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

Introduction

With this anthropological case study of Mudzi village I have aimed to contribute to the discussion on links between poverty, gender inequality, and HIV risk. Current policy reports on HIV prevention, both in sub-Saharan Africa and other regions struggling with severe poverty, tend to promote a shift from individual, biomedical approaches to approaches that address the risk environment of vulnerable population groups. Women are considered particularly vulnerable, because among them infection rates are higher (in Africa) and increase faster (in both Africa and other poor regions) than among men. An increasingly widespread explanation for this is women’s economic dependence on men, which is believed to drive them to risky exchanges of sex for material support despite their awareness of the health risks involved. I call this explanatory model the ‘transactional sex paradigm’. The aim of this study was to assess the model’s applicability to sexual relationships in Mudzi, a rural community in southern Malawi where both livelihood insecurity and HIV prevalence are extremely high.

My findings from Mudzi suggest that the transactional sex paradigm builds on a simplistic and ethnocentric representation of the issues at stake. I concur with advocates of this paradigm that livelihood insecurity and gender ideologies may lead women to make risky sexual choices, but – at least in the case of Mudzi – these are not such straightforwardly causal factors in women’s vulnerability to HIV infection as is commonly assumed. Consequently, the acclaimed solution of providing women such as those in Mudzi with independent income-generating options is unlikely to achieve its desired results. Two overarching arguments have unfolded throughout this book that challenge the promoted ‘way forward’. Firstly, it was found that many aspects other than direct economic dependence on men encourage women to engage in sexual relationship practices that are risky in a context of high HIV prevalence. Secondly, while income-generating opportunities
for women are often already available, women generally consider these a less preferred option.

In this concluding chapter, I summarize the main explanatory insights that surfaced from my data analysis, and combine these to formulate a final answer to this study’s overall research question. In the following discussion I delve deeper into a number of issues that emerged from the data and are relevant to wider discussions. Finally, I wrap up with concluding remarks about the practical implications of this study’s findings for further social science research and policy making.

Summarizing

Here, I will not describe the major themes of this study sequentially as they appeared in the chapters. Whereas the chapters were organized in such a way to best dissect the main research question, the answering of this question benefits from a combining and different ordering of the arguments that appeared from the analyses. Where relevant I refer to the chapter in which a particular theme is explored in depth.

Notwithstanding a discourse among Mudzi villagers that “times have changed” and that frequently switching partners should be avoided in a context of AIDS, divorce is widespread and in general soon followed by remarriage. Commonly, women accept relationship proposals from men whose sexual and health histories are unknown, which further adds to women’s risk of contracting HIV. In addition, condom use remains low and partner concurrency high. In order to comprehend these various risky practices, it is necessary to disentangle the interrelated historical, cultural, and material dynamics that affect women’s daily decision making.

The historical trajectory of gender relations in southern Malawi that is discussed in Chapter 2, shows that Bantu women have long been considered pivotal society members of equal or even higher social standing than men. Various factors, among which the military power to ward off subjugation by patrilineal groups and the rejection of Christianity, have led to the perseverance of the matrilineal Bantu system among the Yao, who form the majority of my research population. Two important and related characteristics of marital relationships result from this matrilineal system, which continue to be found today: the relative weakness of the conjugal bond and the utilitarian approach to marriage. Marriage is still said to primarily revolve around ‘helping each other’, which attests to a persistent perception of husbands and wives as mutually dependent and of their respective roles as complementary.

As holders of the fields matrilineal women of southern Malawi have always been and continue to be in control of food production and preparation. Men’s traditional role was to supplement the staple foods – for example with meat through hunting or salt through trading. When money and the hut tax were introduced by the British
colonial regime, men were locally considered the logical candidates to go out and earn cash. Over the years, money has come to play an increasingly important role in rural daily life. New consumer goods triggered desire, while a multitude of factors coalesced to deteriorate farmers’ capacity to grow sufficient food. Both intensified the households’ want for money. Men continue to be held culturally responsible for providing all that a household needs beyond homegrown food, which today means first and foremost: money. Gender analysts tend to assume that the combination of households’ increased need for money with men’s designated role to earn it enhances men’s position of power at the expense of that of women. However, it appears from our data that the power balance is more nuanced. Men’s responsibility to earn money is not simply a privilege, but also a burden that women continue to lay on men’s shoulders because they think that this is to their advantage.

