Balancing men, morals and money: Women's agency between HIV and security in a Malawi village

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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 destitution. 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.

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