of this throughout Africa, contrary to the general economic assumption that farmers only sell their surplus crops). Several ridiculed their own habit of squandering the maize they had longed for, paid dearly for and worked hard for during the hunger months before harvest. Now they were eating full plates of nsima three times a day, and selling it for low prices to buy ‘mere luxuries’ like fish, meat, and clothes [P2 0651, 1079, 1274, 1623, 1855; P3

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3 At the time of the research, 1000MK equaled approximately 5 Euro and 4000MK thus approximately 20 Euro.
Only those who harvested very little – two or three bags of maize [P2 1611, 1965, 2104, 2182; P3 1817, 4057], and those few who harvested plenty – twenty to forty bags [e.g. P3 4050], respectively kept their precious gold for home consumption or for sale when maize prices rocket again due to scarcity.

Whether a conscious strategy or not, by the selling and lavishing of non-surplus maize Mudzi villagers avoid loss due to pests and theft, and the covert selling of maize by other household members [P2 0730–4, 0741]. Furthermore, those who still have maize when others run out have to share, while those who run out of maize when others still have it are entitled to handouts (see Chapter 7). Besides these possible pragmatic, economizing rationales, the desire to splurge after a period of scarcity and hardship may well be considered a universal human trait that must be empathized with [P3 1892]. Uncertain of what the next day might bring, villagers seemed to prefer enjoying what they had at the moment they had it.

It has been noted several times throughout this book that women in a relationship often try to keep their selling of food crops hidden from their partner. More generally too, the selling of crops, although practiced widely, is preferably kept from the public eye. Villagers fear that their selling may provide others with a justification to deny them food aid when their stores run out. As Rosemary (49) explained when she offered some maize for sale to Gertrude:

“I want to buy soap and salt, that’s why I have decided to sell some maize. I will come at midnight and put it in your kitchen. I am afraid to bring it right now because if my [adult] children see that I am selling maize, they will not give me food in hunger season.” [P2 1508, see also P2 1639]

Rosemary’s fear is not without grounds. As described earlier, both selling and the perceived squandering of maize by excessive consumption were mentioned by Mudzi villagers as reasons for not giving in to requests from hungry fellow villagers to share some maize with them in times of need [P2 1232, 1334, 1488, 1508, 1639].

In sum, selling food crops is an easy and widely practiced means to obtain regular, small quantities of money to satisfy daily household needs. Accessing money in this way does, however, speed up the depletion of the – often already insufficient – household stores. Furthermore, overdoing it may later be punished by fellow villagers who withhold food aid, claiming that the beggar self-inflicted his or her need.

Selling cotton – the one crop that is grown exclusively for income generation4 – seems not to be surrounded with such ambivalence. At least, we have not heard any

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4 During pre-colonial times, men and women had developed the skills to weave cotton into cloth. At colonization, manufactured products including clothes penetrated the rural areas of Malawi, and eradicated local industries (Mandala 1982: 30). By now, the knowledge of cotton processing seems completely forgotten, as revealed by one Mudzi women (57) who had been growing cotton for years yet asked me what it is actually used for [P3 2629].
comment indicating social disapproval of dedicating land to cotton production at the expense of food cultivation. Several villagers explained to us that they planned to use their cotton revenue to buy maize when at its cheapest, and add it to their own stores. They expected to so accumulate a larger store than by growing only maize themselves. In this sense, indeed cotton production deserves no disapproval. In practice, however, the cotton revenues were generally spent on many other things than additional maize (see Chapter 7). As the time to harvest and sell the cotton came close, villagers could not stop dreaming about what they would to do with all the money that they were about to receive [P3 2142, 2271, 2620, 2621]. The sudden possession of wealth – right after months of shortages – turned out to be too tempting for most to spend it (wisely but boringly) on maize, of which they had sufficient for the time being.

Although hardly used to actually supplement the meagre maize yields, part of the cotton revenue was spent on useful necessities such as clothes or iron sheets. But whatever it was spent on, the money was spent quickly. The fact that it comes in a relatively large, one-time amount, necessitates such quick spending, for reasons discussed in Chapter 7. In sum, cotton is a feasible and unsuspicious means for women to obtain money, but the income that they can get through it, although quite substantial, does not last them long.

• External development aid
Several development projects had been and were being implemented in Mudzi before and during our fieldwork. As a peaceful but extremely poor country, Malawi receives relatively large quantities of international development assistance. In 2010 this totalled USD 924 million, which amounts to over 85 percent of the country’s gross capital formation, and almost a quarter of the country’s gross national income (World Bank 2012). The main development projects that were implemented in Mudzi at the time of this study included female literacy classes, a tree nursery, making clay ovens to save fuel, and income diversification through growing soy and mushrooms and rearing pigs and goats. Some of the activities were initiated

5 These iron sheets were bought by a woman (37, abandoned, one child) who had already spent part of her cotton revenue on buying a few iron sheets for some years in a row. The last ones necessary to replace her grass roof were bought during our presence in Mudzi. With next year’s revenue this woman plans to buy nails, and hire someone to put the sheets in place. Such long-term vision was extremely rare in Mudzi. Intriguingly, this particular woman is the only one we are sure is HIV-positive. Several interesting hypotheses can be deduced from this case. Maybe the fact that her HIV status was a public secret led this woman to believe that she could no longer hope for the support of a husband, which made her decide to invest her own money. Or maybe she felt exempted from the potential social scorn that this display of money might trigger, as no one would assume that she got it through a sexual partner or be so mean to bring about further misfortune on her through bewitchment. Maybe she wanted to ‘defeat’ death by openly taking on this long-term vision. It is also possible, of course, that there was no connection between her HIV-status and her actions, which may have rather stemmed from her particular personality.
and implemented through a government program, others by an international non-
governmental organization (NGO).

Both institutes claimed that their projects were ‘participant owned’ and the result
of demonstrated interest by the local population [P3 0317, 2424, 2432]. In practice,
however, Mudzi villagers saw little benefit in the development activities offered
[e.g. P2 0285; P3 0497, 3081–2, 3211, 3301, 4041; P8 0003, 0005, 0009, 0012]. Most women were
already literate; deforestation was not (yet) experienced as problematic; clay ovens
were left unused; and the moisture-needing mushrooms were soon found unfit in
a setting where water supply is problematic. The goat-rearing project was the only
intervention that was highly valued by almost all villagers, as each household had
received its own goat [P2 1490; P3 0333, 1021, 2051; P8 0010].

It seems that, overall, Mudzi villagers have grown accustomed to external
development programs failing to deliver on their promises. After being consulted
about their most pressing problems (water supply and food insecurity) by the NGO,
the villagers found that these were not addressed by the projects that followed [p3
2277]. The villagers made bricks to build a shed for their goats as they were told
do to by the program staff, who then did not supply the promised cement and iron
sheets [P3 2103, 2551]. During our stay in Mudzi on three occasions survey teams from
different institutes dropped by the village to interview randomly selected men and
women [P2 0191–0269, 1749; P3 2529]. The interviewees did not see anything in return
for their time and answers. An agricultural research institute wanted farmers to test
and spread their improved groundnut seeds, so the assigned farmers prepared their
fields. But the seeds were delivered far after the right time to plant. The institute
left the farmers with instructions yet never came to monitor as they had promised
[P2 1859; P3 1255, 2607]. A microcredit scheme had groups of interested women meet
for weeks in a row, but the organization’s representative each time told them that
there were problems with the computer in their office so the requested credits
could not yet be dispensed. Meanwhile this man did take the small amounts of
savings money that the women were to bring in each week. After many weeks the
women gave up and only made some timid, futile attempts to get their savings
back [P2 0504, 583, 666, 1266; P3 1812].

Despite the perceived irrelevance of most projects, Mudzi women generally
participated in the activities offered – albeit halfheartedly at best. Moreover, as
soon as rumours spread about a possible upcoming project, villagers lined up to
have themselves ‘registered’ – indifferent about what the specific project entails
[P2 0112; P3 0552, 0556, 3211, 4033]. They did so partly to assure that they would not
miss any benefits that might result from it. Resources accessed through external
development aid range from the bottle of Coke distributed during a meeting [P3
0599] or the pencil and notebook handed out at the onset of an adult literacy training
[P3 0497], or, in rarer cases, to relatively substantial assets like a goat, or significant
amounts of money paid for physical labour to clear the roads [P2 0101], plant trees [P2
or teach fellow villagers about topics considered important by development professionals [P2 0105; P3 0522, 1870, 1930, 2366, 4031]. Any handout, no matter how small, is appreciated, and making sure to be included amongst the beneficiaries of a project forms an important means for women (and unemployed men) to access support [e.g. P3 1120, 2054].

Rosemary (49) explains that she attends the weekly tree-nursery meetings in which villagers are taught to grow trees, as well as the adult literacy classes every weekday afternoon. She does not see the benefit of either project, as trees can be found everywhere, and she has known how to read and write since primary school. Some villagers speculated, however, that those participating in the tree-planting project would in the end receive a bag of maize, and those involved in the literacy classes would later on be offered a microloan. Rosemary says she doesn’t actually believe that this is true, but unwilling to run the risk of missing out in case it is true, she shows up at each meeting. [P3 0497]

Many women expressed similar arguments for participating in the various project activities offered in Mudzi [P2 0105; P3 0497, 0512, 0524, 4035, 4044; P8 0009]. Others said that they just followed the orders from the Group Village Headwoman, who had assigned them to participate in specific project activities [P3 0360, 0512; P8 0005, 0006, 0011].

Development agencies often appoint Village Heads to act as intermediaries – rightly acknowledging that chiefs know best who within their community most needs support, but wrongly assuming that the support will indeed be transferred to those most in need. As can be expected following the analysis of social capital in the previous chapter, Mudzi villagers, including the (only slightly better-off) chiefs, have good reason to allocate the assets and resources they can dispose of in the most profitable way.

During our research period the Malawi government re-established a relatively well-paid cash-for-work program to assist the rural poor during the hunger season. The handful of beneficiaries that could participate per village were to clear away the bushes which during the rainy season had partly overgrown the roads in their area. Mudzi’s Group Village Headwoman strategically appointed her orphaned adolescent grandson of whom she was to take care and who could as such generate his own income for the time being, as well as her brother and one of the better off women whose son works in South Africa and regularly sends home money – hence a valuable villager to keep befriended. Lastly, she enlisted herself (although she did not actually perform the labour required). [P2 0081, see also P2 0343, 0904; P3 0402, 0612, 0764, 1202, 1257, 2549, 3236, 4061]

Because of their privileged position to access and allocate development support, the incentive to please development agents is particularly strong for community leaders. This may explain the Group Village Headwoman’s ordering of her people to participate in the various project activities despite the overall low value to her villagers. The few women who refused to participate in any of the project activities (fed up with the often-unfulfilled promises of external development projects) were later excluded by the Group Village Head from receiving the much-needed subsidized fertilizer [P3 0486, 0879, 1061, see also P2 0856; P3 1019]. Justifying this
decision, the Group Village Headwoman argued that by not participating in the projects these women had shown they were uninterested in developing themselves and their households. Surely they would not be planning to apply fertilizer either, she rationalized, and thus did not need a precious coupon. While implicit, the punishment was clear to everyone. Neglecting to participate not only gives the authorities grounds to exclude an unruly villager from support, other villagers too may take his or her ‘laziness’ as justification for withholding community assistance – as described in the previous chapter on social capital. Thus, even if projects themselves do not bring any direct benefit, indirectly they are an important means to safeguard access to resources.

It follows from the above that being in the chief’s favour is an important requirement for villagers to access (any but particularly the most beneficial) privileges and handouts distributed via him or her [P2 0856; P3 1019, 3795; P8 0041]. Through obedience and gifting to their chief, Mudzi women aim to become favoured [P3 0676, 2054; P8 0041]. Also through ‘obedience’ to the project staff, Mudzi women tried to increase the benefit that could be gained through projects that otherwise seemed senseless to them. They generally knew very well what was wanted from them by project implementers and were quite willing to play along [e.g. P3 0191, 370, 536, 2283]. I expect that this was both out of politeness and in the hope of (more valuable) handouts or inclusion in (more beneficial) future projects. When interacting with development professionals (which, for quite some time, I was also taken for, see Chapter 4) women confirmed the image of impoverished victims who benefit from external interventions. The most obvious example of such ‘playing along’ may have been the fact that the majority of women who participated in the literacy classes already knew how to read and write. To hide this, they used their left hand to seem as unaccustomed to writing as real illiterate women [P3 0536]. This manipulating of external development projects seems to be one of the few means to increase one’s personal access to resources that does not in any way trigger social disapproval. Rather, social pressure seems to be exerted by both the chief and fellow villagers to communally keep up an image of deprivation and neediness.

The accessing of resources through external development projects is generally haphazard, sporadic, and temporary. Projects come and go, often with presumptuous promises but minimal achievements. During the time of our research only one source seemed stable enough for eligible villagers to build on: the relatively substantial allowance of 1500MK per month for those taking care of an orphan in their household [P2 0009; P3 0555, 0705, 0923, 1095, 3939, 4057; P8 0015]. As a result of this, orphans have become a valuable asset. Consequently, in their struggle to find

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6 Approximately 7.5 Euro at the time of the research
support, some families compete to adopt their deceased relatives’ children [P3 2597, 3735, 4070].

Besides handouts and cash-for-work, Mudzi villagers are offered microloans by multiple institutions. These loans are accessible to all, but on rigid conditions. Interest rates are high (over 30 percent), instalment periods short (up to weekly), and consequences of default harsh (confiscation of goods worth 150 percent of the loan) [P2 0105, 1315; P3 0455-6]. Overall, both lay villagers and the semi-professional businesswomen that we interviewed at the markets were frightened by these preconditions and therefore most refrained from taking such formal microloans [P3 0455, 0708, 0782, 0786, 0993, 1002, 1004]. Those who decided to take a loan often did so in response to pressing monetary needs. Instead of investing it in a profit-making business, they used it to buy food, fertilizer, materials to repair a collapsed roof, or to pay back money they borrowed from fellow villagers [e.g. P2 0439; P3 2870, 3768, 3797].

In sum, external development aid can provide villagers with relatively substantial material benefit, although this benefit more often results from the handouts distributed to attract participants rather than the actual content of the project itself. However, the haphazard, sporadic and temporary nature of most projects makes them unreliable as a steady source of support. Furthermore, the selection of beneficiaries is generally in the hands of local authorities, who tend to privilege themselves, their relatives, and certain key connections. To potentially benefit from external development aid, Mudzi women must try to be on good terms with their chiefs, emphasize and overstate their destitution towards development professionals, and duly play along in often ‘weird’ project activities.

• Social network
As shown in the previous chapter, relationships other than sexual ones can also be important potential sources of support. Fostering strong ties with certain key persons as well as a level of goodwill among the community at large is an important part of women’s arsenal to access resources. Maternal uncles, brothers, or sons working in South Africa may (be asked to) send money or luxury items like blankets, bicycles, or cell phones [P2 0274, 0304, 0310, 0470, 0473, 1050, 1487, 1494, 1987; P3 0588, 0858, 0891, 0996, 1749, 1762, 1801, 2077, 2882, 3968, 4091, 4105]. Adult children within Malawi too can be called upon for support, either financial or physical [P2 0406, 1185, 1197, 1219; P3 0506, 0956, 4073, 4081, 4104]. Fellow villagers may (or may not) contribute to the many resources needed for organizing a funeral or remembrance ceremony to appease the spirit of a deceased relative [P2 0071, 0155, 0175, 1707, 1433, 1435–6, 1444, 1493, 1497, 1577, 1745, 2600]. When in need of food during the hunger season, or seeds during the planting season, multiple contacts – related and unrelated fellow villagers, or relatives outside Mudzi – can be approached and begged for tiny quantities each [P2 0724, 1229, 1282, 1376, 1439, 1881; P3 1127; P8 0006].
Besides such remittances and gifts, which do not need formal repayment, access to resources often is framed as *ganyu* or a loan, hence in exchange for labour or postponed refund. Even close relatives at times involve themselves in such explicit bartering, such as Jasmine’s son, who gave his mother maize during the hunger season, but requested to be repaid with four times its value after harvest [P2 1526, 1568]. Like receiving gifts and remittances, access to *ganyu* and loans too depends on good personal ties with the exchange partner. As one informant explained: “You cannot go to a place where they don’t know you to ask for money” [P3 1175]. In order to be granted some piecework, or be trusted enough to receive a loan, goodwill is required and must thus be fostered [P3 1965]. Having and maintaining a respectable status within the community is of vital importance for this. More so than for men, a woman’s respectable status largely depends on her conforming to the prescribed gender norms.

