Balancing men, morals and money: Women’s agency between HIV and security in a Malawi village
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Women’s sexual relationship choices

Introduction

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

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

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

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

Defining relationships
In the context of this chapter on sexual relationships two issues are worth noting beforehand. Firstly, it is important to recognize that throughout Africa the conjugal bond has long been and in many places continues to be considered inferior to the lineage bond.¹ Both men and women in the first place remain members of their lineage, irrespective of whom they marry. As a result, women are not primarily considered (prospective) wives, but (prospective) procreators of the lineage. A woman’s social identity and self-identity are thus not derived from wifehood but rather from motherhood. This is exemplified by the fact that women, as soon as they have children, are in Mudzi always addressed and referred to as “Mother of So-and-so,” and not, as is customary in the West, in their capacity as wife, as “Mrs. Name-of-husband.” Such naming may seem a trivial particularity, but it signals an essentially different value system. Marriage to a certain man is not a central part of a woman’s identity, and switching partners does not affect her identification. Although marriage in general is valued for practical reasons, precisely whom a woman marries is considered of less importance. This may be illustrated by Audrey Richards’s finding that young women of the Bemba – a matrilineally organized society with kinship structures similar to the Yao – were expected to simply accept the first marriage proposal she received (Richards 1969 [1940]: 22). Scholars of matrilineally organized communities throughout Africa, furthermore, have noted that too strong a commitment between husband and wife tends to be socially disapproved of, and discouraged in more or less subtle ways, as this is feared to compete with the spouses’ loyalty towards their respective lineages (Bleek 1987a: 139, 142, Poewe 1981: 56, 67–8, Stuart et al. 2011a: 30).

Secondly, throughout Africa anthropologists have noted that traditional marriages were not sealed through one, single, clearly defined rite, but rather became gradually solidified through processes that could take extensive periods of time.² To what extent this was the case for the Yao is unclear. The one classic reference point for this ethnic group – British sociologist and anthropologist James Clyde Mitchell – only reported that formalized marriage rites seemed non-existent, writing that: “marriage is legalized entirely by the public acknowledgement of the fact by representatives of each [partner’s matrikin] group” (Mitchell 1962: 35). In

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

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

The Mudzi definition of marriage (and consequentially divorce) that I adopt in this book is without clear-cut demarcations and open for some individual interpretation. The ChiChewa term used for it is banja, which literally translates as nuclear family or household, and in principle refers to a steady relationship that entails living together. Following general custom within Malawi I use the English term ‘marriage’ as a translation of banja. A chibwenzi relationship in principle refers to the courting stage of a relationship, in which partners remain in their separate households and visit each other during daytime. In theory, the couple can get to know each other during this period, while the man assembles the items (pot, pan, plates, cups, blanket) that he is supposed to bring to marriage [P2 0451, 1436; P3 0608, 1911, 3799, 3800, 3843, 3847, 3937, 3943, 4009]. In practice, a chibwenzi relationship does not necessarily lead to banja, and a banja relationship need not be preceded by a chibwenzi stage.

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

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

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

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

**Riskiness of relationship practices**

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

*Quick and pragmatic entry into sexual relationships*

- The practice of proposing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

• Reasons for accepting
  Discourse of need and destitution

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

  The motive that Mudzi women mentioned most frequently for becoming (and staying) involved in a particular sexual relationship was their need for material support. When justifying their acceptance of a sexual proposal women often used the words *mavuto* [problems], *kuvutika* [to have problems/suffer], or *kusowa* [to lack/be needy], adding that they had hoped that their proposer would help them to get the things they lacked, in particular soap, food, and clothes [e.g. P2 1580, 1653, 1901; P3 0495, 0732, 0741, 0784, 0991, 0995, 1501, 1730, 3165, 3594, 3790, 3849, 3861, 3941, 3949, 3953, 3970, 3988, 3998, 4005, 4008, 4012]. Many then elaborated upon their claimed need for support by emphasizing that they had lost their caretakers or struggled to care for their children alone [e.g. P2 1653, 1901; P3 0741, 0746, 0784, 0995, 1501, 3849, 3949, 3953, 3988, 3998, 4002, 4012]:


Mariya\(^6\) (38) relates that her parents had so many children to take care of that she structurally lacked soap, clothes, even food. Therefore, when at 15 a man offered to take care of her, she gladly accepted his proposal. Her problems were so urgent, Mariya emphasizes, that she did not take time to inquire about the man or get to know him better before actually marrying [P3 0495, 3941]. The man turned out to be lazy, and did not give her the support she had hoped for. One day their baby fell off her back because she did not have a sufficiently large and strong *chitenje* with which to properly tie the infant. She blamed her husband, for he had failed to meet her needs as mother. Fed up with his behaviour, she complained to her *ankhoswe* and chief, and divorced [P3 0506]. She moved back into her mother’s house, where she faced the same problems as before. Fortunately, it did not take long before a next man proposed marriage, and she again accepted gratefully [P3 0517, 3851]. In the first years of their marriage the man behaved fine, regularly buying *ndiwo*, soap, clothes for her and later their three children. But he liked other women too much, and began spending nights elsewhere. One day he simply stopped coming back home [P3 3856, 3902]. Mariya struggled to keep her household going, working hard in her field and doing *ganyu* on the side for money [P3 0519, 1603, 3902]. She felt relieved when yet another man came looking for a wife and was referred to her house – he moved in the very same night. The man did do *ganyu* every now and then, but gave her little money, spending most of it on beer. On top of that, he sometimes beat her badly when he came home drunk, which soon made her decide to send him away [P3 0608, 3817, 4000]. The next proposer really was a good man, because he often helped her on her field and treated well her children from other men. Unfortunately, he died a few years after marriage, leaving her with two more children to take care of. One day when doing *ganyu* in a neighbouring village, she and one of the other day labourers found out that both had no partner, and decided to marry – “so that he can help me”. Mariya assumed he would be a serious man, since he was working on the field at the time they met [P 3772]. But she now fiercely complains about her husband’s gambling and extramarital girlfriends. She accepts him nonetheless, saying that she would not know how else to manage taking care of her six children. [P3 0551, 3851]

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

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6 This is the only data fragment that I have ‘fabricated’, by blending the stories of various Mudzi women into the marital history of one fictional woman. Fabrication of cases is obviously risky. By only picking out certain elements of a real case, removing these from their context, and merging them at wish within a new fictional context, an ethnographer enlarges the risk of overlooking important correlations between factors. Nonetheless, this approach has been applied by others too. Nick Miedema (1983) even did so on a much wider scale in his study on the Scilly Islands. He opted to condense all his data into the form of a biography of one fictional ego, striving for an impression of a ‘typical’ Scilly islander. An elaboration upon this method can be found in Miedema (1984). In another anthropological study, by Warner & Lunt (1941) on the social class structures in a North American city, all cases presented were fictional merges of real data. Contrary to Miedema, I do not suggest that my imaginary Mariya represents a ‘typical’ Mudzi woman – the great diversity of women’s situations makes it preposterous that one marital history could be representative for all. I have simply chosen to condense the data in this way for efficiency sake, so as to represent numerous rationales within a relatively short text. Based on our findings from and experiences in the field, I believe that this fabricated relationship history does justice to the accounts of real Mudzi women.
Women’s widespread claim that poverty had pushed them to engage in sexual relationships seems backed by birth statistics retrieved from the two maternity wards\(^7\) in the area. At both wards data could be recovered for (almost) each month of the five years prior to the research. Table 1 shows the average number of births per month over these five years and so gives an insight in the seasonal fluctuations.\(^8\) The table shows a significantly higher number of childbirths in August and September. This peak occurs nine months after the time when food shortages become most pressing.

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

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

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

\(^8\) Notably, the individual years show greater disparities in number of births per month. However, as the exact timing and length of the (peak of the) annual hunger season differ per year, so too do the peaks in childbirths. Hence, when calculating the average over several years, the individual peaks are leveled off.
breastmilk dries up, which reactivates their fertility. At the same time, however, fertility may be negatively affected by the lower food intake. In line with women’s own statements about the link between pressing need and resorting to sexual liaisons for male support, the peak may indeed indicate an increased incidence of unprotected sex during the season of scarcity.