In Chapter 3 I note that few men in Mudzi are able to generate sufficient income to meet their own and their households’ needs and wants. Harsh ecological circumstances, combined with population pressure and detrimental political interests and disinterests of the British colonial administration, subsequent Malawian presidents, and international institutes have led to extremely high levels of livelihood insecurity throughout the country. Among others, this has resulted in widespread male migration to urban centres and to South Africa in search of work, which could explain the more-or-less permanent shortage of men in the rural areas that leaves about one-third of Mudzi women not married at any given point in time.

The struggle to overcome harsh living conditions permeates every aspect of daily village life, including, but reaching far beyond, sexual relationships. The most common means for Mudzi women to obtain resources entail marriage and semi-relationships, the cultivation and sale of food and cash crops, ganyu (piecework), petty trade, development projects, and a wide social network. In the ethnographic chapters these means to support are examined in detail. Throughout, it appears that villagers’ ability to mobilize resources in times of emergency is central to their survival amidst the frequent occurrence and persistent threat of livelihood shocks. It is this vital importance of spreading risk by diversifying access to multiple sources of potential future support, rather than acute deprivation per se, that underlies many women’s daily life decisions, including those concerning sexual relationships. The analyses of the ethnographic data reveal women’s tactical navigation between these various and sometimes conflicting sources of potential support in order to maximize access and minimize blockage to support.

Despite men’s general inability to generate sufficient money, Chapter 5 reveals that relationships with men are an important means for women to increase their household’s security, both directly and indirectly. Through marriage a woman attaches to her household not just additional labour power, but someone who is culturally expected to take up the heavy tasks in the field, the maintenance of the house, and the earning of money. Sexual liaisons are therefore a means to physical and material
support par excellence, as women are customarily entitled to receive, and justified to claim, such support from their partners. Furthermore, marriage accredits women with a respectable status, which enhances their access to potential future support from the wider community. Unmarried women tend to face scorn from and risk exclusion by married women who fear competition over their husband. This helps to explain why some Mudzi women also entered into or stayed involved in relationships with men who did not otherwise contribute to their household.

However, this material side of relationships is only part of the story. Men’s willingness to provide support in generally difficult circumstances is highly appreciated by women as a symbolic gesture of ‘love’, ‘care’, and ‘commitment’. Men who make the effort to provide are by definition loving husbands, while husbands who do not are discredited (and often divorced) for their disrespect and carelessness. This intertwining of material transfers with cultural norms and emotional attachment tends to be overlooked in the transactional sex paradigm, leading to incorrect interpretations of the involved women’s destitution and powerlessness.

The preference for a (stable) partnership also plays a role in women’s ambivalent attitudes towards independent income generation, described in Chapter 8. Opportunities for women to make money are regularly available, and particularly ganyu and petty-trade are often engaged in. Most village women are only involved in such activities temporarily, however, and generally just in between sexual partnerships. In other words, women can and do economically survive without men, but for a number of reasons most prefer to access support primarily through relationships with men. Husbands tend to object to women’s engagement in trade, as it negatively reflects on their image as provider and potentially exposes their wives to the advances of other men. Furthermore, income-generating activities are often tedious and considered inappropriate for women. As money is ideologically associated with men, women with cash are often suspected to have obtained it through (illicit) sexual relationships. Additionally, a woman’s access to independent income may give husbands and fellow villagers justification for withholding additional support, as it can be argued that she does not need it. At the same time, fellow villagers may assume from a woman’s ‘resort’ to money making that she has no other sources of support to turn to. This assumption makes offering her help unattractive, as she seems unlikely to be able to reciprocate. Although sharing is a social obligation, it is preferably done with people who are likely to return the favour, as explored in Chapter 7.1 Arousing suspicion that one lacks access to support may thus be detrimental to one’s livelihood security, and is therefore

1 It must be emphasized that I do not believe that this local logic is a cultural trait characteristic of Mudzi, or Yao, or rural Malawian people. Having to make such merciless choices results rather from the desperate level of livelihood insecurity that these people must deal with on a daily basis, most probably for as long as they live.
avoided whenever possible. In sum, making money threatens a woman’s marital status, her image as a respectable woman, and her potential access to additional sources of support. Overall, accessing support through relationships with men is in line with the prevalent ‘gender contract’, and therefore more advantageous to women’s overall livelihood security.