The direct link between one’s social status and access to community support – the ease of such access, quality and quantity of the support offered, whether for free or as an overt exchange – has been elaborately described in Chapter 7. In short, access to support often depends on one’s apparent capacity to reciprocate. Appearing capable of future reciprocity is thus crucially important in order to access support in times of need (see also Nombo & Niehof 2008). Moral obligations to share with those in need are strong, but can be evaded under certain conditions. When a villager can somehow be accused of having self-inflicted his or her need, this may be used as a justification for withholding support. Women (as do men) must thus at all times avoid giving cause for accusations of culpability for future problems.

The previous chapter shows that accessing (reciprocal) support through one’s social network is considered normal and, moreover, necessary to maintain the network. Not surprisingly then, it occurs with high frequency. However, as described in Chapter 5, the support that women can generally beg from relatives and other fellow villagers is limited, because day-to-day provisioning is considered to be foremost a husband’s task. Consequently, an unmarried woman in need of support is expected to pursue marriage rather than exclusively depend on her (non-sexual) social network.

**Making money**

• Ganyu

For both men and women *ganyu* is an important and widely used means to obtain money. *Ganyu* entails piecework, usually agricultural, for fellow villagers who – at a certain moment – have some money to spend. For two (related) reasons I position it between accessing money (through one’s social network) and making money (through wage labour). On the one hand, *ganyu* consists of work-for-money (or for food or seeds), and thus approaches more formal wage labour. However, granting
or being granted ganyu depends to a great extent on social connections and is
often framed as support – both from labourer to the reward provider, and from the
reward provider to the labourer. In these cases usually no explicit reward-size is
agreed upon beforehand. Ganyu labourers just receive what the hiring party sees
fit at the end of the day or the task. On the other hand, ganyu also falls between
the two categories because of the medium-level ambivalence surrounding it. As
is all ‘money making’, ganyu is locally characterized as a task that a man should
take up [e.g. P3 3173, 3242–3, 3646, 3860]. Nonetheless, possibly because of its overlap
with ‘accessing money through one’s social network’, women’s involvement in
it is not as stigmatized as it is in the other two forms of money making. This
may furthermore have to do with the fact that ganyu activities most often entail
agricultural labour, which is in itself considered proper for women. For analysis
sake, I classify ganyu under the heading ‘making money’, because of its (here
relevant) characteristic as primarily a male responsibility.

Ganyu is not exclusively hired by those relatively better off and carried out
by those most destitute (see Chapter 3) – although it is commonly understood as
such by development professionals. As soon as one villager accesses a substantial
amount of money, for example a sum received from a relative in South Africa,
part of it is often spent immediately on hiring ganyu labourers [P2 0439; P3 0904]. As
argued in the previous chapter, by spreading and diluting wealth in this way, envy
can be averted while social capital built. Hiring labourers does thus not necessarily
stem from ample financial leeway, nor does it indicate that other, arguably more
urgent needs have been met. As a matter of fact, one of the most deprived women in
Mudzi, the widowed Awetu Bakali (62), whose adult children all died and left her
caring for the grandchildren, is too weak to cultivate sufficient maize and therefore
depends on hired help on her field [P3 4057]. She scrambles for money to be able
to pay for ganyu, at the expense of other household needs [P3 4075; P8 0014, see also
P3 4074, 4098]. Furthermore, even women with husbands in South Africa at times
feel compelled to hire out their labour, when they are in dire need of money and
their husband fails to send support. In sum, numerous Mudzi villagers hire ganyu
at one moment, while performing ganyu at another, depending on their access to
and need for money (or food or seeds) [P3 3963, 3972, 4104, 4059, 4074, 4081, 4098, 4105].

Although ganyu is a widely resorted to means to access some money, food, or
seeds, the availability of it is seasonal and, especially for women, low paid (Bryceson
2008: 100, Devereux et al. 2006a: 34). Furthermore, some Mudzi women seem to
consider it somewhat shameful to perform ganyu [e.g. P2 1197; P3 0698, 1314, 2846]
(see also Moore & Vaughan 1987: 538), possibly because it may be interpreted
as revealing a lack of other, more respectable, forms of support – particularly a
husband who is capable and willing to sufficiently provide [P3 2846, 3193–4, 3646].
The need to not appear without sources of support has already been discussed.
Unlike the selling of crops, resorting to ganyu is furthermore taken to indicate a
lack of farming skills, which results in food shortages and a need to labour on other people’s fields to survive [P2 0282, 0695]. Nonetheless, begging relatives for *ganyu* is perceived as less shameful – and more effective – than begging them directly for money or maize [e.g. P3 1095, 3861, 4079].

• Wage labour
Only a handful of Mudzi women have ever been formally employed. Two have for some time worked as a housekeeper in town (receiving 4500MK7 per month) [P3 0496, 4093], and one even in South Africa [P3 3776]. Four women had temporarily worked at one of the plantations in the area, which employ women for specific short-term tasks (receiving 5000MK8 per month) [P2 2117; P3 3766, 3943, 4012]. Two women were hired to run a mini-shop at one of the nearby marketplaces (receiving 3500MK and 4000MK per month9) [P3 2189, 3758], a job mostly done by men [P3 0989]. Two received payment for tutoring fellow village women in the adult education program set up by an external development agency (receiving 1000MK10 per month), and two had once been appointed to register villagers entitled to orphan care support [P2 0112] and for political elections [P2 0117] respectively.

The low number of employed Mudzi women partly stems from the scarcity of jobs available to them. Generally, those who have found employment – as a bar girl, housekeeper, or nurse – live elsewhere, and were therefore not included in this research.

The job easiest available to Mudzi women is a temporary labour contract at one of the plantations in the area. However, many feel that the labour there is too strenuous, and say they cannot manage to do it [P2 1582, 1938]. It is considered a desperate measure, taken only when truly without any other form of support. As noted before, such a signal is likely to have severe negative impacts on one’s general livelihood security (more precisely one’s potential access to support from others in times of need). As soon as the Mudzi women who worked at these plantations received a relationship proposal, they gladly accepted it, and quickly quit their job [P3 3766, 3943].

• Business
Early travellers entering the region that is today called southern Malawi reported that they were greeted by both male and female local traders offering merchandise (Mandala 1984: 142). Mudzi elderly too indicate that some of their mothers (and fathers) were involved in local trading activities [P3 1277, 1326, 3485]. In Mudzi

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7 Approximately 22.50 Euro at the time of the research.
8 Approximately 25 Euro at the time of the research.
9 Approximately 17.50 and 20 Euro at the time of the research.
10 Approximately 5 Euro at the time of the research.
today, most small-scale businesses are in hands of women. The more substantial enterprises, for example trade in second-hand clothes, fresh fish, or ‘hardware’ (plastic gadgets like combs and sunglasses) are almost exclusively undertaken by men. Possibly, this gender division can be explained by the fact that these latter businesses need greater investment – in terms of both money and time – and therefore a relatively serious and longer-term commitment. As I will argue further on, rural Malawian women have reason not to commit seriously and invest substantially in their business endeavours.

The majority of Mudzi women have at one point in life taken up some form of small-scale business to increase the little financial capital available to them at that specific time. These businesses commonly entail either trading raw food crops that were bought elsewhere (tomatoes, green leaves, sugarcane, cassava, bananas, dried fish), or processed foods (boiled maize cobs, pastry, alcoholic beverages). The merchandise is sold from home, by vending through the villages, or by sitting at one of the small markets in the vicinity. The income is generally so small that they can only be used to cover day-to-day necessities, such as food, soap, body lotion, salt, matches, or paraffin.

Assessing the specific timing of women’s decision to start a small-scale business reveals that four preconditions must be favourable. Overall, businesses are only taken up when 1) there is a need for income, 2) investment money is available, 3) merchandise is available at a reasonable cost, and 4) buyers have money to spend and an interest to buy. It follows from this that both seasonal and personal circumstances play a role. The life histories of Mudzi women and the market women suggest that personal circumstances play the most decisive role, but only lead to actual business undertakings when seasonal conditions allow it.

During the hunger season, although there is certainly a need for income, the little money available is used to buy maize for food, not to invest in merchandise. Furthermore, merchandise is difficult to find and expensive at this time, and customers do not have purchasing power. As the shortages deepen, virtually all business activity comes to a halt. The two small markets near Mudzi become completely deserted, and the market at the nearest trading centre stops buzzing.

It could be hypothesized that it is not only the food shortages but also this lack of business opportunities during the hunger season that intensifies women’s dependence on male support. This would further explain the peak in sexual activity during the hunger season that was described in Chapter 5. Such an argument would

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11 Zigumu, mandasi, zitumbuwa, or kanyenya.
12 Either kachasu – a strong gin-type of liquor, or masese – fermented porridge.
13 In Chapter 3 I have described these markets in more detail.
not hold, however, during and after harvest season. At that time, investment money and purchasing power abound. There is little use trying to sell what can be found growing in abundance, but with a little creativity, merchandise could be found or produced that appeals to buyers. In sum, conditions for business are favourable. Nonetheless, very few Mudzi women actually made use of this, and hardly any business activity developed [e.g. P3 2375, 2561]. Meanwhile, a peak in sexual activity was found during this season. Apparently, when having the option to gain some (more) of the wealth that proliferates around harvest time either through relationships with men or through other means, women prefer the former.

There appears to be a general consensus among Mudzi women and market women alike that businesses are only started when financial problems proliferate [P2 0557, 0605, 0954, 0979; P3 0785, 781, 0987, 0988, 1002, 1673]. “Kukhala olemera, geni siungapange!” one woman proclaimed: “If you are rich, you don’t do business!” [P3 0842]. Trading (like ganyu and contract labour) is a strenuous and time-consuming activity, which is not always easy to combine with the female responsibilities of field, household, and child care. The long distances that must be walked to find and offer merchandise leave one tired, hungry, and covered with sweat and dust; the long hours spent at the market waiting for customers are boring [P3 1003, 1095, 1216, 1326]. Moreover, as noted for ganyu and contract labour too, women’s involvement in business is surrounded with socio-cultural ambivalence – a point that is further examined in the second half of this chapter. All in all, women have good reason to leave these hardships to men. The life histories of Mudzi women indeed reveal that most instigated their business activities only after divorce [P2 0139–41; P3 0560, 0698, 0778, 0783, 3751, 3759, 3765, 3790]. Conversely, many stopped again once they found a new partner [e.g. P3 1062, 4100, 4104].

Investment money to start up a business can be found through ganyu or the selling of crops – if either of these opportunities is available at that particular time. Some women upon divorce receive money from their mother or male matrikin to find further support through running a business, others borrow some money – if money is circulating in their social network at that time [P3 0702, 3792, 4000]. In the social vocabulary of Mudzi, commencement of a trade first of all signals that the trader acquired investment money from somewhere [e.g. P3 0930]. Because money provision is so strongly perceived of as a male affair, women’s entry into trade often triggers the presumption that she received start-up capital from a sexual partner [e.g. P3 0930], despite the actual variety in sources of such investment money. The implications of this common suspicion are assessed further on.

The merchandise that is available and in demand varies throughout the year, and hence so do the types of businesses that women engage in at any time of the year [P3

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14 Notably, this does not go for women engaged in beer or gin brewing. As they have the equipment for it, they usually resort to this trade whenever they can manage to buy ingredients.
Whatever business they enter into, the profits they can make are generally small. Often, it does not take long before these meagre profits have to be fully diverted to expenses other than re-investment – food, soap, school necessities, health care, or a funeral – and business ceases [P3 0783, 1023, 1267, 1352, 1559, 3792, 3796] (see also Edriss & Kamvani 2003). Only when some new surplus capital is found, can trading temporarily be taken up again [P2 0982, 1461; P3 0703, 2358, 3749].

In sum, most of the businesses that Mudzi women engage in are small-scale, short-lived, and commonly only resorted to in between marriages. Further on, I delve deeper into this last point, by assessing why for most Mudzi women (and by extension, I expect, most women living under similar conditions) involvement in money making is incompatible with involvement in sexual relationships.

Considering this common perception in Mudzi of trade and marriage as mutually exclusive, I was highly surprised to find that the majority (23 of 32, or 74 percent) of the semi-professional businesswomen who we interviewed at the markets were, in fact, married. It appears that, although generally considered incompatible with women’s money making, marital support is at the same time imperative for women’s business endeavours to succeed. The next section therefore not only deals with reasons for the general incompatibility of marriage and women’s money making, but also with conditions under which the match does work and so can lead to relative success.

Ambivalence towards women’s money making

Amila (36) lives in one of the simplest huts of Mudzi, together with her second husband and their four children (the one surviving child from her first marriage moved to Amila’s maternal uncle after her new husband had mistreated the boy). Her field lies low and is therefore often flooded with rainwater, damaging her yield. Although last year Amila received a government coupon to purchase subsidized fertilizer (1000MK for a 50kg bag instead of the market price of 4500MK), Amila did not manage to gather enough money to buy it. Like always, her maize stores therefore ran out months before the general hunger season started. When possible, Amila tries to access money or supplementary maize through ganyu, but nonetheless her household often goes without food. Amila’s husband helps her to cultivate her field, but he rarely provides money for their household. He does do ganyu when this is available, but uses the little money this generates to buy cigarettes or batteries for his radio. Struggling to take care of her children, Amila recently decided to start trading sugarcane. At some hours walking

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15 It would, therefore, be unrealistic to divide Mudzi women into those who have a business income and those who do not, as comparative studies elsewhere have done (e.g. Chapoto & Jayne 2006). A woman who at the time of inquiry is involved in trade, may not have been shortly before or still be long after – and vice versa. Conclusions based on the presumed difference between these two groups are thus of little value.

16 By ’semi-professional’ I mean that the women concerned had comparatively stable businesses and were working at one of the markets almost every day rather than on an ad-hoc, on-and-off basis.

17 Approximately 5 Euro at the time of the research.
distance, in a river valley where sugarcane is cultivated, Amila buys a bundle for 80MK – the maximum load she can carry on her head. In Mudzi she sells from her house, or at a nearby crossroads. Within a few days she usually sells all her sugarcane for approximately 150MK, making 70MK profit. With this money she buys maize to feed her children on a daily basis. Despite this success, Amila’s trading activities are looked at askance, both by her husband and by fellow village women. The women ridicule her for behaving “as if she is not married” [P3 2846, 3139–40, 3153–5], while her husband refuses to carry out the usual tasks expected from a husband, such as building a grass fence. He tells Amila that, since she is making her own money now, she should just hire someone to do it for her [P3 2614]. Furthermore, he now demands that she buys him batteries, and dried fish for lunch instead of the usual green leaves that can be picked freely everywhere [P2 1770; P3 2614]. At other times, he orders Amila to stop her trading activities, accusing her of gaining profit through prostitution [P3 2562, 2589]. Amila nonetheless persists in her independent income generation, at least for the time being.