Contesting the ‘acute poverty’ claim
Interestingly, however, the birth statistics in Table 5.1 also show a peak in December and January – nine months after harvest, when food is abundant and relatively large sums of money flow into the community because the main cash crop, cotton, is sold. Apparently the occurrence of (unprotected) sexual intercourse peaks both when the need for money or food is highest and – albeit to a lesser extent – when the availability of money and food are highest. In other words, the incidence of unprotected sex also peaks at the very moment at which advocates of the transactional sex paradigm hypothesize a decline in women’s sexual risk taking. The increase in sexual relationships during harvest time was confirmed by the (unsolicited) quotes from informants, such as the following:

While knitting Livia (21, unmarried mother of two), claimed that she did not want to get involved with men anymore. The other women laughed, and one forecasted: “Ah, we’ll see during the next cotton-selling season, you’ll surely find yourself pregnant again then!” Another woman added: “Have you forgotten that during cotton-selling season farmers have a lot of money and can cheat on you [by saying] that they’ll marry you and then when the money finishes go back to their wife??”[P3 0507]

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

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

As described, all Mudzi women grow their own maize, and many also grow and sell cotton. At least for the time being, their livelihoods are secure during harvest time. Nonetheless the occurrence of sexual relationships appears to increase at this time of the year. Apparently, these women’s involvement in sexual relationships is not only motivated by acute and pressing destitution, as generally claimed in Mudzi women’s self-reports and assumed by advocates of the transactional sex paradigm. More accurately, women seized the opportunity to access extra money⁹ – as some men have, or claim they will soon have, full pockets after selling their cotton harvest. Assessing the data obtained through other means than the formal interviews indeed paints a more nuanced picture, for example about the type of material support desired and received from men. Rather than merely concerning

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

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

When Venesi (35) passed by with a certain man, Livia (21) started laughing and said that: “This is how village men are. The one who is in relationship with Venesi wants to eat the maize that will come from her field. After that their relationship will end” [P2 1058, also P3 2404]. Some weeks later, another Mudzi woman commented about Venesi’s new relationship: “Venesi wants to get married now! But after cotton season they will divorce. That is what most of the men use to do.” [P2 1398]

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

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

As appears from the above fragments, not only women were looking for (complementary) resources, some men too perceived the season of abundance as an opportunity to increase their access to food and money by entering into new (sometimes polygynous) relationships or reuniting with exes. Rather than benefitting materially, the women who accepted proposals from these men sacrificed part of their harvest and income to be in a relationship.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The equation of a sexual relationship with men’s gifting is socio-culturally so deeply embedded that several informants implied that a certain man and woman were sexually involved by merely stating that “he took her to the market” [P2 2001; P3 1482, 1679]. The direct association of income with men also shows from a joke made by one elderly Mudzi widow: Pointing to the basket full of groundnuts that she kept for sale, Alma (66) commented that those were “her husband” now, as they helped her to get the things she needed [P3 4018].

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

12 Several contemporary anthropologists have argued that the tradition of bridewealth may have laid the basis for the now frequently noted transactional aspect of sexual relationships in Africa (e.g. Helle-Valle 1999: 379, Hunter 2010: 190, Nobelius et al. 2010: 498–9, Wamoyi et al. 2010: 16). This would be nearly insignificant for matrilineal societies where there is no customary payment of bridewealth. Even so, the less well-defined requirement for men to show long-term commitment, through gifting and labouring in his partner’s field, before becoming properly accepted as husband or son-in-law (e.g. Richards 1969 [1940]: 77), may have had the same effect. If current-day relationships in patrilineal societies are modelled after an exchange of bridewealth for sexual access to a woman, in matrilineal societies the tradition of a man’s continued gifting to formalize a marriage bond may have led to a persistent expectation, even claiming, of male support in sexual relationships.
woman tells an unrelated man about her financial problems, it is implicated that she is actually communicating her interest in a sexual relationship with him. Rather than male-female interactions entailing direct and deliberate exchanges of material support for sex, the picture that emerges is thus one in which sex and gifting are deeply intertwined and are both no more and no less than inherent features of male-female unions. “Sex and material gifts”, Wiseman Chirwa (1997: 8) argues for relationships in Malawi, “can have the same emotional value”. As a result, gifting is also strongly interrelated with feelings of affection and love, a point to which I return further on.