From the various facets of gender relations a complex and confusing blend of intra-household power dynamics emerges. In matrilineal Mudzi, women own the two main assets for daily survival: the land and the house. Men need a wife for access to these. Women, however, need a husband to clear their field and build and maintain their house. Furthermore, household food security has nowadays become impossible to achieve without monetary inputs, and, as said above, finding money is considered a primarily male task. Both naturally and culturally men are better able to do *ganyu* or run a business, as they are often physically stronger (and never have to share their energy with a foetus, suckling baby, or child tied on their back). They are also exempted from the household chores of cooking, cleaning, fetching water and firewood that keep women busy. For reasons mentioned earlier, many women prefer and tactically manoeuvre to hold men responsible for the arduous duty of money making. Overall, the gendered power scale seems quite balanced. Men and women need each other in order to secure their livelihoods and both depend on sexual relationships to prosper. However, the relative shortage of men and the resultant surplus of women in want of a husband affects this equilibrium. Competition among women intensifies and social repercussions against those without a partner chafe. This further increases the need for a husband. Although remarriage is more urgent for men than for women as they have no proper place to stay without a wife, it is easier accomplished by men – especially so when an abundance of women eagerly awaits a proposal. Nonetheless, this balance shift generally does not prevent a Mudzi woman from eventually dismissing an unsatisfactory husband. Rather, the impact of the imbalance seems to be that a man has less incentive to behave as a proper husband, as he can easily find a new partner when his current wife complains too much or sends him off.

As a result, divorce continues to be widespread, as it seems to have been throughout matrilineal Bantu history. Although the threat of AIDS has added yet another argument against marital instability, most Mudzi women remain unwilling to put up with a husband whom they feel is insufficiently committed to them and their household. The correlations found in Chapter 3 between marital status and household food security validate these women’s logic. Women staying with a husband who negatively affects the household income – because he eats without providing or helping on the field – are likely to end up in the ‘worst off’ category, whereas women involved in long-term relationships with collaborating husbands form the mainstay of the ‘best off’ category. Women who continue searching for this ideal partner form the middle group, roughly speaking.
In women’s quest for livelihood security and stable partnerships, sex is an indispensable element – the glue that solidifies a reciprocal relationship between unrelated men and women. As shown in Chapter 6, the traditional reverence towards sex as vital to personal, marital, and communal wellbeing continues to be reproduced during ceremonies and rituals performed at various stages throughout the life course of an individual. Restrictions against extramarital sex existed long before HIV entered the scene, and are still commonly subscribed to. In practice, however, trespassing is considered excusable on a number of grounds. By extension, villagers apply these same grounds to pardoning the sexual behaviours that HIV-prevention campaigns advise against. Furthermore, AIDS, like other STIs in the past, now for many seems to have transitioned into a disease that can be ‘cured’, or at least suppressed, for an extended period of time, by using medication that is freely distributed. A pragmatic mix of fearlessness, fatalism, a social need not to become associated with AIDS, and the urgency of other livelihood threats have led to a generally low prioritization of HIV prevention among Mudzi villagers. Rather than lack of negotiating power on the terms under which sex takes place, I believe it is these factors that prevent many Mudzi women from adopting the promoted ABC practices.

In sum, the data presented in this book do not negate that economic considerations play an important role in women’s decisions to engage in sexual relationships, nor that these decisions can lead to practices that are risky in a context of high HIV prevalence. Rather, my data show that these facts should not be taken to mean that the women involved in risky sexual practices are necessarily in acute need, without other options to survive, and forced into sex against their will – as advocates of the transactional sex paradigm tend to presume. This case study first and foremost reveals that women who are not economically disadvantaged vis-à-vis men choose to engage in relationship practices that expose them to the risk of HIV infection. Notably, whereas Western analysts tend to assume that a woman’s involvement in sexual-economic exchange signals destitution, Mudzi villagers, quite to the contrary, interpret women’s involvement in non-sexual money making (be it ganyu, business, or wage labour) as forced by, and thus as sign of, deprivation. Rather than being women’s only means of support, sexual partnerships are considered the most appropriate source of support. Under the current circumstances, women have much to gain from upholding this gender construction, which permits them to leave the increasingly difficult task of finding money to men, but still capitalize on the fruits of it. Considering the high value that Mudzi women attach to spreading risk by fostering multiple sources of potential future support, sexual relationships