Like Amila, many of the women who were engaged in trading faced scorn from fellow villagers and, if married, from their husbands [P3 2846, 3139]. Sometimes these women themselves too complained about the fact that they felt “as if they are the husband” because of their money-making activities – confirming the ideal of men as breadwinners [P3 3060, 3205–6, 3328–9, 3998]. At other times, however, the same women showed pride about their income-generating capacities and financial independence [P3 0436, 1225, 2850, 3761], making comments like the following:

Debora (20, divorced, two children): “Now I can buy soap, I don’t beg from my mother anymore, she can rest now. The biggest problem is food, which I can now buy [through my business].” [P3 0785]

Selenia (57, married, six children): “Women who just stay [without doing business] have to beg for salt, while for us businesswomen there is no need to beg, we can just take some money and buy all we want by ourselves. I have even bought school uniforms for my children.” [P3 0743, 3761]

Ethel (28, married, four children): “Women that don’t do business have many problems, because it is difficult to get what they want. They have to go around looking for ganyu, others may start stealing or do prostitution. They cannot get the things that I am getting.” [P3 0698-9, 0702, 0744]

Furthermore, women who are fat and thus appear well off are admirably described as looking like amayî a genî [businesswomen] [P3 1171, see also P3 0993], indicating that in practice it is considered more likely that a woman’s wealth results from her own trading rather than through marriage.

It appears that women’s independent access to money is controversial and regarded with ambivalence. It is surrounded with disdain and suspicion, yet also with pride and respect. Next, I assess the various aspects that underlie this ambivalence, both within a sexual partnership and within the wider community.

**Ideology of male provider**

“Many women are ashamed, they say that it should be the husband who brings in money” (Emily, market woman selling dried fish at Mbera, 31, widow, three children). [P2 0963, see also P3 3139–40]
Numerous comments like the above were made by Mudzi women, indicating that “men should look for money” [P3 3262–3, also P3 0354, 2972, 3157–8, 3287–8, 3442–3, 3625], and that “women who generate money are like men” [P3 3060, 3205–6, 3328–9, 3998]. The ideology of the male provider is pervasive and persistent (and, as noted earlier, proactively upheld by women), even though in practice it is often not observed.

Unmarried women involved in income generation are ridiculed for not getting a husband to labour for them, and married women for accepting their husband’s lack of support [P2 2858; P3 0354, 2846, 3139–40, 3153–5]. A man too is mocked when his wife engages in trading activities, because this is interpreted as exposing his failure to provide [P2 1613; P3 3256, 3402–3]. It appears that a woman’s involvement in income generation is directly associated with a lack of male support. Furthermore, I have earlier noted that a man’s generous providing is considered to prove his commitment to and love for his partner. Not being well provided for thus signals that a woman is not (really or sufficiently) loved by any partner.

Suspicion of prostitution and promiscuity

The strong association of income provision with men ‘pollutes’ women’s independently acquired money. The movement inherent in most trading – either to buy or sell merchandise – furthers the distrust surrounding women’s income generation. Notably, the ChiChewa verb *kuyendayenda* refers both to moving around (e.g. for business purposes) as well as to having multiple partners. Women involved in business are indeed often suspected of accessing their money through sexual contacts with men [P2 0626; P3 0354, 0695, 0930, 2193, 2342, 2344, 2381, 2850, 3168]. The assumptions of Oswald (36, married) about women who go to the lake to buy fish for sale are exemplary:

“The biggest problem with businesswomen,” Oswald says, “is that when they don’t have enough money, they start chatting with various men in order to attract the men to sleep with them and give them some money. They start by asking a man: ‘Kodi simutigulira chakumwa?’ [Won’t you give me something to drink?]. Then around lunchtime, they say: ‘Tiyeni, mukatigulire nsima ku restrant’ [Let’s go, buy us some nsima at a restaurant]. And most men accept. Then at night, the woman says: ‘Mutha kubwera, palibe vuto’ [You can come, no problem].” [P2 0695]

I cannot ascertain how frequent businesswomen venturing out of Mudzi would indeed act in this way. A number of studies have delved particularly into the engagement in transactional sex by women fish traders (e.g. Bené & Merten 2008, MacPherson et al. 2012, Merten & Haller 2007), all confirming its wide occurrence. Assessing exactly what authors – and informants – mean when referring to transactional sex encounters, is, however, often difficult (see Chapter 1). I suspect that at least some of the interactions that the researchers classify as ‘economic-sex exchange’ rather fall under what are locally considered normal male-female relationship interactions. Moreover, I suspect that many third-party informant
reports consist of the sort of prostitution gossip that we also heard frequently, but never saw substantiated. Instead, most of the suspicions and gossip were proven ungrounded. The following examples reveal both the common association of women’s income with sexual involvement with men, and the (often) ungrounded nature of such suspicions:

When one of Livia’s casual lovers – the father of her last child, married elsewhere – found her selling tomatoes one day, he threatened to beat her, rationalizing that she could only have bought the tomatoes with money acquired through a sexual relationship with another man. Instead, she received the tomatoes from her mother, who in turn had received them from her son (living with his wife in Balaka town) to sell. [P2 0626]

When the husband of Tumanene (26, second marriage, 2 children) migrated to South Africa, it took time for him to find lucrative employment. In need of money to visit her ill mother in her home village, Tumanene was becoming anxious. She considered selling some of her maize to start up a temporary business to generate the required money. This, however, would be a hazardous undertaking, because the other Mudzi women married to men in South Africa would likely inform their husbands about Tumanene’s sudden disposal of money, and her engagement in trade. As such, her husband would surely hear about it. Tumanene feared that it might cause him to divorce her, as he might suspect that she obtained the money through another man, and besides that, might fear that she would be meeting even more men while moving around with her merchandise. Furthermore, he would probably feel ridiculed by being exposed as incapable of sufficiently providing for his wife despite his move to South Africa. [P2 1510, 1613]

As appears from these and other stories, there are two distinct aspects of women’s trading activities that arouse suspicion. One is their initial access to the investment money required to start a business, the second their encounters with other men while traveling and working at markets [see also P2 0598-9, 0979; P3 0701, 3179]. Both trigger suspicion and allegations of promiscuity and even prostitution [P3 0354, 3168, 3414–5].

Some Mudzi women used their partner’s fear of the temptations and promiscuity associated with women’s income-generating activities to their advantage, pressuring him into finding and sharing more resources, as we saw Grace do:

Grace (22), a pretty, young Mudzi woman and mother of two children, recently abandoned by the father of her last child, accepted work as a vendor in a small shop at the crossroads half an hour walking from Mudzi. The shop owner who offered her the job is known to like women, and the Mudzi women who gathered at our house to knit were convinced that Grace would become involved a relationship with him “to get more money” [P3 2198]. Grace’s boyfriend disapproved of her working at the shop and wanted her to stop. He told her that he tried his best to find enough money for her, already giving her relatively large sums of money, for example to have her hair treated and braided at a hair salon in Balaka town. Grace, however, refused to stop, and kept telling her boyfriend that she continued working because he was not sufficiently providing for her. [P3 2560]

Presumably, Grace feels that – for the time being at least – she has more to gain by keeping her job at the shop and maintain the tie with the shop owner, than by
investing in the relationship with her boyfriend by succumbing to his request to quit. She may not be very interested in continuing her relationship with this current boyfriend, not considering it a potentially worthwhile relationship, or she may feel that he will eventually accept her behaviour anyway. Most women, however, are reluctant to face the suspicion aroused by their involvement in money making and therefore refrain from it [e.g. P3 2344, 2381] – especially when they are married and thus have a steady partner to lose. In the following section, I further explore the troublesome match of marriage and women’s independent-income generation, as well as some women’s ways to overcome these.

The troublesome match of marriage and women’s money making

Three factors coalesce to obstruct women’s participation in business activities while married. Firstly, as described above, husbands often have difficulties coping with the uncertainty about the source of their wife’s income, fearing that it may come from other sexual partners [P2 0598–9, 0626, 0979, 1510; P3 0701, 3179]. Secondly, as also touched upon above, some men feel uncomfortable with the message that is indirectly communicated by a woman engaging in trade, namely that he fails to fulfil his duty as income provider [P2 1613; P3 3118, 3256, 3402–3]. Thirdly, the duty of married women to care for their husbands absorbs much of their time, leaving little opportunity for business activities. As Debora, an unmarried woman (20, divorced, two children) involved in trading explained:

“If I had a husband at home I would have to stop doing this business. I would have to bring him water so he can wash himself, I would have to cook him food so that he can eat. Now I don’t have that worry.” [P3 0785]

To this, Debora added: “Now I only think about how my children will eat.” Apparently, the responsibility of feeding children differs from feeding a husband. On the one hand, feeding a husband means the actual preparation of a meal, which entails collecting firewood, fetching water for cooking and cleaning, the cooking itself, serving the dishes, followed by cleaning the pots and plates. Leaving the house for an extended period of time for business purposes is incompatible with these tasks. Not only do husbands pressure wives to perform such behaviour, the community at large too condemns the married woman who wanders around selling “rather than staying at home and taking care of her husband” [P3 0354]. On the other hand, feeding one’s children as an unmarried mother entails first and foremost the acquisition of food. In the case of Debora, her children are looked after, and thus cooked for, by her mother when she is away for business. Through her trade Debora can buy the necessary maize, and in that sense fulfil the responsibility of feeding her children (and mother). It seems that is not so much women’s general duties in the field and around her house that keep them from engaging in money-making activities, as most businesswomen managed to combine these. It seemed to rather be women’s
duties as a wife towards a husband – which include remaining near the house so as to be able to give him water to drink, prepare him some food to eat, or put a bucket of water in the bafa for him to wash his body whenever he wants.

The three aspects of women’s money making that are disliked by men – fear of adultery, injured honour, and lack of care at home – lead some husbands to straightforwardly forbid their wives to engage in business, or at least express their disapproval of it [P2 0599, 1613; P3 2562, 3191, 3417–8, 3994]. In line with this, unmarried businesswomen are generally told to stop their trade by a new partner (which in many cases is even part of the seduction process, as the new partner will claim to be providing for her) [e.g. P3 3191]. Others, however, accept their wife’s own sourcing of income because they themselves benefit from the fruits (read: foods) of her labour [P3 2788, 2960, 3479, 3176, 3583, 3608, 3618]. Some even interpret it as a license to sit back and neglect their own responsibilities, because these can now be taken up by their money-making wife [P2 1105, 1303, 1565; P3 2796, 2960, 3608, 3618, 3630, 3641], as in the case described earlier of Amila’s husband. Other scholars in the region too have found that women’s independent money making often leads to a reduction in support from their partner (e.g. Baerends 1994: 53 on sub-Saharan Africa in general, Nyanzi et al. 2005: 18 on market women in Uganda, Omari 1994 on Tanzania in Silberschmidt 2004: 48).

Despite southern Malawian women’s involvement in trading activities for at least the past few generations, their independent money making conflicts with the currently prevalent gender ideology of women caring for children and husband, and men providing the financial means for this. Put more bluntly, it conflicts with the main substance of the marital ‘gender contract’. Logically, then, most Mudzi women feel that marriage and independent-income generation are incompatible, and preferably not combined. Considering the negative associations with both women’s money making and an unmarried status, it should come as no surprise that Mudzi women generally preferred marriage to economic independence.

Interestingly, the (Mudzi and market) women who were involved in trading while married, unanimously emphasized that their independent income had not altered the relationship with their husband [P3 0436, 0462, 0701, 0705, 0838, 3761]. Arguably, this may be one of the reasons why they succeeded in continuing their business during marriage. These women emphasized that they still consult their husband on the larger household expenses (e.g. when considering the purchase of a bicycle), bring him water when he is thirsty or wants to wash himself, and kneel down when addressing him. In other words, they seemed to make a deliberate effort to keep up the traditional deference expected from women towards their husband. This may increase the likeliness of men to allow their wife’s involvement in business activities, as one Mudzi woman claimed (Dora, 42) [P3 3205–6]. Another Mudzi woman (Sofia, 25) asserted that marriages in which the wife rather than the husband brings in the money certainly exist, but in such cases:
“You cannot say that you are the one who is taking care of the family, no! You say that the husband is the one who takes care of the family so that people should not see his foolishness.”

[P3 3402–3]

Hence, a woman who wishes to maintain both her marriage and her access to independent income must tactically keep up the image of the obedient wife, towards her husband as well as in front of the community at large. In this way, a husband may accept her continued business activities, and can she maintain a level of financial autonomy while safeguarding her position as a respectable – because married – community member.

Earlier on I remarked on how many women who were exceptionally successful in running a more-or-less steady business, however small, were married. One dynamic that may underlie this was already mentioned in Chapter 5: Marriage can effectively counter the common suspicion in a community that a businesswoman obtained her (marginal) wealth through sexual indecency. This would make a woman who is involved in business and married to a man who does not (threaten to) divorce her for this more likely to persist in her money making endeavours.

Many of the relatively successful businesswomen tended to be married to men who not only condoned their business endeavours, but actually encouraged them. Most of their husbands, moreover, had a small but regular income, working as a teacher, builder, or guard. This income provided the regular (re-)investment capital necessary for most poor rural women to continue their business [e.g. P3 0993, 0995]. Because rural salaries are in many cases too small for a family to make it to the next payday without incurring debts, these husbands had encouraged their wives to invest the lump sum salary in a business which would generate extra money in small bits throughout the month [P3 0746, 0977]. Another reason why women with employed husbands may be more likely to persist in trading even during marriage is the fact that they need not stay at home to cater to their husband, as is he off to work during most of the day.

A husband who condones his wife’s money making and is both capable and willing to provide regular financial support appears to be a near requirement for women’s successful engagement in small-scale business (see also Edriss & Kamvani 2003). This is not to suggest, however, that all women with supportive husbands are likely to be involved in business [e.g. P3 1673]. The disadvantages of a woman’s independent money making are simply too many. They include, besides the aspects mentioned in this chapter, also the aspects discussed in the previous chapter on possession of wealth in general, particularly the arousal of envy and justification for exclusion for other forms of support.
Conclusion

The transactional sex paradigm asserts that helping poor women to generate an independent income is likely to reduce their reliance on (risky) sexual relationships. In the case of Mudzi, this chapter suggests however that women do not necessarily lack alternative means to support. To the contrary, Mudzi women have various options at hand to access money or generate an income independent from a sexual partner. They regularly resort to one or more of these – whenever considered necessary and possible. This commonly means that they only engage in money making when they have no husband to provide for them. Overall, it seems that women, for a number of reasons, prefer to depend on a male provider rather than attempt to be economically independent.

One reason underlying this preference is the physical hardship that generally comes with trying to combine women’s normal duties in the field and within the household with the arduous labour of making money. Another important factor is the negative connotation of women’s income generation as improper gender behaviour. As has been noted throughout, Mudzi men and women share a gender ideology in which it is men who should bring in the money. Women, in turn, should be financially taken care of by a (loving) male provider. Although honoured more in theory than in practice, this conceptualization leads women’s money making to be surrounded with ambivalence and controversy.