Because sexual relationships grant a woman entitlement to support, they form an important means for her to increase her livelihood security. Although, as we will see further on, such direct access to support is not the only reason for women to engage in sexual relationships, I here want to make the point that women tend to play an active role in assuring such support. As providing is expected from male partners in sexual relationships (just like paying reverence, attending to household chores, and caring for children are expected from the female partner), women have a right to claim such support. We overheard some men discuss, and were told by others, that women can be very explicit and demanding about the kind of gifts and the large share of the meagre incomes they desire from their partner [P2 0095, 0492, 0633, 0777, 0924; P3 1126, 2138, 2651, 2900–15]. Telling us about ordinary village boys like himself who – contrary to businessmen from town – struggle to find a partner and keep her satisfied, Ethelo (23) explained:

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

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

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

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

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

Other reasons for sexual relationships
Conformity and community respect
“IT’s just natural, God created a man and a woman to live together.”[P3 3203–4, also P3 3189–
90, 3310–1, 3617, 3675, 3900, 4018]15

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

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

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

One of the most successful women at the markets that we frequented was Patricia (36), who ran a thriving business of *zitenje* – the colourful cloth wrap that many women wear around their waist and tie their babies in. Patricia complained that her husband did not help her in any way in her business, and that he had extramarital relationships. The reason she mentioned for staying with him despite her discontent was to keep people from assuming that she gained her wealth through prostitution. When married, people could at least think that she received money and gifts from her husband – even though in reality she earned it all through her own business. [P3 0455, 0707, see also P3 3056]

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

\textsuperscript{16} In Malawi primary education is free, but secondary education is not. Many children and youngsters therefore do not continue on to secondary school, and many drop out before even reaching that stage.
Chikondi (28) told us that some months back she had married a man on the very same day that they had first met on the way to the market. This man tends to disappear to his home village during the day, only showing up in the evenings to eat and sleep. He does not support Chikondi and her children in any substantial way – only sporadically does he bring a bar of soap or some vegetables. When I asked Chikondi why she had agreed to marry this man, she explained that other women had stopped talking to her at the pump after her first husband had left her, because they suspected her of receiving their husbands in her house. Within reach for her to hear, women had told each other: “Don’t talk to her, she may steal your husband.” Quickly marrying a new man had been the only way for her to stop such gossip, she felt. She now has an extra mouth to feed, but at least is accepted again by her fellow village women. [P3 3817-9]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ideally, as gathered from the above, a woman has a husband to provide for her and their children. Conforming to this ideal brings respect, while defiance brings about both suspicion and disrespect. Numerous women referred to such community respect, or disrespect, as reason for (quickly) accepting a marriage proposal, or staying with their (unsatisfying) husband [P3 0417, 2730, 2927, 2939–42, 2979, 3115, 3293, 3308–9, 3437, 3492–3, 3580, 3608, 3900, 3923].

Male tasks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It seems safe to say that where there is gifting (between a non-related man and woman), there is sex21 – and where there is sex, there is gifting. This does not mean, however, that whenever there are sex and gifting, there is love (see also Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009: 20). Love is longed for in a relationship, and considered an important ingredient for a long-lasting, stable marriage [P2 1605; P3 0824, 1208, 3223–4, 3923]. It is, however, not considered a prerequisite for entering a chibwenzi

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relationship or marriage – as demonstrated in the previous subsections. Rather, it is generally considered to arise from and be nurtured by the caring behaviour of both partners – a woman preparing her partner’s favourite meal, a man bringing household necessities before his partner asks for it, and helping to cultivate her field without complaint [e.g. P2 1606; P3 2507, 2676, 3860]. Some Mudzi women stated that such love usually lasts only from “just after marriage until the first child is born” [P2 1605; P3 0844, 3191], while others believe that it is something that grows when spouses persist in their commitment to each other and their household over an extended period of time [P3 2507, 2752].