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2 As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 6, the general message of most formal HIV-prevention recommendations can be summarized as “Abstain, Be faithful, or use a Condom,” which is often abbreviated as ABC.
are likely to remain treasured as an important means of support even when other income sources are made available. Overall, Mudzi women engage in sexual relationships for a number of reasons other than those that are directly material, most of which could not be replaced by an independent income.³

It appears that the common depiction of poor women as powerless victims unwillingly forced by acute destitution to engage in direct exchanges of sex for material support does not do justice to the daily reality of life in Mudzi. The implied expectation that women will readily abstain from risky sexual practices when offered the means to generate an independent income fails to acknowledge the major role played by cultural norms, the complexity of women’s economic survival strategies, and the agency they exert in upholding the prevalent gender norms.

Generalizability
In this study of Mudzi village, the in-depth anthropological research approach has proven its worth. A quantitative end-of-project survey, which was conducted in the area during our fieldwork period, found evidence for increased self-efficacy of respondents to abstain, be faithful, use condoms, and reduce the number of sexual partners (Rimal et al. 2009). We witnessed, however, how the surveyed Mudzi women had felt insulted by the questions about their sex lives and gave mostly untruthful answers. The unknown men and women who administered the questions had been dropped off by a van, spread themselves throughout the village, arbitrarily interrogated people while offering nothing in return, and vanished again some hours later – with nonsense⁴ data, leaving behind perplexed and agitated Mudzi villagers [see P2 0191–0269; P3 0580, 2216, 2529]. This is not to suggest that quantitative studies are by definition incapable of retrieving sensitive personal data (see for example the solid studies of the AWLAE⁵ project and

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³ Realistically, moreover, self-employment – which constitutes the bulk of externally organized income-generating activities for poor women – is unlikely to significantly and consistently improve households’ livelihood security. Food surpluses to sell and other commodities for trade are limited, and whenever something is available for trade, competition tends to be high. At the same time, demand is very low, because of the minimal purchasing power of the customers. Consequently, the potential profit margins are very small, and, more importantly, uncertain. Particularly this uncertainty of profit may function as disincentive to adopt a longer-term perspective. Various studies have found that wage labourers with small – but reliable – incomes tend to spend their salaries less on ‘quick fixes’ such as snacks, alcohol, or tobacco, and more on nutritious diets and education for themselves and their families than individual entrepreneurs do (Banerjee & Duflo 2012: 231–3). It appears that small-scale, low-level, self-employment opportunities are unable to provide the necessary stability to actually affect women’s livelihood choices.

⁴ I cannot say useless or worthless, because the collected data served the international, multimillion-dollar HIV behaviour-change project well with a positive evaluation.

⁵ AWLAE stands for ‘African Women Leaders in Agriculture and the Environment’, which is a Wageningen University-based project (2003-2011) in which 20 African women scholars did PhD studies of HIV/AIDS impacts on the role of women in African food and livelihood systems.
It does make clear, however, that we must not assume that ‘the truth’ can be straightforwardly accessed, and that it takes great care to construct a truthful picture, especially where sensitive personal information is concerned (see also Bignami-Van Assche et al. 2003, Bleek 1987b, Wiegers 2007). As described in Chapter 4, I also experienced difficulties with direct questions, even though I carefully built rapport with my respondents, explained my goals, safeguarded the appropriateness of topics and questions, and compensated for the input I received. It took time, endurance, and luck – and a very good research assistant – to bridge the divide between me and the village women, and to gain insights into their intimate lives. The informal, flexible, and long-term nature of an anthropological approach and the genuine interest that was implied by our participant presence, were indispensable in this endeavour.

There are, however, also obvious weak points to my qualitative research approach. What was gained in depth was lost in breadth. The result is that I have no way of knowing to what extent our findings may or may not apply to the next village (or even Mudzi at another point in time). There are numerous variables that may affect the sexual choices of poor adult women in settings other than in Mudzi. A few scholars have undertaken cross-country reviews to explore correlations between certain variables and the occurrence of transactional sex (e.g. Chatterji et al. 2004, Luke 2003, Moore et al. 2007). As already noted in Chapter 1, however, there is little overall consistency in the findings of the studies reviewed. Here, I will briefly discuss three variables that seem of potential relevance in the light of my own analyses, although many others could be explored too. These variables concern matrilineal versus patrilineal kinship structure, Islamic versus Christian orientation, and urban versus rural locality.