Earlier I have argued that access to multiple sources of support is of vital importance within the insecure livelihoods of rural Malawi. By diversifying potential support sources, villagers try to reduce the risk of finding themselves without any help in times of need. The data presented in this chapter reveal that women’s entrepreneurial endeavours are potentially threatening to their perceived entitlement and actual access to other sources of support. In the first place, a woman’s money making threatens her marital relationship (chances), as few men are willing to put up with a woman ‘wandering around’. In extension, it then also threatens women’s access to community support, as a married status is important for community respect and inclusion. Furthermore, as noted in the previous chapter, a woman’s means to generate her own income may be used as a justification by others (including her husband) to exclude her from receiving support, arguing that she does not need it. To minimize the loss of other sources of support, Mudzi women generally tend to keep their economic pursuits sporadic and brief, and where possible hidden from the public eye. Because of this, external initiatives to create or boost local income-generating activities are unlikely to be taken up seriously or for the long term, and seem unlikely to achieve their intended goal of sustainably reducing women’s poverty and their risk for HIV infection.
Discussion and conclusion

Introduction

With this anthropological case study of Mudzi village I have aimed to contribute to the discussion on links between poverty, gender inequality, and HIV risk. Current policy reports on HIV prevention, both in sub-Saharan Africa and other regions struggling with severe poverty, tend to promote a shift from individual, biomedical approaches to approaches that address the risk environment of vulnerable population groups. Women are considered particularly vulnerable, because among them infection rates are higher (in Africa) and increase faster (in both Africa and other poor regions) than among men. An increasingly widespread explanation for this is women’s economic dependence on men, which is believed to drive them to risky exchanges of sex for material support despite their awareness of the health risks involved. I call this explanatory model the ‘transactional sex paradigm’. The aim of this study was to assess the model’s applicability to sexual relationships in Mudzi, a rural community in southern Malawi where both livelihood insecurity and HIV prevalence are extremely high.

My findings from Mudzi suggest that the transactional sex paradigm builds on a simplistic and ethnocentric representation of the issues at stake. I concur with advocates of this paradigm that livelihood insecurity and gender ideologies may lead women to make risky sexual choices, but – at least in the case of Mudzi – these are not such straightforwardly causal factors in women’s vulnerability to HIV infection as is commonly assumed. Consequently, the acclaimed solution of providing women such as those in Mudzi with independent income-generating options is unlikely to achieve its desired results. Two overarching arguments have unfolded throughout this book that challenge the promoted ‘way forward’. Firstly, it was found that many aspects other than direct economic dependence on men encourage women to engage in sexual relationship practices that are risky in a context of high HIV prevalence. Secondly, while income-generating opportunities
for women are often already available, women generally consider these a less preferred option.

In this concluding chapter, I summarize the main explanatory insights that surfaced from my data analysis, and combine these to formulate a final answer to this study’s overall research question. In the following discussion I delve deeper into a number of issues that emerged from the data and are relevant to wider discussions. Finally, I wrap up with concluding remarks about the practical implications of this study’s findings for further social science research and policy making.

Summarizing

Here, I will not describe the major themes of this study sequentially as they appeared in the chapters. Whereas the chapters were organized in such a way to best dissect the main research question, the answering of this question benefits from a combining and different ordering of the arguments that appeared from the analyses. Where relevant I refer to the chapter in which a particular theme is explored in depth.

Notwithstanding a discourse among Mudzi villagers that “times have changed” and that frequently switching partners should be avoided in a context of AIDS, divorce is widespread and in general soon followed by remarriage. Commonly, women accept relationship proposals from men whose sexual and health histories are unknown, which further adds to women’s risk of contracting HIV. In addition, condom use remains low and partner concurrency high. In order to comprehend these various risky practices, it is necessary to disentangle the interrelated historical, cultural, and material dynamics that affect women’s daily decision making.

The historical trajectory of gender relations in southern Malawi that is discussed in Chapter 2, shows that Bantu women have long been considered pivotal society members of equal or even higher social standing than men. Various factors, among which the military power to ward off subjugation by patrilineal groups and the rejection of Christianity, have led to the perseverance of the matrilineal Bantu system among the Yao, who form the majority of my research population. Two important and related characteristics of marital relationships result from this matrilineal system, which continue to be found today: the relative weakness of the conjugal bond and the utilitarian approach to marriage. Marriage is still said to primarily revolve around ‘helping each other’, which attests to a persistent perception of husbands and wives as mutually dependent and of their respective roles as complementary.

As holders of the fields matrilineal women of southern Malawi have always been and continue to be in control of food production and preparation. Men’s traditional role was to supplement the staple foods – for example with meat through hunting or salt through trading. When money and the hut tax were introduced by the British
colonial regime, men were locally considered the logical candidates to go out and earn cash. Over the years, money has come to play an increasingly important role in rural daily life. New consumer goods triggered desire, while a multitude of factors coalesced to deteriorate farmers’ capacity to grow sufficient food. Both intensified the households’ want for money. Men continue to be held culturally responsible for providing all that a household needs beyond homegrown food, which today means first and foremost: money. Gender analysts tend to assume that the combination of households’ increased need for money with men’s designated role to earn it enhances men’s position of power at the expense of that of women. However, it appears from our data that the power balance is more nuanced. Men’s responsibility to earn money is not simply a privilege, but also a burden that women continue to lay on men’s shoulders because they think that this is to their advantage.

In Chapter 3 I note that few men in Mudzi are able to generate sufficient income to meet their own and their households’ needs and wants. Harsh ecological circumstances, combined with population pressure and detrimental political interests and disinterests of the British colonial administration, subsequent Malawian presidents, and international institutes have led to extremely high levels of livelihood insecurity throughout the country. Among others, this has resulted in widespread male migration to urban centres and to South Africa in search of work, which could explain the more-or-less permanent shortage of men in the rural areas that leaves about one-third of Mudzi women not married at any given point in time.

The struggle to overcome harsh living conditions permeates every aspect of daily village life, including, but reaching far beyond, sexual relationships. The most common means for Mudzi women to obtain resources entail marriage and semi-relationships, the cultivation and sale of food and cash crops, ganyu (piecework), petty trade, development projects, and a wide social network. In the ethnographic chapters these means to support are examined in detail. Throughout, it appears that villagers’ ability to mobilize resources in times of emergency is central to their survival amidst the frequent occurrence and persistent threat of livelihood shocks. It is this vital importance of spreading risk by diversifying access to multiple sources of potential future support, rather than acute deprivation per se, that underlies many women’s daily life decisions, including those concerning sexual relationships. The analyses of the ethnographic data reveal women’s tactical navigation between these various and sometimes conflicting sources of potential support in order to maximize access and minimize blockage to support.

Despite men’s general inability to generate sufficient money, Chapter 5 reveals that relationships with men are an important means for women to increase their household’s security, both directly and indirectly. Through marriage a woman attaches to her household not just additional labour power, but someone who is culturally expected to take up the heavy tasks in the field, the maintenance of the house, and the earning of money. Sexual liaisons are therefore a means to physical and material
support par excellence, as women are customarily entitled to receive, and justified to
claim, such support from their partners. Furthermore, marriage accredits women with
a respectable status, which enhances their access to potential future support from the
wider community. Unmarried women tend to face scorn from and risk exclusion by
married women who fear competition over their husband. This helps to explain why
some Mudzi women also entered into or stayed involved in relationships with men
who did not otherwise contribute to their household.

However, this material side of relationships is only part of the story. Men’s
willingness to provide support in generally difficult circumstances is highly
appreciated by women as a symbolic gesture of ‘love’, ‘care’, and ‘commitment’. Men
who make the effort to provide are by definition loving husbands, while
husbands who do not are discredited (and often divorced) for their disrespect
and carelessness. This intertwining of material transfers with cultural norms and
emotional attachment tends to be overlooked in the transactional sex paradigm,
leading to incorrect interpretations of the involved women’s destitution and
powerlessness.

The preference for a (stable) partnership also plays a role in women’s ambivalent
attitudes towards independent income generation, described in Chapter 8.
Opportunities for women to make money are regularly available, and particularly
ganyu and petty-trade are often engaged in. Most village women are only involved
in such activities temporarily, however, and generally just in between sexual
partnerships. In other words, women can and do economically survive without
men, but for a number of reasons most prefer to access support primarily through
relationships with men. Husbands tend to object to women’s engagement in trade,
as it negatively reflects on their image as provider and potentially exposes their
wives to the advances of other men. Furthermore, income-generating activities are
often tedious and considered inappropriate for women. As money is ideologically
associated with men, women with cash are often suspected to have obtained it
through (illicit) sexual relationships. Additionally, a woman’s access to independent
income may give husbands and fellow villagers justification for withholding
additional support, as it can be argued that she does not need it. At the same time,
fellow villagers may assume from a woman’s ‘resort’ to money making that she
has no other sources of support to turn to. This assumption makes offering her
help unattractive, as she seems unlikely to be able to reciprocate. Although sharing
is a social obligation, it is preferably done with people who are likely to return
the favour, as explored in Chapter 7.1 Arousing suspicion that one lacks access
to support may thus be detrimental to one’s livelihood security, and is therefore

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1 It must be emphasized that I do not believe that this local logic is a cultural trait characteristic of Mudzi, or Yao,
or rural Malawian people. Having to make such merciless choices results rather from the desperate level of
livelihood insecurity that these people must deal with on a daily basis, most probably for as long as they live.
avoided whenever possible. In sum, making money threatens a woman’s marital status, her image as a respectable woman, and her potential access to additional sources of support. Overall, accessing support through relationships with men is in line with the prevalent ‘gender contract’, and therefore more advantageous to women’s overall livelihood security.

From the various facets of gender relations a complex and confusing blend of intra-household power dynamics emerges. In matrilineal Mudzi, women own the two main assets for daily survival: the land and the house. Men need a wife for access to these. Women, however, need a husband to clear their field and build and maintain their house. Furthermore, household food security has nowadays become impossible to achieve without monetary inputs, and, as said above, finding money is considered a primarily male task. Both naturally and culturally men are better able to do ganyu or run a business, as they are often physically stronger (and never have to share their energy with a foetus, suckling baby, or child tied on their back). They are also exempted from the household chores of cooking, cleaning, fetching water and firewood that keep women busy. For reasons mentioned earlier, many women prefer and tactically manoeuvre to hold men responsible for the arduous duty of money making. Overall, the gendered power scale seems quite balanced. Men and women need each other in order to secure their livelihoods and both depend on sexual relationships to prosper. However, the relative shortage of men and the resultant surplus of women in want of a husband affects this equilibrium. Competition among women intensifies and social repercussions against those without a partner chafe. This further increases the need for a husband. Although remarriage is more urgent for men than for women as they have no proper place to stay without a wife, it is easier accomplished by men – especially so when an abundance of women eagerly awaits a proposal. Nonetheless, this balance shift generally does not prevent a Mudzi woman from eventually dismissing an unsatisfactory husband. Rather, the impact of the imbalance seems to be that a man has less incentive to behave as a proper husband, as he can easily find a new partner when his current wife complains too much or sends him off.

As a result, divorce continues to be widespread, as it seems to have been throughout matrilineal Bantu history. Although the threat of AIDS has added yet another argument against marital instability, most Mudzi women remain unwilling to put up with a husband whom they feel is insufficiently committed to them and their household. The correlations found in Chapter 3 between marital status and household food security validate these women’s logic. Women staying with a husband who negatively affects the household income – because he eats without providing or helping on the field – are likely to end up in the ‘worst off’ category, whereas women involved in long-term relationships with collaborating husbands form the mainstay of the ‘best off’ category. Women who continue searching for this ideal partner form the middle group, roughly speaking.
In women’s quest for livelihood security and stable partnerships, sex is an indispensable element – the glue that solidifies a reciprocal relationship between unrelated men and women. As shown in Chapter 6, the traditional reverence towards sex as vital to personal, marital, and communal wellbeing continues to be reproduced during ceremonies and rituals performed at various stages throughout the life course of an individual. Restrictions against extramarital sex existed long before HIV entered the scene, and are still commonly subscribed to. In practice, however, trespassing is considered excusable on a number of grounds. By extension, villagers apply these same grounds to pardoning the sexual behaviours that HIV-prevention campaigns advise against. Furthermore, AIDS, like other STIs in the past, now for many seems to have transitioned into a disease that can be ‘cured’, or at least suppressed, for an extended period of time, by using medication that is freely distributed. A pragmatic mix of fearlessness, fatalism, a social need not to become associated with AIDS, and the urgency of other livelihood threats have led to a generally low prioritization of HIV prevention among Mudzi villagers. Rather than lack of negotiating power on the terms under which sex takes place, I believe it is these factors that prevent many Mudzi women from adopting the promoted ABC2 practices.

In sum, the data presented in this book do not negate that economic considerations play an important role in women’s decisions to engage in sexual relationships, nor that these decisions can lead to practices that are risky in a context of high HIV prevalence. Rather, my data show that these facts should not be taken to mean that the women involved in risky sexual practices are necessarily in acute need, without other options to survive, and forced into sex against their will – as advocates of the transactional sex paradigm tend to presume. This case study first and foremost reveals that women who are not economically disadvantaged vis-à-vis men choose to engage in relationship practices that expose them to the risk of HIV infection. Notably, whereas Western analysts tend to assume that a woman’s involvement in sexual-economic exchange signals destitution, Mudzi villagers, quite to the contrary, interpret women’s involvement in non-sexual money making (be it ganyu, business, or wage labour) as forced by, and thus as sign of, deprivation. Rather than being women’s only means of support, sexual partnerships are considered the most appropriate source of support. Under the current circumstances, women have much to gain from upholding this gender construction, which permits them to leave the increasingly difficult task of finding money to men, but still capitalize on the fruits of it. Considering the high value that Mudzi women attach to spreading risk by fostering multiple sources of potential future support, sexual relationships

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2 As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 6, the general message of most formal HIV-prevention recommendations can be summarized as “Abstain, Be faithful, or use a Condom,” which is often abbreviated as ABC.
are likely to remain treasured as an important means of support even when other income sources are made available. Overall, Mudzi women engage in sexual relationships for a number of reasons other than those that are directly material, most of which could not be replaced by an independent income.³

It appears that the common depiction of poor women as powerless victims unwillingly forced by acute destitution to engage in direct exchanges of sex for material support does not do justice to the daily reality of life in Mudzi. The implied expectation that women will readily abstain from risky sexual practices when offered the means to generate an independent income fails to acknowledge the major role played by cultural norms, the complexity of women’s economic survival strategies, and the agency they exert in upholding the prevalent gender norms.

**Generalizability**

In this study of Mudzi village, the in-depth anthropological research approach has proven its worth. A quantitative end-of-project survey, which was conducted in the area during our fieldwork period, found evidence for increased self-efficacy of respondents to abstain, be faithful, use condoms, and reduce the number of sexual partners (Rimal et al. 2009). We witnessed, however, how the surveyed Mudzi women had felt insulted by the questions about their sex lives and gave mostly untruthful answers. The unknown men and women who administered the questions had been dropped off by a van, spread themselves throughout the village, arbitrarily interrogated people while offering nothing in return, and vanished again some hours later – with nonsense⁴ data, leaving behind perplexed and agitated Mudzi villagers [see P2 0191–0269; P3 0580, 2216, 2529]. This is not to suggest that quantitative studies are by definition incapable of retrieving sensitive personal data (see for example the solid studies of the AWLAЕ⁵ project and

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³ Realistically, moreover, self-employment – which constitutes the bulk of externally organized income-generating activities for poor women – is unlikely to significantly and consistently improve households’ livelihood security. Food surpluses to sell and other commodities for trade are limited, and whenever something is available for trade, competition tends to be high. At the same time, demand is very low, because of the minimal purchasing power of the customers. Consequently, the potential profit margins are very small, and, more importantly, uncertain. Particularly this uncertainty of profit may function as disincentive to adopt a longer-term perspective. Various studies have found that wage labourers with small – but reliable – incomes tend to spend their salaries less on ‘quick fixes’ such as snacks, alcohol, or tobacco, and more on nutritious diets and education for themselves and their families than individual entrepreneurs do (Banerjee & Duflo 2012: 231–3). It appears that small-scale, low-level, self-employment opportunities are unable to provide the necessary stability to actually affect women’s livelihood choices.

