Balancing men, morals and money: Women’s agency between HIV and security in a Malawi village
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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\(^1\) 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\(^2\) (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.\(^3\) 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

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 contradictio 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 B7) 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.8 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.

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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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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

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\(^{13}\) 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. Nsima is then eaten only once a day instead of twice, and becomes increasingly diluted each day until only a liquid porridge (phala) remains. 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. As long as there is enough maize, the grains are peeled for softer flour and finer nsima. 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.

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. When possible, social relations who have maize are begged to share some of it. 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. Alternatively, other types of food that are considered inferior to maize, such as cassava, are also bought at relatively high prices. 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. 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.

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. “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 yield [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. 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. 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\textsuperscript{21} 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

\textsuperscript{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 in 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\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{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 uxorilocality 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.23

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 Makhua 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

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 as “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 villagers [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.

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 woman 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\(^{28}\) 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 \([P2\ 1635;\ P3\ 0364,\ 2862,\ 4019]\), 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.\(^{29}\) A gate-man makes about 3000 MK\(^{30}\) 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.\(^{31}\) 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 \([P3\ 0550,\ 0608,\ 2791,\ 2943–4,\ 2951,\ 2999–3000,\ 3088–93,\ 3310–1,\ 3377–8,\ 3468–9,\ 3613,\ 3766,\ 4018]\). 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.

\(^{28}\) 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 \([P2\ 1744,\ 2030,\ 2042;\ P3\ 1196]\).

\(^{29}\) Equivalent to half a Euro at the time of the research.

\(^{30}\) Equivalent to approximately 15 Euro at the time of the research.

\(^{31}\) 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 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 women [P3 2344, 3160, 3173, 3182, 3282, 3407–9, 3578, 3603, 3624, 3635, 3671, 3860, 3864]. Invariably, women described their husbands as the akulu

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 (head34 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 anthropologists35 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 Bemba36 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 matrilocally 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.