The first variable (matrilineality versus patrilineality) is interesting, particularly because it is so rarely taken into account in studies of transactional sex. Commonly, in such studies the kinship structures of the researched population group are not made explicit, and in some cases informants from communities with different kinship structures are put together into one undifferentiated group. Although the relatively high degree of autonomy granted to Mudzi women by matrilineal institutions is curtailed by their livelihood insecurity and the resultant dependence on support from others, it still is a significant factor. Statistics on divorce rates and HIV prevalence suggest that the potential impact of kinship organization on sexual relationship choices should not be overlooked. Throughout Africa divorce rates are found to be significantly higher among matrilineal than among patrilineal

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6 MDICP stands for ‘Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project’, now called the Malawi Longitudinal Study of Families and Health. This is a joint collaboration between the Population Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania and the Malawi College of Medicine, concerning an on-going panel study conducted in 125 villages throughout the three regions of Malawi, broadly investigating social processes, family planning, and AIDS.
groups (see Chapter 5). Also HIV prevalence is, at least in Malawi, higher among matrilineal than patrilineal groups (see Chapter 1). However, because this variable is often not accounted for in studies on sexual decision making, conclusions about its association with HIV prevalence are difficult to draw.

Religious history is related to kinship organization. As described in Chapter 2, Christianity and Islam have had different impacts on the reproduction of ethnic traditions, including kinship systems. Christian missionaries have come in greater numbers than representatives of Islam, and have more directly interfered in the social structures of the communities with whom they worked. Among some ethnic groups, contact with missionaries eventually contributed to the transition from a predominantly matrilineal to predominantly patrilineal social organization (Phiri 1983). In many settings, however, matrilineal institutions have persisted (see Chapter 1). In a recent study on southern Malawi, Nicole Bennesch (2011) describes the ways through which Christian missionaries purposefully tried to eradicate matrilineal principles, and how the various Christian doctrines persistently hail and affirm female subordination and subservience to men (see also Ahlberg 1994: 228–33, Arnfred 2007: 142). According to Bennesch, this has severely affected women’s once strong bargaining position vis-à-vis men and contributed to a proliferation of exploitative transactional sex relationships in southern Malawi, despite the continued existence of matrilineal institutions. One explanation for the divergence of our conclusions may be the fact that Bennesch conducted her study exclusively among Christian Malawians, while mine included primarily (though not exclusively) Muslims. This would suggest that a significant difference exists between Christian and Muslim matrilineal communities. However, in my fieldwork I did not detect an association between Mudzi women’s relationship choices and their religious denomination (but, admittedly, I did not systematically investigate this). Alternatively, Bennesch’s reliance on interviews and focus group discussions, without extensive observation or data on interaction between insiders to verify the reports, may have led to a bias towards normative discourses and public perceptions rather than actual practices. Notably, at the national level there is no difference in HIV rates among Christian and Muslim Malawians (GoM 2011: 198).

The third variable concerns rural versus (poor) urban locality. Most (of the few) cities in Malawi have so-called high-density areas, in which daily life resembles that of rural areas in several respects. Living accommodations are simple and small, and generally lack electricity and running water. Sanitation exists as pit-latrines, and cooking stoves as open fires. Other aspects, however, seem substantially different. Although many urban families still cultivate some maize, their plots are mostly small and farming is not a main occupation. To a greater extent than in rural

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7 Even the city centre of Malawi’s capital Lilongwe is dotted with small parcels of land devoted to maize cultivation.
areas, food security depends on cash income. As a result, dependence on men may be stronger among poor urban women than rural women, as argued by Cole (2010: 78) and Dodoo (2004). Whereas in the rural areas of Malawi women outnumber men, this is reversed in the urban areas. This too may influence the gendered power balance. Another factor which may well affect men’s and women’s behaviour differently in rural and urban settings is the level of social control or cohesion, which is commonly assumed to be weaker in cities than in villages. Generally, reduced social cohesion is associated with increased sexual looseness and higher HIV risk. We found, however, that strong social control may actually push women to quickly remarry, which increases their exposure to HIV. A study that specifically aimed to compare sexual decision making in a (South African) rural and urban site, found that in both settings women engaged in sexual relationships for material gain (Hunter 2002). In the latter, however, the gain revolved around basic subsistence items, while in the former around luxury items (see also Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009: 43). Women’s involvement in sexual relationships to access relative luxuries has been noted in many urban studies. It has, however, also been noted by a number of studies situated in rural sub-Saharan Africa. This leads us to the following reflection on congruence between findings throughout the many different types of settings on the African continent.