⁴ I cannot say useless or worthless, because the collected data served the international, multimillion-dollar HIV behaviour-change project well with a positive evaluation.

⁵ AWLAЕ stands for ‘African Women Leaders in Agriculture and the Environment’, which is a Wageningen University-based project (2003–2011) in which 20 African women scholars did PhD studies of HIV/AIDS impacts on the role of women in African food and livelihood systems.
MDICP, now called MLSFH). It does make clear, however, that we must not assume that ‘the truth’ can be straightforwardly accessed, and that it takes great care to construct a truthful picture, especially where sensitive personal information is concerned (see also Bignami-Van Assche et al. 2003, Bleek 1987b, Wiegers 2007). As described in Chapter 4, I also experienced difficulties with direct questions, even though I carefully built rapport with my respondents, explained my goals, safeguarded the appropriateness of topics and questions, and compensated for the input I received. It took time, endurance, and luck – and a very good research assistant – to bridge the divide between me and the village women, and to gain insights into their intimate lives. The informal, flexible, and long-term nature of an anthropological approach and the genuine interest that was implied by our participant presence, were indispensable in this endeavour.

There are, however, also obvious weak points to my qualitative research approach. What was gained in depth was lost in breadth. The result is that I have no way of knowing to what extent our findings may or may not apply to the next village (or even Mudzi at another point in time). There are numerous variables that may affect the sexual choices of poor adult women in settings other than in Mudzi. A few scholars have undertaken cross-country reviews to explore correlations between certain variables and the occurrence of transactional sex (e.g. Chatterji et al. 2004, Luke 2003, Moore et al. 2007). As already noted in Chapter 1, however, there is little overall consistency in the findings of the studies reviewed. Here, I will briefly discuss three variables that seem of potential relevance in the light of my own analyses, although many others could be explored too. These variables concern matrilineal versus patrilineal kinship structure, Islamic versus Christian orientation, and urban versus rural locality.

The first variable (matrilineality versus patrilineality) is interesting, particularly because it is so rarely taken into account in studies of transactional sex. Commonly, in such studies the kinship structures of the researched population group are not made explicit, and in some cases informants from communities with different kinship structures are put together into one undifferentiated group. Although the relatively high degree of autonomy granted to Mudzi women by matrilineal institutions is curtailed by their livelihood insecurity and the resultant dependence on support from others, it still is a significant factor. Statistics on divorce rates and HIV prevalence suggest that the potential impact of kinship organization on sexual relationship choices should not be overlooked. Throughout Africa divorce rates are found to be significantly higher among matrilineal than among patrilineal

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6 MDICP stands for ‘Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project’, now called the Malawi Longitudinal Study of Families and Health. This is a joint collaboration between the Population Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania and the Malawi College of Medicine, concerning an on-going panel study conducted in 125 villages throughout the three regions of Malawi, broadly investigating social processes, family planning, and AIDS.
groups (see Chapter 5). Also HIV prevalence is, at least in Malawi, higher among matrilineal than patrilineal groups (see Chapter 1). However, because this variable is often not accounted for in studies on sexual decision making, conclusions about its association with HIV prevalence are difficult to draw.

Religious history is related to kinship organization. As described in Chapter 2, Christianity and Islam have had different impacts on the reproduction of ethnic traditions, including kinship systems. Christian missionaries have come in greater numbers than representatives of Islam, and have more directly interfered in the social structures of the communities with whom they worked. Among some ethnic groups, contact with missionaries eventually contributed to the transition from a predominantly matrilineal to predominantly patrilineal social organization (Phiri 1983). In many settings, however, matrilineal institutions have persisted (see Chapter 1). In a recent study on southern Malawi, Nicole Bennesch (2011) describes the ways through which Christian missionaries purposefully tried to eradicate matrilineal principles, and how the various Christian doctrines persistently hail and affirm female subordination and subservience to men (see also Ahlberg 1994: 228–33, Arnfred 2007: 142). According to Bennesch, this has severely affected women’s once strong bargaining position vis-à-vis men and contributed to a proliferation of exploitative transactional sex relationships in southern Malawi, despite the continued existence of matrilineal institutions. One explanation for the divergence of our conclusions may be the fact that Bennesch conducted her study exclusively among Christian Malawians, while mine included primarily (though not exclusively) Muslims. This would suggest that a significant difference exists between Christian and Muslim matrilineal communities. However, in my fieldwork I did not detect an association between Mudzi women’s relationship choices and their religious denomination (but, admittedly, I did not systematically investigate this). Alternatively, Bennesch’s reliance on interviews and focus group discussions, without extensive observation or data on interaction between insiders to verify the reports, may have led to a bias towards normative discourses and public perceptions rather than actual practices. Notably, at the national level there is no difference in HIV rates among Christian and Muslim Malawians (GoM 2011: 198).

The third variable concerns rural versus (poor) urban locality. Most (of the few) cities in Malawi have so-called high-density areas, in which daily life resembles that of rural areas in several respects. Living accommodations are simple and small, and generally lack electricity and running water. Sanitation exists as pit-latrines, and cooking stoves as open fires. Other aspects, however, seem substantially different. Although many urban families still cultivate some maize,7 their plots are mostly small and farming is not a main occupation. To a greater extent than in rural

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7 Even the city centre of Malawi’s capital Lilongwe is dotted with small parcels of land devoted to maize cultivation.
areas, food security depends on cash income. As a result, dependence on men may be stronger among poor urban women than rural women, as argued by Cole (2010: 78) and Dodoo (2004). Whereas in the rural areas of Malawi women outnumber men, this is reversed in the urban areas. This too may influence the gendered power balance. Another factor which may well affect men’s and women’s behaviour differently in rural and urban settings is the level of social control or cohesion, which is commonly assumed to be weaker in cities than in villages. Generally, reduced social cohesion is associated with increased sexual looseness and higher HIV risk. We found, however, that strong social control may actually push women to quickly remarry, which increases their exposure to HIV. A study that specifically aimed to compare sexual decision making in a (South African) rural and urban site, found that in both settings women engaged in sexual relationships for material gain (Hunter 2002). In the latter, however, the gain revolved around basic subsistence items, while in the former around luxury items (see also Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009: 43). Women’s involvement in sexual relationships to access relative luxuries has been noted in many urban studies. It has, however, also been noted by a number of studies situated in rural sub-Saharan Africa. This leads us to the following reflection on congruence between findings throughout the many different types of settings on the African continent.

Having assessed the possible disparities resulting from different research localities, it is worth noting here that one feature of sexual relationships which I encountered in Mudzi has been found by scholars throughout sub-Saharan Africa, as well as in the African diaspora (e.g. Sobo 1993 on the Caribbean). This feature relates to one of the central assumptions underlying the transactional sex paradigm. It concerns the normality and normativity of men’s gifting or providing in sexual relationships, which extends to a general acceptance or even approval of women’s involvement in a partnership for pragmatic reasons. In other words, engaging in a sexual relationship for material benefit is in itself not considered demeaning, neither by the woman involved nor by her social environment. Her involvement in such a relationship thus need not be involuntary. Although poverty or structural inequalities may still play a role in shaping women’s sexual choices, it is important to recognize that these choices are not per se driven by destitution and desperation. The recurrence of this

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8 The study actually compares a ‘township’ with an ‘informal settlement’, the distinction between which may be reasonably similar to an urban and rural area.
distinct moral attitude towards sexual-economic exchange throughout the continent might confirm the heavily criticized thesis of Caldwell et al. (1989) that there is something like an “African system of sexuality” which is internally coherent and essentially different from ‘sexual systems’ in other parts of the world.

Discussion

Revisiting morality and Caldwell’s thesis

As discussed in Chapter 1, advocates of the vulnerability approach often point to poor women’s involvement in sexual exchange relationships to typify how the combined forces of poverty and gender inequality drive the spread of HIV. Their argument contains the implicit presumption that no woman would wilfully engage in offering sex for material benefit if she were not coerced by external factors. In this section I argue that through such an explanation, Western observers and analysts judge the sexual-economic exchanges that are so widely noted in sub-Saharan Africa by their own sexual mores and logic. This perspective on transactional sex leads women to be perceived as vulnerable victims and the relationships in which they are involved as essentially coercive and exploitative. However, as well put by De Zalduondo & Bernard (1995: 158), this approach “implies an apology for sexual-economic exchange where none is needed.” The authors point out that the stigmatization of sexual exchange follows from the particular Western European cultural heritage in which ‘love’ and ‘money’ are considered mutually exclusive opposites (ibid, see also Cole 2009, Helle-Valle 2004, Nelson 1985, Wojcicki 2002), and only the first one is approved of as grounds for engaging in sex. Material benefit, considered to be the opposite of genuine love, is then, morally, the least acceptable motive for involvement in a sexual relationship.

In the book *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, editors Jonathan Parry & Maurice Bloch (1989) emphasize that money is not the impersonal, value-free object of exchange that it is often taken to be by Western analysts. The contributions to the volume demonstrate that instead, monetary exchanges tend to be infused with cultural meaning, symbolic interpretation, and moral evaluation – leading to great cross-cultural variation in attitudes towards money and exchange. In his chapter about Madagascar, Bloch makes a particularly strong case for the uniqueness of the European morality in which monetary transfers are considered inappropriate and experienced as uncomfortable not just within sexual but all personal relationships. He writes:

In Europe the linking of monetary exchange and sexual or familial exchange is seen as either typically immoral or as a source of humour and dissonance. By contrast, in Madagascar the need to keep the two areas separate is not present. The right thing for a man to do is to give his lover a present of money or goods after sexual intercourse. ... It is thus clear that if the Merina attitude to money strikes us ... as needing elucidation it is because the symbolism of money is powerful, not in Merina culture, but in European culture” (Bloch 1989: 166–7).
Comparing the values attached to reciprocity in intimate relationships in Ghana and the Netherlands, Van der Geest (1998) notes that while the practice is important in both settings, this importance is only openly acknowledged in Ghana. In other words, there seems to be a social taboo in the West on the overt and explicit appreciation of material exchange or benefit within intimate relationships.

Based on a comprehensive reading of the ethnographic literature on social relationships, Caldwell et al. (1989) have argued that in African settings, quite to the contrary, pragmatic instrumentalism used to be and often still is a widely accepted approach to conjugal relationships. They attribute this to the high value attached to the lineage bond at the expense of the conjugal bond. The conjugal bond is constructed as ideally auxiliary to the lineage. Mudzi women indeed framed their relationship choices primarily in a discourse of pragmatism and utilitarianism. Notably, I do not suggest that the actual underlying motives for engaging in sexual relationships are significantly different in Western and African settings. I suggest that the motives that are publicly considered appropriate seem divergent, even contradictory (see also Arnfred 2004: 23, Helle-Valle 2004: 205–6). As argued in Chapter 5, such normative templates are likely to shape actual motives, but may also be used to cover up other motives.

The issue at stake is that interpreting the motives of actors within one cultural system through the lens of another is likely to lead to distorted understandings. As an example, sociologist Ampofo writes: “Very few women in [our Ghanaian] sample were willing to remain in relationships for purely altruistic reasons, no matter how caring their boyfriends, if these could/would not support them” (1997: 189). What is overlooked in this quote is the intrinsic interconnectedness that seems to exist in many relationships throughout Africa between material support and emotional affection. As I found in Mudzi, and others have found elsewhere in Africa too (such as Bloch quoted above), a husband who does not commit to providing, can by definition, not be a loving husband. ‘Altruism’, to stick to the term used by Ampofo, is revealed precisely, and maybe predominantly, through the provision of material support.

Advocates of the transactional sex paradigm tend to perceive African women’s emphasis on the material side of sexual relationships as a breach of normative behaviour – leading them to search for the disturbing factors that must underlie such violation. This perception reveals more about these analysts’ own cultural assumptions than about the level of desperation faced by African women. In Mudzi, at least, women’s relationship pragmatism seemed an (outward show of) conformation to their community’s social norms rather than a violation of these.

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13 Studies conducted on sexuality among African urban elites and middle classes indicate that the ideology of romantic love is gaining prominence here as a measurement and expression of ‘modernity’ (Cole 2010, Cole & Thomas 2009, Hunter 2010, Spronk 2012).
As noted in the introductory chapter, the Caldwells’ thesis on an African system of sexuality has been criticized among others for generalizing on the basis of a selective reading of the available sources (called by Helle-Valle 2004: 206 the ‘not-in-my-tribe’ argument of some anthropologists). Certainly, singular statements about regions as large and diverse as sub-Saharan Africa are generalizations that gloss local variations, of which the Caldwells presumably were aware. The point, however, is that they observed a significant trend which helps us to better understand the transactional sex discussion. I believe that their argument about a distinct and coherent social system found (at least historically) throughout large parts of sub-Saharan Africa has great explanatory power when it comes to understanding the general instability of partnerships and the common utilitarian approach to these. It sheds another light on the social interactions that are widely called ‘transactional sex’ as well as its relation with the AIDS pandemic and the various – often Western donor-funded – ineffective HIV-prevention efforts.

The Caldwells’ analysis does not hold up, however, when they go on to deduce from the commonality of weak and normatively instrumental sexual relationships that there would be no traditional restrictions on sexuality whatsoever (Caldwell et al. 1989: 194–9). This aspect of their argument would not hold for Bantu descendants (as described in Chapter 6), and has also been refuted more widely (e.g. Ahlberg 1994, Ankomah 1999, Arnfred 2004b, Heald 1995). Another oft-heard criticism of the Caldwells’ explanation of sexual behaviour throughout Africa from a cultural perspective is exactly this cultural determinism. By blaming culture, it is argued, the global and local forces at play in further impoverishing and marginalizing African populations and individuals are disregarded and so become depoliticized (e.g. Stillwaggon 2006b: 133–57). It is this cultural framing of women’s engaging in transactional sex that led to what is called the ‘vulnerability approach’ (see Chapter 1). In the following section I try to ‘politicize’ my findings, assessing whether the dynamics that in Mudzi underlie risky sexual practices (although different from those envisaged by advocates of the transactional sex paradigm) may still be conceptualized as structurally violent.

Women’s agency and structural violence

Paul Farmer (2004: 307–8) warns against small-scale ethnographic studies that ignore oppressing macro-level structures and so tend to overestimate and romanticize the so-called “weapons of the weak.”14 He urges anthropologists to

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14 “Weapons of the weak” is a term used by James Scott, coined in his book *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (1985). With the term, Scott calls attention to the fact that those living under severely restrictive circumstances may still create opportunities for self-determination, without necessarily starting a revolution. Their everyday, small-scale forms of resistance add to their feelings of self-worth but do not actually and overtly threaten the status quo.
always keep in focus the materiality of social life – which I hope to have done in this case study. My representation of Mudzi life should leave no doubt that poverty, underdevelopment, marginalization, and voicelessness in the global arena have detrimental impacts on people’s lives and livelihoods and seriously restrict their options for survival and self-fulfilment. The structural violence that Farmer and followers speak of does, however, not only refer to the impoverishment and global economic marginalization of Third World populations, but also to the cultural or normative marginalization of particular subgroups. It refers to a broad “machinery of social oppression” (Farmer 2004: 307) and contrasts with overt violence because it tends to be indirect, normalized, and regularized. In other words, it concerns the oppressive structures that derive power from their hegemonic character. Particularly subordinating gender ideologies are often mentioned as harming (“structurally violating”) women and as increasing their vulnerability to the risk of HIV infection. The line of reasoning behind this generally seems to be that gender inequality causes women’s relatively greater poverty, which puts them in a position of financial dependence on (sexual relationships with) men.