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

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

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

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

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

Frequent divorce and remarriage

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

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

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22 Such a repressive female sexual morality has been linked to Christian influences in Africa (e.g. Ahlberg 1994, Arnfred 2007). I dare not say to what extent this is the case in Mudzi. In the next chapter I elaborate upon sexual mores and practices.
be highest in matrilineally organized societies. Lesley Noonan (1979) compared ethnographic data on 442 ‘preliterate’ societies regarding conditions that are in the social science literature often mentioned as affecting divorce rates. Of the tested variables, only matrilocal residence after marriage was found on its own to predict greater marriage instability. Post-marital matrilocal residence may be associated with arguments one, four, and five (although this last is strongly related to other factors too, as argued in Chapter 2). The argument that the custom of bridewealth increases marital stability is not supported by Noonan’s cross-cultural study, nor by Gibbs who notes that marriage payments are at times just (fruitless) attempts to counter high levels of marriage instability (Gibbs 1963: 558).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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31 Some husbands send a notification to their wife after disappearing, informing her that their marriage has ended and granting her permission to look for a new partner [P3 0705]. Even without such formal notification, a chief can decide to allow an abandoned woman to divorce unilaterally if he or she finds this reasonable [P3 2297].
Men are generally perceived as instigating divorce32 quicker and more often than women [P2 1604; P3 3185, 3247–8, 3264–5, 3410-1, 3593, 3672], and as soon as they are slightly unsatisfied with her behaviour. According to some Mudzi women, men just find themselves another wife, and leave – usually in that order [P2 0125; P3 2889, 3854]. In practice, obviously, not all men are so quick to depart. One Mudzi man compared his (quarrelsome) marriage to football: “Sometimes you fall, but then you just get up and continue, still enjoying the game” [P3 2753]. Nonetheless, numerous Mudzi women relate that their ex-partners simply left one day without giving any reason, and never returned [e.g. P3 0546, 1040, 3766, 3772, 3900, 3902, 3962, 3963, 3994]. Not seldom did this departure coincide with childbirth [P2 0144, 0160, 1605, 1638, 1883, 1940; P3 0505, 0698, 0780, 0871, 1729]. Local custom prohibits couples from having sex in the months after delivery,33 which prompts some men to (temporarily) move in with another woman. Furthermore, as described earlier, various Mudzi men left their wife and her children when the responsibility of providing became too difficult [P2 1178, 1221; P3 1729], as did Rosemary’s fifth husband:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In no case did a Mudzi woman complain about – let alone want to divorce – a husband who supported her sufficiently [e.g. P3 3225–6].35 This, again, should not be interpreted as indicating that women are only after material gain. Rather, in a

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\(^3\) A ‘mandasi’ is a local pastry.
Husbands and wives can never be sure of their spouses’ commitment to their partnership and not rely on his or her sustained support. This reinforces and is reinforced by each spouse’s prioritization of their individual agendas. In response to this reality, Mudzi villagers found ways to cover their needs, in more or less subtle ways, both within marriage and by changing or even combining partners. This navigating of both men and women between different partners is further analysed in the following section.

Relational overlap

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

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

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

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

• Polygyny

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

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

In the literature on gender and AIDS, men tend to be perceived as the authoritative partner in heterosexual relationships (Arnfred 2007: 145, Kaler 2004a: 286), and their wives in their house [P2 1561; P3 2206]). The women who during our fieldwork period were caught having sex with another man than their husband, did so in their own house, at nights when their husbands were away (but came back earlier than expected).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Deconstructing the discourse of destitution

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

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

45 See also African feminist Oyeronke Oyewùmí (2002: 6), who argues that in many African cultures the idiom of marriage is a way of describing patron-clients relationships.

Livia (21) experienced the negative consequences of her promiscuous image when the two men who each planned to marry her were discouraged to do so by other Mudzi women saying that Livia was a *hule* who likes men too much. [P2 1645, 1756, 1796, 1882; P3 2495]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion and conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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