Having assessed the possible disparities resulting from different research localities, it is worth noting here that one feature of sexual relationships which I encountered in Mudzi has been found by scholars throughout sub-Saharan Africa, as well as in the African diaspora (e.g. Sobo 1993 on the Caribbean). This feature relates to one of the central assumptions underlying the transactional sex paradigm. It concerns the normality and normativity of men’s gifting or providing in sexual relationships, which extends to a general acceptance or even approval of women’s involvement in a partnership for pragmatic reasons. In other words, engaging in a sexual relationship for material benefit is in itself not considered demeaning, neither by the woman involved nor by her social environment. Her involvement in such a relationship thus need not be involuntary. Although poverty or structural inequalities may still play a role in shaping women’s sexual choices, it is important to recognize that these choices are not per se driven by destitution and desperation. The recurrence of this

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8 The study actually compares a ‘township’ with an ‘informal settlement’, the distinction between which may be reasonably similar to an urban and rural area.
distinct moral attitude towards sexual-economic exchange throughout the continent might confirm the heavily criticized thesis of Caldwell et al. (1989) that there is something like an “African system of sexuality” which is internally coherent and essentially different from ‘sexual systems’ in other parts of the world.

Discussion

*Revisiting morality and Caldwell’s thesis*

As discussed in Chapter 1, advocates of the vulnerability approach often point to poor women’s involvement in sexual exchange relationships to typify how the combined forces of poverty and gender inequality drive the spread of HIV. Their argument contains the implicit presumption that no woman would wilfully engage in offering sex for material benefit if she were not coerced by external factors. In this section I argue that through such an explanation, Western observers and analysts judge the sexual-economic exchanges that are so widely noted in sub-Saharan Africa by their own sexual mores and logic. This perspective on transactional sex leads women to be perceived as vulnerable victims and the relationships in which they are involved as essentially coercive and exploitative. However, as well put by De Zalduondo & Bernard (1995: 158), this approach “implies an apology for sexual-economic exchange where none is needed.” The authors point out that the stigmatization of sexual exchange follows from the particular Western European cultural heritage in which ‘love’ and ‘money’ are considered mutually exclusive opposites (*ibid*, see also Cole 2009, Helle-Valle 2004, Nelson 1985, Wojcicki 2002), and only the first one is approved of as grounds for engaging in sex. Material benefit, considered to be the opposite of genuine love, is then, morally, the least acceptable motive for involvement in a sexual relationship.

In the book *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, editors Jonathan Parry & Maurice Bloch (1989) emphasize that money is not the impersonal, value-free object of exchange that it is often taken to be by Western analysts. The contributions to the volume demonstrate that instead, monetary exchanges tend to be infused with cultural meaning, symbolic interpretation, and moral evaluation – leading to great cross-cultural variation in attitudes towards money and exchange. In his chapter about Madagascar, Bloch makes a particularly strong case for the uniqueness of the European morality in which monetary transfers are considered inappropriate and experienced as uncomfortable not just within sexual but all personal relationships. He writes:

In Europe the linking of monetary exchange and sexual or familial exchange is seen as either typically immoral or as a source of humour and dissonance. By contrast, in Madagascar the need to keep the two areas separate is not present. The right thing for a man to do is to give his lover a present of money or goods after sexual intercourse. … It is thus clear that if the Merina attitude to money strikes us … as needing elucidation it is because *the symbolism of money is powerful, not in Merina culture, but in European culture*” (Bloch 1989: 166–7).
Comparing the values attached to reciprocity in intimate relationships in Ghana and the Netherlands, Van der Geest (1998) notes that while the practice is important in both settings, this importance is only openly acknowledged in Ghana. In other words, there seems to be a social taboo in the West on the overt and explicit appreciation of material exchange or benefit within intimate relationships.