In the case of Mudzi I found that gender norms indeed play a role in women’s motivations to engage in relationship practices that are risky in an environment with high HIV prevalence. However, this is not so much because prevalent gender norms aggravate women’s poverty relative to that of men, so placing them in a dependency position. Rather, it has to do with women’s wish to live up to what society expects from them. More precisely, it has to do with their general preference to be with (rather than without) a partner, and their general preference not to ‘look for’ money themselves. On the one hand, these preferences probably reflect internalization of the prevalent gender ideology. On the other hand, however, I have argued they are also part of women’s tactics to maximize their access to (marital and communal) support. To what extent then would it be appropriate, or at least useful, here to conceptualize the prevalent gender norms as structurally violent – hence, as repressive gender ideologies that harm women?

Certainly the norm that a proper woman is married and provided for negatively affects women’s free choice concerning sexual relationships and income generation. Nonetheless, I object to straightforwardly considering these women as victims of the prevailing cultural scripts. Thinking of Mudzi’s gender norms as only suppressive and harmful is too one-sided to be actually helpful. In fact, those who most actively (try to) enforce the norms about proper manhood and womanhood, seem to be women themselves. One reason for Mudzi women to want a relationship is to avoid social repercussions from other women, since married women perceive the unmarried status of a fellow village woman as threatening the stability and future of their own marriage. The repercussions thus are an attempt by women to protect their marriage and their livelihood security. Women also have good reasons to actively uphold the prevalent cultural script because of what is prescribes for
men. The gender contract holds that men contribute material and physical support in their reciprocal relationships with women. It serves women well to hold men responsible for income generation, as this is generally tough work, increasingly problematic to achieve, and difficult to combine with their own responsibilities. Moreover, it reflects positively on a woman’s image to be provided for by a partner, and negatively if she must turn to making money herself. To pressure their partners to go out and look for money, women can (and persistently do) draw on the culturally underpinned norm that income provision is pre-eminently a male responsibility. Thus, while the ideology prescribing that it should be men and not women who work for income restricts women’s options for independent money making, at the same time it offers them alternative avenues for improving their livelihood security.

Notably, numerous women regularly do engage in (temporary) money making, particularly through petty trade. Interestingly, some of them expressed explicit pride about being able to provide for themselves and for defeating this gender norm, at least for the time being. These women’s explicit defiance of public scrutiny indirectly confirms the norm but also shows women’s room for manoeuvring. The very existence of this room for manoeuvring suggests that the norm is not strictly enforced and that most women comply with it relatively voluntarily. Indeed, as argued earlier, challenging the norm would, among other things, allow men to shun their responsibility for providing money to the household. It appears that women’s choice to comply with and uphold this norm is in fact a form of agency.

In sum, some of the normative gender roles indirectly contribute to women’s (and men’s) risk to contract HIV, but should not for that reason be considered as victimizing women. As we have seen, women actively use these norms for their own purposes too. Nonetheless, it remains important to keep in mind that although most women prefer to uphold the norms, this is not because they unequivocally benefit from them.

Structural change
With the salary that Gertrude earned as my research assistant, she has set out to obtain a bachelor’s degree. During these studies she became involved with a young man she knew through her church. After some blissful months together, the young man began to express his doubts about their future. He feared that she would not become the proper housewife that he envisioned for himself, wondering whether she would cook and clean and kneel for him given her (soon-to-be) high education level. She repeatedly assured him that she would, but his doubts were too strong. He broke up with Gertrude, which left her sad and angry.

Several of the employed young women I know from the years that I worked in Malawi’s capital Lilongwe also long to settle down and start a family – without having to relinquish their financial independence. They too have trouble finding
a partner who is not scared off by the cultural flexibility that this demands from him. One of these women once sighed: “They try to offer me a cell phone, but I already have my own. Then a television, but I have one. Then they try to seduce me by promising to buy a car, but I already have that too. Then they just don’t know what else they can do to please me, and they slink off.” These women, just like Gertrude, pay a high price for their progressive (or ‘culturally deviant’) striving for self-development and self-reliance.

Structural change – in the sense of changing cultural norms such as those discussed in the previous section – does not come about easily. Bringing about gender equality or empowerment requires much more than offering poor rural women income-generating projects. As De Zalduondo & Bernard (1995: 178) have argued specifically about (the futility of) attempts to reduce risky sex by addressing women’s poverty:

[T]o alter sexual behaviour is to alter a system that includes not only sex, but the division of labour, the family and kinship, the economic system, the class structure, health beliefs, religion and ethics – the interrelated set of conditions upon conditions which prompt and constrain the wishes and actions of individuals as they cope with a particular social and economic environment.

Multifaceted structural change would be needed to alter these “conditions upon conditions.” Rather than merely ‘freeing women from external chains’, internalized cultural scripts need rewriting too. Both the interpretations of proper womanhood and proper manhood need change to allow for relationships that build on alternative forms of reciprocity. This raises questions about ways for male partners to shape their masculinity and express affection other than through material provisioning, and about ways women can be respectable other than through remaining near the house and being provided for by a husband. A study of women’s agency in an Indonesian fishing village (Niehof 2007) yields a potential alternative. There, although a woman’s role is grounded in house and hearth, good mothers are those who can feed their families well. The income-generating activities of women in the fish trade are seen as part of their role as responsible mothers. Hence, the domestic domain as a female sphere is extended to include certain economic activities of women outside the house. Women who successfully exercise their agency in income generation for the benefit of their families are respected by other women and men alike.

In Chapter 1 I described how Giddens’ structuration theory bridges the artificial dichotomy between structure and agency by contending that the two are actually interdependent, producing social reality through bi-directional interaction. The theory has been criticized for insufficiently recognizing the potential for structural change (Rütten & Gelius 2011: 954). Others have subsequently theorized about the coming about of structural change (e.g. Dolfisma & Verburg 2005, Sewell 1992). Although difficult, it is obviously not impossible, and need not necessarily
be brought about through abrupt, revolutionary alterations. Anke Niehof (2012) has described how African women’s role in caring for the increasing number of ill relatives seems to enhance their authority and strengthen their position in an otherwise patriarchal context. Gaynor Makura-Paradza (2010) found that the fast-changing environment in patriarchal Zimbabwe allows for new and innovative ways for women divorcees and widows to access land, which leads to shifts in gender relations. In an earlier study, I found that Guatemaltecan women through watching telenovelas\textsuperscript{15} adopted the idea that female subordination was not as innate and natural as they had previously assumed (Verheijen 2005, 2006). Over time, inconspicuous daily life routines may so lead to incremental cultural change (see also Ehn & Löfgren 2009).

Concluding notes

From the findings presented in this book, several methodological points remain to be noted that are of relevance for further research on (risky) sexual relationships in the region. The first concerns the almost exclusive concentration of transactional sex studies on unmarried youth. Although references to transactional sex in policy reports are usually concerned with women with hungry children to care for, studies that actually assess the practice of transactional sex tend to focus on unmarried youngsters (see Chapter 1). This focus seems to result from a presumption that sexual lives change fundamentally once an individual enters into marriage. Our Mudzi study shows, however, that this need not be the case, as is also suggested by data from elsewhere in Africa (e.g. Amornkul et al. 2009, Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009, Dodoo 2004, Dunkle et al. 2004, Luke 2005a, Van den Borne 2005a). By omitting married women, divorcees, and widows from studies on risky sexual practices, these women’s motives remain unnoticed or misunderstood, and, consequently, ineffectively addressed. An exclusive focus on youth is therefore not justified when trying to understand what drives women to expose themselves to the risk of HIV infection.

Relatedly, marital status should not be taken as a static given and a stable measurement factor. Few women in Mudzi were continuously married or unmarried, and few households were permanently ‘female headed’ or ‘male headed’. Categorizing women or households into such separate groups because of their at-that-point status (which is often somewhat ambivalent anyway), and assuming that these are structurally different groups, would be of little value in Mudzi. Overall, the great majority of women face the same struggles and employ

\textsuperscript{15} The Latin American version of soap operas.
the same tactics to reduce their livelihood insecurity, with quick entry into marriage being one of these. In sum, our data warn against a false dichotomy of married versus unmarried, and female-headed households versus male-headed households. The number of past marriages and duration of the current marriage (e.g. less or more than five years) may be better indicators of a woman’s marital situation and household stability.

Another point of concern is women’s common discourse about destitution driving them into sexual relationships. I have argued that this representation reduces the multiple factors at stake to only one. Women’s emphasis on this particular consideration at least to some extent just expresses compliance with the cultural norm prescribing that proper women are provided for by a partner. Many studies have deduced from such self-reports, third-party reports, and focus group discussions that women’s poverty has led to a proliferation of sex exchange. I hypothesize that in many cases, informants’ emphasis on women’s destitution as underlying the spread of HIV only partially represents reality. I suggest that it is also a clever means for respondents to avert the blame for AIDS and meanwhile redirect attention to what really matters to them: the structural lack of services and commodities they face on a daily basis, or, put more broadly, their overall livelihood insecurity. The discourse of destitution driving women to engage in risky sex and so further the AIDS pandemic is one that is apparently well received by the international donor community, and therefore fits the agendas of affected communities and the mediating development agencies alike. A study assessing the impact of a particular microcredit service (Day 2007) may be taken to exemplify women’s tactical employment of risky sex and AIDS to pursue other goals. When the researcher inquired about transactional sex, the majority of respondents answered that this occurs because women are pressed to repay loans on unfavourable terms set by the particular institute that happened to be under assessment (Day 2007: 52–3).

My last point concerns the notion of transactional sex itself, which seems out of place for most sexual activities in Mudzi. Gifting and sex are both indispensable elements of ‘marital’ relationships in Mudzi and beyond. The utilitarian or instrumental approach to many of these relationships is evident. The term ‘transactional’ may be used to refer to this characteristic of mutual dependence between men and women united in sexual relationships. However, when understood, as it usually is, as a mere exchange of sex for money or material support, the concept becomes too narrow, and fails to capture the other relational aspects involved. It would be incorrect to speak of or presume the ‘selling of sex’ in this context, particularly because this is not the way in which the people involved

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perceive it. As noted, we have heard of and observed some cases in and around Mudzi in which (young) women were quite obviously and straightforwardly after the resources that they could access by faking interest in a sexual relationship or actually sleeping with a man who proposed.\textsuperscript{17} However, these cases, in which the transaction was hollowed out to an almost direct exchange of sexual favours for material benefit, do not represent the relationship practice that poses the greatest or main HIV risk for the general population. It is rather most women’s continuous search for a steady, reliable, helpful husband combined with the frequency of breakups that seems to facilitate the spreading of HIV (combined with other earlier-mentioned factors such as men’s frequent migration, which ‘imports’ the virus into the community, and the low priority given to HIV prevention amidst more urgent problems).

In part, this study was set up with the aim of formulating recommendations for improving HIV prevention policy.\textsuperscript{18} I have aimed to achieve this by assessing to what extent the currently common assumption that women need economic empowerment to reduce their vulnerability to HIV infection is justified. As explicated throughout, I do not expect that Mudzi women would make safer sexual choices if they were offered additional means to gain an independent income. The interrelations between livelihood insecurity and risky sexual behaviour are more complex and less straightforward than usually presumed and cannot simply be remedied with income-generating projects. Instead of persisting with the perception that women lack agency to change their sexual behaviour, it should be acknowledged that women have certain reasons for engaging in risky relationship practices. Moreover, they may also have good reasons to refrain from or limit their involvement in independent income generation. Understanding these underlying reasons is a prerequisite for formulating any attempt to assist in changing the current situation, and I hope that this study has contributed to such an enhanced understanding.

This should not be interpreted as an argument against a policy focus on poverty reduction. Although I found in Mudzi that it is not acute poverty per se which motivates women to risk HIV infection, many of women’s daily life choices – including those related to sexual interaction – are shaped by pervading and persistent livelihood insecurity. If a woman would have access to other safety nets besides

\textsuperscript{17} E.g. P2 1560, 1721, 1728, 1740; P3 2470. Notably, even these cases did not seem void of relationship symbolism, of a performance of normative gender expectations. Interestingly, furthermore, these cases particularly concerned the younger women who were reasonably taken care of at home. They therefore did not desperately need a husband, but could have many flings in order to access as many gifts as possible. With other words, destitution was less of a threat to them than to others, which was exactly what allowed them to engage more freely in casual sexual encounters.

\textsuperscript{18} As described in Chapter 4, this research has been co-funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of their IS-Academy, an initiative aimed at stimulating policy-relevant social science research.
her primary social network, the social exclusion that may result from an unmarried status would be less life threatening, and thus reduce the pressure on women to acquire a partner. Furthermore, if the problems that are now experienced as more direct and urgent than the threat of AIDS can be successfully addressed, villagers may begin to prioritize HIV prevention. A brighter future may encourage Mudzi villagers to make longer-term investments, including in their health. The findings presented in this book do therefore not deny the need to reduce rural women’s livelihood insecurity. To the contrary, as an HIV prevention focus it remains valid and important – provided that this insecurity is understood as only partially explaining women’s relationship choices, and the causes and consequences of the insecurity as broader and more complex than female economic dependence on men.
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Appendix 1: Overview of reviewed literature on transactional sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Research pop.</th>
<th>Urban/ rural</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Conclusion about factors underlying/related to transactional (or risky) sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ackermann &amp; De Klerk</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>Transactional sex result of female poverty and male control of sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ankomah</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Premarital youth</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>FGDs (6), in-depth interviews (78)</td>
<td>Relationships about material gain; economic need + societal norms obstruct women to negotiate safe sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennesch</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>Villagers, Christian religious leaders, university students, NGO employees</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Interviews, FGDs</td>
<td>Matrilineal women’s once strong social position severely undermined throughout history, leading them now to depend heavily on exploitative sexual relationships with men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryceson &amp; Fonseca</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>Peasants</td>
<td>(semi) rural</td>
<td>Key informant interviews, FGDs, survey 141 rural households</td>
<td>Destitution increasingly pushing women to transactional sex e.g. as form of ganyu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buseh et al.</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Swaziland</td>
<td>General population, health staff</td>
<td>rural mission</td>
<td>FGDs (3)</td>
<td>Women may have extra-marital partners for economic security and lack power to negotiate terms of sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caldwell et al.</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>General population</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>Focus on lineage procreation encourages sex without limits. Economic exchange in sexual relationships is common and considered normal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campbell</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Female commercial sex workers</td>
<td>Mining community</td>
<td>In-depth interviews 21 CSWs</td>
<td>Most women unwillingly pushed into sex work by destitution and lack of other livelihood options.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatterji et al.</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>12 countries sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Existing national survey statistics</td>
<td>In most countries TS highest among 15-19 girls, unmarried, non-Muslim women + young, unmarried &amp; Muslim men. No consistent correlation with socio-economic status, location, or in-school status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cluver et al.</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>AIDS-orphans</td>
<td>Peri-urban settlements</td>
<td>Longitudinal follow up of 723 adolescents</td>
<td>Familial AIDS, food insecurity, and exposure to abuse raised prevalence of transactional sex amongst girls from 1% to 57%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cole</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Madagascar</td>
<td>Young women</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>Ethnographic approach</td>
<td>Money is means to achieve respected social adulthood, support expected from male sexual partners à women’s use of sexuality to amass resources is socially respected and valued.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Findings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cornwall</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>General population</td>
<td>small town</td>
<td>Ethnographic approach</td>
<td>Despite locally prevalent discourse on contemporary women as running after money, women only divorce after severe hardship. Husbands expected to provide even if wife has money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dodoo</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>Urban poor</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>Existing national statistics, FGDs</td>
<td>Risky sex is economic survival strategy, particularly among urban, poor women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunkle et al.</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Structured questionnaires</td>
<td>Sex with non-primary partner motivated by material gain = 20%: associated with higher HIV infection, gender-based violence, substance use, socioeconomic disadvantage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunkle et al.</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Young men aged 15-26</td>
<td>rural</td>
<td>Interviews 1288 men</td>
<td>Strong link between transactional sex and gender-based violence. Men get resources through sexual partnerships too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilbert &amp; Walker</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>National statistics</td>
<td>Strong association of HIV infection with low income, high unemployment, and poor education; women worst off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gysels et al.</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>Sex workers</td>
<td>trading centre</td>
<td>Life histories (34), participant observation, sexual diaries</td>
<td>Disadvantaged backgrounds played role in move into commercial sex. Better economic situation = better negotiating position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallman</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Youth aged 14-24</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Household survey</td>
<td>Economic disadvantage associated with risky sex (including transactional sex), particularly for (young) women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haram</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>Unmarried youth incl single mothers</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Long-term fieldwork, life histories</td>
<td>Gifting pivotal aspect of all relationships and particularly sexual. Young women barter sex for economic benefit. Aware of HIV risk, but for many it is economically and socially too costly to abandon relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hargreaves et al.</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Age group 14-35</td>
<td>rural</td>
<td>Cohort survey 1967 respondents</td>
<td>Only low education for women related to increased HIV incidence (household wealth, marital status, and mobility unrelated).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawkins et al.</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>Young women</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>Peer in-depth interviews</td>
<td>By extracting financial and material resources from older men through power of their sexuality, young women construct a positive identity and esteem linked to perceptions of modernity and consumption and their ability to access consumer goods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helle-Valle</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>General population</td>
<td>rural</td>
<td>Ethnographic research</td>
<td>Material support generates agency, women can remain independent through informal sexual relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Young women</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Ethnographic research</td>
<td>Rural setting à limited livelihood options à sex for subsistence needs; urban setting à less destitution à sex for socially motivated consumption desires, women more agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Age Group</td>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Key Findings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kaufman &amp; Stavrou</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>14-22, 3 races (African, Indian, White)</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>FGDs (10)</td>
<td>Gifting among like-age adolescents is common &amp; important in shaping sexual relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keene</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Uganda, Botswana</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>Educational, socio-economic, and cultural disadvantages increase HIV risk in general, but particularly for women, who are pushed to rely on transactional sex with one or several men to gain access to needed resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leclerc-Madlala</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>peri-urban</td>
<td>Ethnographic approach</td>
<td>Pre-existing sexual cultures &amp; gender inequality with new influences (migration, increasing poverty, family disintegration, new ways for acquiring &amp; demonstrating wealth) stimulate transactional sex and prove fertile ground for HIV.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leclerc-Madlala</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>Ethnographic approach</td>
<td>Transactional sex perceived as normal, leading to multiple liaisons, exploited for new ‘needs’ = commodities of modernity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>Adolescents</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>Cross generational sex common; girls exert agency over who to date and how long, but less control over sexual practices. Gifts and violence limit girls’ negotiating power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machel</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>School girls aged 14-20 of middle and working class</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>Interviews + survey 182 girls</td>
<td>Girls with lower socio-economic status more vulnerable than higher SES: more accepting gender power differences, less assertive, more economically dependent on partner weakening bargaining power safe sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MacPherson et al.</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>Fishing community</td>
<td>rural</td>
<td>Participant observation, FGDs, semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Transactional sex common, women particularly vulnerable in negotiation because of existing gendered power structures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maganja et al.</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>Youth 16-24</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>Interviews (60), 14 FGDs (14)</td>
<td>Transactional sex in both casual &amp; committed relationships; much distrust; sex-gift exchange expected otherwise extra partners/breakup/rape; women exert agency but still at disadvantage negotiating safe sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masvawure</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>University students</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>Participant observation, in-depth interviews</td>
<td>Transactional sex for social status, to feel and be perceived of as modern &amp; successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Findings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meekers &amp; Calves</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>Young aged 17-25</td>
<td>urban FGDs</td>
<td>Economic need leads many young women to use premarital sexual relations (incl multiple partners) for economic support, despite HIV risk.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merten &amp; Haller</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>Fishermen, fish traders</td>
<td>rural Participant observation, FGDs, interviews</td>
<td>Fish-for-sex exchanges not based on tradition, but on the economic opportunities provided in conditions of poverty and changing livelihoods.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mill &amp; Anarfi</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>HIV positive women</td>
<td>both In-depth Interviews HIV+ women (31)</td>
<td>Poverty, through limited education and vocational skills, led women to take on boyfriends to support them as survival strategy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller et al.</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>HIV positive people</td>
<td>rural clinic In-depth interviews HIV+ women (41)</td>
<td>Food security increases female vulnerability by pushing them into transactional sex and violent relationships, and limiting their control over condom use.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mills &amp; Ssewakiryanga</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>University youth</td>
<td>urban Single sex + mixed FGDs</td>
<td>Fragile masculinities depend (a.o.) on providing for girlfriend while avoiding to be stripped of all income; both genders secretive about wealth. Ideology of romantic love less central to people’s aspirations than centrality of money as symbol through which relationships are practiced and understood.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moore et al.</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Burkina Faso, Ghana, Malawi, Uganda</td>
<td>Youth aged 12-19</td>
<td>both Nationally representative household surveys, FGDs, in-depth interviews</td>
<td>Transactional sex very common, unrelated to household economic status, orphan hood, education level, age difference, or condom use.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Munthali et al.</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>Adolescents aged 12-19</td>
<td>both Nationally representative household survey</td>
<td>4 out of 5 girls received something (96% money) in exchange for sex in past year, indicating that this is a common feature of routine dating &amp; courting.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nnko et al.</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>Out-of-school adolescents</td>
<td>rural Social mapping 2 communities, narrative research workshops (10), in-depth interviews (81)</td>
<td>Exchange of money and gifts for sex was reported by both female and male adolescents, but perception and interpretation differed: Males perceived that females engage in sex largely for material gain while females saw it as display of partner’s love or commitment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nnko &amp; Pool</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>School youth</td>
<td>urban Role plays</td>
<td>For boys sexual desire is important motivating factor, for girls an ambiguous mixture of attraction &amp; financial gain. Girls often quite competent in negotiating financially rewarding sexual deals.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Findings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nyanzi et al.</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>School youth</td>
<td>rural</td>
<td>Role plays, FGDs, interviews (30) + survey (80)</td>
<td>Girls feel humiliated if not receiving anything for sex, receipt of money/gifts confers social status among peer group. Boys think only HIV+ girls would give free sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oyefara</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Female commercial sex workers</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>Survey (320), in-depth interviews (10)</td>
<td>35% joined sex industry out of poverty and lacking other means of finding food; poverty &amp; food insecurity lowered condom use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poulin</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>Premarital youth aged 15-24</td>
<td>rural</td>
<td>Field observations, in-depth interviews (54), survey data</td>
<td>Transfers are as much an expression of love/commitment as meeting material needs (women) or get sex (men); part and parcel of normal relationship; size of transfer unrelated to condom use, rather love/commitment/seriousness; girls have power over relationships beyond negotiating safe sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robinson &amp; Yeh</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Formal &amp; informal female commercial sex workers</td>
<td>semi-urban</td>
<td>Self-report diaries (192)</td>
<td>When household member (mostly child) falls ill, CSW (of whom many did not self-identify as such), particularly the poorer ones, intensified risky sexual contacts (anal or unprotected intercourse).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silberschmidt &amp; Rasch</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>Girls aged 15-19 who aborted</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews (51)</td>
<td>Girls not only victims but also willing preys and active social agents engaging in high-risk sexual behaviour for material gain. Vast majority involved with business men twice their age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoebenau et al.</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>South Africa, Lesotho, Madagascar</td>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>FGDs, interviews, survey</td>
<td>Transactional sex linked to consumerism, women not passive victims (use sexuality to extract resources) but agency within limits --&gt; men continue to determine the terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swidler &amp; Watkins</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>General population</td>
<td>rural</td>
<td>Conversation diaries of 22 local observers</td>
<td>Patron-client ties and moral obligation to support the needy underlie transactional sex, rather than simply male lust and female poverty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tawfik &amp; Watkins</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>General population</td>
<td>rural</td>
<td>Conversation diaries of 22 local observers</td>
<td>In policy circles women from rural Malawi said to engage in extra-marital sex because they need money for survival, but women themselves say they are not only motivated by money for survival but also for attractive consumer goods, by passion, and by revenge for a husband’s infidelity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Study Method</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Findings</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Van den Borne</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>Informal sex workers</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Semi-structured in-depth conversations, FGDs, observations Women materially motivated, but hope for lasting relationship. Sex-money transactions under cover of normal male-female reciprocity, to distance both sex worker and client from tabooed prostitution, and increase chances of supportive relationship to become lasting.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Eerdewijk</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>Premarital youth</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Participant observation, interviews, FGDs Money &amp; gifts understood as expression of boyfriends’ love and care; occurs in all sexual relationships - despite discourse on incompatibility of love and material interest.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wamoyi et al.</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>Premarital youth</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Participant observation, interviews, FGDs, survey At micro-level girls quite powerful, actively using sexuality as resource. Sex-gift exchange basis of most relationships, entered for material gain: basics, luxuries, peer pressure.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weiser et al.</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Botswana, Swaziland</td>
<td>Adults aged 18-49</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Cross-sectional survey 2000 adults Food insufficiency associated with inconsistent condom use, sex exchange, intergenerational sex, lack of control in sexual relationships - among women, not men.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wojcicki</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Women aged 20-45 who frequent bars to exchange sex for money</td>
<td>Semi-urban</td>
<td>Participant observation, 50 interviews Women economically motivated, for basic needs or luxuries, but not self-identifying nor seen as commercial sex worker. When exchange/bargain is not made explicit, and women’s financial need emphasized, then less stigma involved than CSW.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: Interview guide ‘baseline’ all adult Mudzi women

1. Name + (ex) husband’s name
2. Age/When born
3. Area of origin (If elsewhere: since when in this village, came with who, why?)
4. Ethnic group & religion
6. (Ex) Husband’s area of origin & ethnic group. Age.
7. Marital history: Have you been married before? / Is this your first marriage? Can you tell me about previous marriages: how started and ended?
8. How many children did you give birth to? When did you have your first & last child? Still alive? Died as children or adults? How many people stay in your HH?
9. Education level: When did you leave school & why?
10. What are your household’s sources of income? What is money used for? Who decides what the money is used for & why? Do you have independent income? Since when, why, size & use of profit, how life/relationship changed?
11. How many acres land do you own? And husband? Who farms (which field)? All of it cultivated last season? Why (not)?
12. Which crops do you cultivate? Size of harvest this year? What done with harvest? If sold: where, when, how much?
15. Faced any problems cultivating crops last season?
16. How much still left of harvest? Until when do you expect your HH can eat from this? How survive afterwards? Eating differently now?
17. Does your HH own blankets, bed, radio, bicycle, cell phone, school uniforms, livestock? [check: IRON SHEETS?]
19. Can you tell me about your health? How often have you been ill in the last year? What kind of illnesses?
20. What do you consider to be the biggest problem/difficulty in your HH & community?
Appendix 3: Interview guide market women

1. Name, age, village, type of business
2. Is this your own business or employed?
3. Since when? How did you find money to start business?
4. Where/How do you get product? How often?
5. When & where do you sell?
6. Married? (First? Since when? Why divorced?) How many people in HH? Through what ways does HH find food? Do you also farm? How combining these activities?
7. Went to school? When left & why?
8. How much profit? What do you do with income? Who decides on expenditure?
9. How has business changed your life/relationship? In your opinion: In which ways are business women like you different from rural non-business women?
10. Do you know any organizations that give out loans for small businesses? Made use of loans? Why (not)?
Summary

The ‘transactional sex paradigm’
The aim of this book is to test, through a Malawian case study, the hypothesis that improved livelihood security for women will lead them to make safer sexual choices. This hypothesis arises from the widespread assumption, especially prevalent in public health and development literature, that poverty and gender inequality push women to sexual risk taking. Perceived as poor and marginalized, African women are often assumed to have few other means to survive than to exchange sexual favours for material support from men. This dependence on male support, the assertion goes, puts women in a disadvantaged position when it comes to negotiating safe sexual practices while pushing them to seek multiple sex partners – hence significantly increasing the risk of HIV transmission. To reverse the downward spiral of poverty and AIDS, many reports conclude, it is imperative to economically empower women so as to reduce their need to resort to risky survival sex. As this line of argument has become so commonplace, and goes uncontested in much of the literature, I refer to it as a paradigm: the ‘transactional sex paradigm’.

Malawi and AIDS
Malawi is one of the least developed countries worldwide. Within Malawi, poverty and malnutrition are most severe in the rural areas and in the Southern Region. Ever since HIV prevalence became monitored Malawi has also been among the top ten countries with the highest infection rates. It is currently estimated that 11 percent of the population between the ages 15 and 49 lives with the virus. As is the case throughout sub-Saharan Africa (but, notably, nowhere else) infection rates are higher among women (13%) than among men (8%). As in most of the world, prevalence is more prominent in the urban areas (17%) than in the rural areas (9%), but it is increasing in the rural areas while diminishing in the urban areas. In Malawi, HIV rates have always been substantially higher in the Southern Region (15%) than in the Central (8%) and Northern (7%) Region. Although national HIV prevalence has slowly declined, HIV incidence remains highest in the Southern Region.

Because both poverty and HIV prevalence are extraordinarily high in Malawi, peaking in the Southern Region and on the rise in the rural areas, I expected that a possible link between the two would be most pronounced and best discernible here. A village community in one of Malawi’s southern districts was therefore selected as the research site for this study. Intriguingly, most village communities in Malawi’s south are matrilineally and matrilocaly organized. This means that as a rule it is the women who hold the rights to land and who remain resident near their (maternal) kin. Upon marriage a woman is joined by her husband, who is supposed to help cultivate her field and build a house that is hers to keep in case of divorce. Various studies found that, as a result, these women’s livelihoods are relatively secure compared to that of other rural Malawian women. In other words, the very
site that was selected because of its extremely high levels of both food insecurity and HIV prevalence – which, following the transactional sex paradigm, would suggest a low socio-economic status of women vis-à-vis men – seems a rather favourable environment for women. These women’s comparatively good socio-economic position makes them particularly interesting to study, as an analysis of their sexual choices may shed light on the hypothetical impact of female economic empowerment on HIV transmission.

Data collection
The data on which this study draws are largely ethnographic, collected through daily participant observation and many informal chats during a one-year stay in the research community between August 2008 and July 2009. The data were collected by me – a Dutch woman with a degree in cultural anthropology, work experience in Malawi during the three years prior to this study, and some fluency in the most commonly spoken language – with the invaluable help of my research assistant – a Malawian woman with a secondary education degree, who is not originally from the research area but fluent in both languages spoken there. The main method of informal data collection was greatly facilitated by a spontaneous gathering of village women at our house each afternoon to learn to knit from my research assistant, meanwhile chatting with each other and us. Additionally, we interviewed all ninety adult women living in the research village on several occasions during the research period, had four women keep financial diaries, interviewed thirty randomly selected small-scale businesswomen 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.

Balancing men, morals and money
Notwithstanding high levels of awareness about HIV and ways to avoid it, partner switches and concurrent partnerships were found to be common at the research site. Moreover, the village women often accepted relationship proposals from men whose sexual and health histories were unknown, which further added to their risk of contracting HIV. By disentangling the interrelated historical, cultural, and material dynamics that affect women’s daily decision making, this study endeavoured to comprehend women’s risky sexual practices.