Based on a comprehensive reading of the ethnographic literature on social relationships, Caldwell et al. (1989) have argued that in African settings, quite to the contrary, pragmatic instrumentalism used to be and often still is a widely accepted approach to conjugal relationships. They attribute this to the high value attached to the lineage bond at the expense of the conjugal bond. The conjugal bond is constructed as ideally auxiliary to the lineage. Mudzi women indeed framed their relationship choices primarily in a discourse of pragmatism and utilitarianism. Notably, I do not suggest that the actual underlying motives for engaging in sexual relationships are significantly different in Western and African settings. I suggest that the motives that are publicly considered appropriate seem divergent, even contradictory (see also Arnfred 2004: 23, Helle-Valle 2004: 205–6). As argued in Chapter 5, such normative templates are likely to shape actual motives, but may also be used to cover up other motives.

The issue at stake is that interpreting the motives of actors within one cultural system through the lens of another is likely to lead to distorted understandings. As an example, sociologist Ampofo writes: “Very few women in [our Ghanaian] sample were willing to remain in relationships for purely altruistic reasons, no matter how caring their boyfriends, if these could/would not support them” (1997: 189). What is overlooked in this quote is the intrinsic interconnectedness that seems to exist in many relationships throughout Africa between material support and emotional affection. As I found in Mudzi, and others have found elsewhere in Africa too (such as Bloch quoted above), a husband who does not commit to providing, can by definition, not be a loving husband. ‘Altruism’, to stick to the term used by Ampofo, is revealed precisely, and maybe predominantly, through the provision of material support.

Advocates of the transactional sex paradigm tend to perceive African women’s emphasis on the material side of sexual relationships as a breach of normative behaviour – leading them to search for the disturbing factors that must underlie such violation. This perception reveals more about these analysts’ own cultural assumptions than about the level of desperation faced by African women. In Mudzi, at least, women’s relationship pragmatism seemed an (outward show of) conformation to their community’s social norms rather than a violation of these.

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13 Studies conducted on sexuality among African urban elites and middle classes indicate that the ideology of romantic love is gaining prominence here as a measurement and expression of ‘modernity’ (Cole 2010, Cole & Thomas 2009, Hunter 2010, Spronk 2012).
As noted in the introductory chapter, the Caldwells’ thesis on an African system of sexuality has been criticized among others for generalizing on the basis of a selective reading of the available sources (called by Helle-Valle 2004: 206 the ‘not-in-my-tribe’ argument of some anthropologists). Certainly, singular statements about regions as large and diverse as sub-Saharan Africa are generalizations that gloss local variations, of which the Caldwells presumably were aware. The point, however, is that they observed a significant trend which helps us to better understand the transactional sex discussion. I believe that their argument about a distinct and coherent social system found (at least historically) throughout large parts of sub-Saharan Africa has great explanatory power when it comes to understanding the general instability of partnerships and the common utilitarian approach to these. It sheds another light on the social interactions that are widely called ‘transactional sex’ as well as its relation with the AIDS pandemic and the various – often Western donor-funded – ineffective HIV-prevention efforts.

The Caldwells’ analysis does not hold up, however, when they go on to deduce from the commonality of weak and normatively instrumental sexual relationships that there would be no traditional restrictions on sexuality whatsoever (Caldwell et al. 1989: 194–9). This aspect of their argument would not hold for Bantu descendants (as described in Chapter 6), and has also been refuted more widely (e.g. Ahlberg 1994, Ankomah 1999, Arnfred 2004b, Heald 1995). Another oft-heard criticism of the Caldwells’ explanation of sexual behaviour throughout Africa from a cultural perspective is exactly this cultural determinism. By blaming culture, it is argued, the global and local forces at play in further impoverishing and marginalizing African populations and individuals are disregarded and so become depoliticized (e.g. Stillwaggon 2006b: 133–57). It is this cultural framing of women’s engaging in transactional sex that led to what is called the ‘vulnerability approach’ (see Chapter 1). In the following section I try to ‘politicize’ my findings, assessing whether the dynamics that in Mudzi underlie risky sexual practices (although different from those envisaged by advocates of the transactional sex paradigm) may still be conceptualized as structurally violent.