Based on the insights gained, I argue that the ‘transactional sex paradigm’, which is increasingly used to explain the continued spread of HIV throughout sub-Saharan Africa and consequently inform policy, overlooks certain important cultural and socio-economic aspects of women’s sexual choices. While confirming the widespread assumption that the need for support plays a role in poor women’s decisions to readily accept sexual proposals from men, my data demonstrate that the interrelations between livelihood insecurity and risky sexual behaviour are more complex and less straightforward than usually presumed.
The harsh living conditions and the struggles to overcome them permeate every aspect of daily village life, including, but reaching far beyond, sexual relationships. Central to villagers’ survival amidst the frequent occurrence and persistent threat of livelihood shocks is their ability to mobilize resources in times of need. It is this vital importance of access to multiple sources of potential future support rather than acute deprivation per se that underlies many of the daily life decisions of women, including those concerning sexual relationships. Throughout this book women’s tactical navigation is revealed between the various, and sometimes conflicting, sources of potential support in order to maximize access and minimize blockage to it.

In the village studied, sexual liaisons are a means to material support par excellence because it is traditionally expected that men provide their partner with the necessary extras beyond the foods she cultivates from her own field. Women are thus entitled to receive, and justified to claim, support from their sexual partners. However, (right to) direct receipt of support from men is not the only reason for women to engage in sexual relationships. Being in a relationship provides women a respectable status, which enhances their access to community support. This is an important reason for many women to enter into or stay involved in relationships with men, even if they do not directly benefit their household. Factors that thus also play a role are the wish to conform to cultural norms, gaining or maintaining a respectable status, and averting suspicion, jealousy, and consequent community exclusion. Further reasons are longing for affection, sexual satisfaction, and offspring, and benefitting from other duties that husbands are supposed to perform besides providing money. In other words, most of the reasons for women to be involved in a relationship cannot simply be resolved by an independent income. Moreover, considering the high value that the village women attach to spreading risk by fostering multiple sources of potential future support, sexual relationships are likely to remain treasured as an important means to access support even when other income sources are made available.

The assumption that access to income-generating options will affect women’s sexual decision-making is furthermore challenged by our findings concerning women’s means to earn money. Notably, independent income-generating options are already available and regularly resorted to. They do not, however, improve women’s livelihood security as advocates of female economic empowerment commonly assume. Women’s involvement in money making signals a number of messages that potentially block other channels of support, and is therefore a generally less preferred option. Income generation is culturally considered a male responsibility, which in principle makes it unnecessary, inappropriate, and disrespectful for women to engage in. As money is so intrinsically associated with men, women with wealth are routinely suspected to have obtained it through (illicit) sexual relationships. A woman’s access to independent income may furthermore give husbands and fellow villagers a justification for withholding additional
support, as it can be argued that she does not need it. At the same time, fellow villagers may assume from a woman’s ‘resort’ to money making that she has no other sources of support to turn to. This assumption makes her unattractive to help in times of need as she seems unlikely to be able to reciprocate. Although sharing is a social obligation, it is – out of necessity – preferably done with people who are likely to return the favour. Arousing suspicion that one lacks access to support may thus be detrimental to one’s livelihood security, and is therefore avoided when possible. In sum, a woman’s money making threatens her marital status, her image as respectable woman, and her potential access to additional sources of support. Overall, accessing support through relationships with men is in line with the prevalent ‘gender contract’, and therefore more advantageous to women’s overall livelihood security. In the current circumstances, women have much to gain from upholding these gender norms, which allow them to leave the laborious task of finding money to men, but still capitalize on the fruits of it.

Hence, while Western analysts tend to assume that a woman’s involvement in sexual-economic exchange signals destitution that leaves her no choice, my informants held quite an opposing view. They instead tended to interpret women’s involvement in non-sexual money making (be it ganyu, business, or wage labour) as forced by, and thus as sign of, deprivation. Meanwhile, a man’s material support to his sexual partner is considered obligatory, and thus irrespective of either his or her economic status.

Overall, this study shows that women’s choices concerning their sexual relationships usually have little to do with an acute need for direct support. Instead, their daily life choices in general – including those related to sexual interaction – are related to their attempts to assure or improve their vulnerable livelihoods. The relatively high degree of autonomy granted to women by matrilineal institutions is curtailed by their severe livelihood insecurity and the resultant dependence on support from others, including, but not restricted to, sexual partners. Their struggle for survival requires a constant juggling of diverse resources and a continuous readjustment of priorities to make the most of each situation. It is this judicious opportunism – the clever manoeuvring to keep open as many options as possible – that reveals women’s agency within the structural constraints they face.

It appears that the common depiction of poor women as powerless victims, forced by acute destitution to exchange sex for direct support, does not do justice to the everyday reality of southern Malawi. The implied expectation that women will readily switch to safe sexual practices when offered the means to generate an independent income fails to acknowledge the major role played by cultural conventions, the complexity of women’s economic survival strategies, and the agency that women exert in upholding and using to their advantage the prevalent gender norms.
Samenvatting (Dutch summary)

Het ‘transactionele seks paradigma’
Aan de hand van een Malawiaanse case study test dit boek de hypothese dat verbeterde bestaanszekerheid voor arme vrouwen er toe leidt dat zij veiligere seksuele keuzes maken. Deze hypothese komt voort uit de veronderstelling, met name gangbaar in de volksgezondheid- en ontwikkelingsliteratuur, dat armoede en genderongelijkheid vrouwen er toe drijven seksuele risico’s te nemen. Doorgaans wordt aangenomen dat afhankelijkheid van materiële steun van mannen de onderhandelingspositie van vrouwen met betrekking tot seks ondermijnt en hen om tegelijkertijd toe drijft om meerdere seksuele relaties aan te gaan, waardoor zij een verhoogd risico lopen op HIV-besmetting. Om de neerwaartse spiraal van armoede en AIDS te doorbreken, zo bepleiten veel rapporten, is economische empowerment van vrouwen essentieel omdat daarmee de oorzaak van riskante ‘overlevingsseks’ zou worden weggenomen. Omdat deze redenering zo wijdverspreid is en onbetwist blijft in veel van de literatuur spreek ik hier van het ‘transactionele seks paradigma’.

Armoede en AIDS in Malawi
Zowel armoede als HIV-besettingspercentages zijn uitzonderlijk hoog in Malawi. Beide pieken in de zuidelijke regio en stijgen op het platteland. Ik verwachtte daarom dat een mogelijk verband tussen de twee hier het meest geprononceerd en waarneembaar zou zijn en koos voor een dorpsgemeenschap in zuidelijk Malawi als lokatie voor deze studie. Intrigerend genoeg zijn de meeste dorpsgemeenschappen in deze regio matrilineair en matrilokaal georganiseerd. Dit betekent dat het de vrouwen zijn die landrechten hebben en in de buurt van hun (moeder’s) familie blijven wonen. Een man voegt zich bij zijn echtgenote en wordt verwacht te helpen bij het bewerken van haar land en het bouwen van een huis dat haar eigendom blijft in het geval van scheiding. Verschillende studies hebben aangetoond dat, als gevolg hiervan, de bestaanszekerheid van deze vrouwen over het algemeen groter is dan die van andere plattelandsvrouwen in Malawi. Met andere woorden, dit specifieke gebied, dat ik selecteerde vanwege de extreem hoge voedselonzekerheid en HIV-besettingspercentages – wat volgens het transactionele seks paradigma een laag sociaal-economische status van vrouwen ten opzichte van mannen zou voorspellen – lijkt juist een redelijk gunstige omgeving voor vrouwen. De relatief goede sociaal-economische positie van deze vrouwen maakt hen interessant voor deze studie, aangezien een analyse van hun seksuele keuzes licht kan werpen op de hypothetische impact van economische empowerment van vrouwen op HIV-verspreiding.

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1 Met ‘paradigma’ bedoel ik een denkpatroon van veronderstellingen, concepten en waarden waarmee een bepaalde kwestie bezien, geïnterpreteerd en geanalyseerd wordt, en dat zelf niet ter discussie wordt gesteld.
Dataverzameling
De data waarop deze studie bouwt, zijn grotendeels etnografisch van aard en verzameld gedurende een eenjarig verblijf in de onderzoeksgemeenschap tussen augustus 2008 en juli 2009. De onderzoeksgegevens zijn vergaard door mijzelf – een Nederlandse vrouw opgeleid als cultureel antropoloog die de meest gesproken taal van het gebied redelijk beheerst – met de onmisbare hulp van mijn onderzoeksassistent – een Malawiaanse vrouw met middelbare school opleiding die niet afkomstig is uit het onderzoeksdistrict maar beide talen die er gesproken worden wel vloeiend spreekt. De informele onderzoeksbenadering werd gefaciliteerd door dagelijkse spontane bijeenkomsten voor ons huisje van dorpsvrouwen die, net als ik, wilden leren breien van mijn onderzoeksassistent, onderwijl kletsend met elkaar en ons. Verder interviewden we alle negentig dorpsvrouwen, hielden vier dorpsvrouwen financiële dagboeken voor mij bij, interviewden we dertig vrouwen met een eigen handeltje op één van de markten nabij het onderzoeksdorp en verzamelden we geboortestatistieken bij de twee klinieken in de omgeving.

“Balancing men, morals and money”
Hoewel de dorpsbewoners zich terdege bewust zijn van HIV en mogelijke preventiethedomen, worden partners vaak snel gewisseld, overlappen veel relaties en blijft condoomgebruik minimaal. Bovendien accepteren de dorpsvrouwen geregeld aanzoeken van mannen wier seksuele en gezondheidsgeschiedenis hen onbekend zijn, wat hun risico op HIV-besmetting verder vergroot. In dit boek worden deze riskante seksuele keuzes verklaard middels het ontrafelen van de onderling gerelateerde historische, culturele en materiële factoren die van invloed zijn op de dagelijkse besluitvorming van vrouwen. Op basis van de verworven inzichten stel ik dat het transactionele seksparadigma belangrijke culturele en sociaal-economische aspecten van de seksuele besluitvorming van vrouwen over het hoofd ziet. Mijn data bevestigen weliswaar de veronderstelling dat behoefte aan (materiële) steun een rol speelt in de gretigheid waarmee veel vrouwen seksuele aanzoeken accepteren, maar tonen ook aan dat de relatie tussen bestaanszekerheid en onveilige seksuele keuzes gecompliceerder en minder rechtstreeks is dan meestal wordt aangenomen.
De erbarmelijke levensomstandigheden en pogingen deze het hoofd te bieden doordringen elke vezel van het dagelijkse leven. Bestaanszekerheid voor de dorpselingen staat en valt bij het kunnen mobiliseren van voldoende hulp ten tijden van nood. Het is veel meer dit belang van het creëren en behouden van toegang tot diverse potentiële hulpbronnen dan acute armoede an sich die ten grondslag ligt aan veel van de dagelijkse keuzes van vrouwen. Door het hele boek heen komt naar voren hoe vrouwen tactisch navigeren tussen de verschillende, soms conflicterende, potentiële hulpbronnen om zo hun toegang er toe te maximaliseren.
Seksuele relaties

Seksuele relaties blijken bij uitstek geschikt als hulpbron omdat het traditionele verwachtingspatroon voorschrijft dat een man zijn echtgenote moet voorzien van alle huishoudelijke behoeften buiten het door haar verbouwde voedsel om. Vrouwen hebben dus recht om financieel onderhouden te worden door hun seksuele partner en zijn zodoende gerechtvaardigd om dit van hem te claimen. Directe steun van een partner is echter niet de enige reden voor vrouwen om seksuele relaties aan te gaan. Een relatie brengt vrouwen ook een respectabele status, wat nodig is om hulp te kunnen ontvangen uit de wijdere gemeenschap. Voor veel dorpsvrouwen blijkt dit een belangrijke reden om een relatie aan te gaan of aan te houden, ook wanneer ze weinig tot geen directe steun ontvangen van de partner in kwestie. Aanvullende redenen zijn de verlangens naar affectie, seksuele bevrediging en kinderen, en het profiteren van de andere taken voorbehouden aan mannen naast inkomstengenererings. Gezien het grote belang dat vrouwen hechten aan het diversificeren van hulpbronnen is het waarschijnlijk dat seksuele relaties een belangrijk onderdeel blijven van hun overlevingstactiek, ook wanneer andere inkomstenbronnen voor hen beschikbaar zouden worden gemaakt.

Inkomstengenerering

De veronderstelling dat toegang tot inkomstengenerering de seksuele besluitvorming van vrouwen zou beïnvloed worden tevens betwist door onze bevindingen omtrent de middelen voor vrouwen om zelfstandig geld te verdienen. In tegenstelling tot de algemene aanname beschikken de dorpsvrouwen wel degelijk over manieren om zelfstandig geld te generen en maken zij hier geregeld gebruik van. Deze middelen brengen echter niet de verbetering in bestaanszekerheid die pleitbezorgers van economische empowerment voor vrouwen doorgaans verwachten. Wanneer een vrouw zich bezighoudt met inkomstengenerering kan dat namelijk haar toegang tot andere hulpbronnen blokkeren. Inkomstengenerering wordt cultureel gezien als specifieke taak van mannen, en daarom in principe als onnodig en ongepast voor vrouwen. Vanwege de sterke associatie van geld met mannen worden vrouwen met eigen inkomsten er vaak van verdacht hun rijkdom te verkrijgen door clandestiene seksuele relaties. Het onafhankelijke inkomen van een vrouw kan bovendien door echtgenoten en andere dorpsbewoners gebruikt worden als rechtvaardiging om haar van hulp te onthouden, omdat ze het niet nodig zou hebben. Tegelijkertijd kan het feit dat een vrouw zich ‘verlaagt’ tot inkomstengenerering geïnterpreteerd worden als een gebrek aan toegang tot hulpbronnen, wat het voor anderen onaantrekkelijk maakt om haar te helpen in tijden van nood aangezien ze niet in staat lijkt de hulp te reciproceren. Al met al bedreigt het zelfstandig genereren van geld door een vrouw haar huwelijk, haar respectabele imago en haar potentiële toegang tot aanvullende hulpbronnen. Het verkrijgen van steun van een echtgenoot is daarentegen in lijn met de heersende gendernormen en daarom het meest bevorderlijk voor de algehele bestaans-
zekerheid van vrouwen. Onder de huidige omstandigheden hebben vrouwen veel te winnen bij het in stand houden van dit genderpatroon, dat hen in staat stelt om de lastige taak van inkomstengenerering over te laten aan mannen, maar ondertussen wel de vruchten ervan op te eisen.

Concluderend
Terwijl Westerse analisten er vaak vanuit gaan dat seksueel-economische uitwisseling het gevolg is van diepe armoede die vrouwen geen andere keuze laat, hielden mijn informanten er een tegengestelde visie op na. Zij interpreteerden juist vaak niet-seksuele inkomstengenerering als veroorzaakt door, en dus teken van, ernstige armoede – met diverse negatieve gevolgen van dien. De gangbare voorstelling van arme Afrikaanse vrouwen als machteloze slachtoffers, door acute armoede gedwongen om seks te ruilen voor directe steun van een man doet geen recht aan de dagelijkse realiteit van zuidelijk Malawi. De verwachting dat een vrouw veiligere seksuele gewoontes aanneemt wanneer ze de mogelijkheid krijgt aangeboden om structureel een zelfstandig inkomen te genereren onderschat de kracht van culturele conventies, de complexiteit van de economische overlevingsstrategieën van vrouwen, en de pro-actieve rol van vrouwen bij het in stand houden en voor eigen voordeel inzetten van de heersende gendernormen.