**Women’s agency and structural violence**

Paul Farmer (2004: 307–8) warns against small-scale ethnographic studies that ignore oppressing macro-level structures and so tend to overestimate and romanticize the so-called “weapons of the weak.” He urges anthropologists to

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14 “Weapons of the weak” is a term used by James Scott, coined in his book *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (1985). With the term, Scott calls attention to the fact that those living under severely restrictive circumstances may still create opportunities for self-determination, without necessarily starting a revolution. Their everyday, small-scale forms of resistance add to their feelings of self-worth but do not actually and overtly threaten the status quo.
always keep in focus the materiality of social life – which I hope to have done in this case study. My representation of Mudzi life should leave no doubt that poverty, underdevelopment, marginalization, and voicelessness in the global arena have detrimental impacts on people’s lives and livelihoods and seriously restrict their options for survival and self-fulfilment. The structural violence that Farmer and followers speak of does, however, not only refer to the impoverishment and global economic marginalization of Third World populations, but also to the cultural or normative marginalization of particular subgroups. It refers to a broad “machinery of social oppression” (Farmer 2004: 307) and contrasts with overt violence because it tends to be indirect, normalized, and regularized. In other words, it concerns the oppressive structures that derive power from their hegemonic character. Particularly subordinating gender ideologies are often mentioned as harming (“structurally violating”) women and as increasing their vulnerability to the risk of HIV infection. The line of reasoning behind this generally seems to be that gender inequality causes women’s relatively greater poverty, which puts them in a position of financial dependence on (sexual relationships with) men.

In the case of Mudzi I found that gender norms indeed play a role in women’s motivations to engage in relationship practices that are risky in an environment with high HIV prevalence. However, this is not so much because prevalent gender norms aggravate women’s poverty relative to that of men, so placing them in a dependency position. Rather, it has to do with women’s wish to live up to what society expects from them. More precisely, it has to do with their general preference to be with (rather than without) a partner, and their general preference not to “look for” money themselves. On the one hand, these preferences probably reflect internalization of the prevalent gender ideology. On the other hand, however, I have argued they are also part of women’s tactics to maximize their access to (marital and communal) support. To what extent then would it be appropriate, or at least useful, here to conceptualize the prevalent gender norms as structurally violent – hence, as repressive gender ideologies that harm women?

Certainly the norm that a proper woman is married and provided for negatively affects women’s free choice concerning sexual relationships and income generation. Nonetheless, I object to straightforwardly considering these women as victims of the prevailing cultural scripts. Thinking of Mudzi’s gender norms as only suppressive and harmful is too one-sided to be actually helpful. In fact, those who most actively (try to) enforce the norms about proper manhood and womanhood, seem to be women themselves. One reason for Mudzi women to want a relationship is to avoid social repercussions from other women, since married women perceive the unmarried status of a fellow village woman as threatening the stability and future of their own marriage. The repercussions thus are an attempt by women to protect their marriage and their livelihood security. Women also have good reasons to actively uphold the prevalent cultural script because of what is prescribes for
men. The gender contract holds that men contribute material and physical support in their reciprocal relationships with women. It serves women well to hold men responsible for income generation, as this is generally tough work, increasingly problematic to achieve, and difficult to combine with their own responsibilities. Moreover, it reflects positively on a woman’s image to be provided for by a partner, and negatively if she must turn to making money herself. To pressure their partners to go out and look for money, women can (and persistently do) draw on the culturally underpinned norm that income provision is pre-eminently a male responsibility. Thus, while the ideology prescribing that it should be men and not women who work for income restricts women’s options for independent money making, at the same time it offers them alternative avenues for improving their livelihood security.

Notably, numerous women regularly do engage in (temporary) money making, particularly through petty trade. Interestingly, some of them expressed explicit pride about being able to provide for themselves and for defeating this gender norm, at least for the time being. These women’s explicit defiance of public scrutiny indirectly confirms the norm but also shows women’s room for manoeuvring. The very existence of this room for manoeuvring suggests that the norm is not strictly enforced and that most women comply with it relatively voluntarily. Indeed, as argued earlier, challenging the norm would, among other things, allow men to shun their responsibility for providing money to the household. It appears that women’s choice to comply with and uphold this norm is in fact a form of agency.

In sum, some of the normative gender roles indirectly contribute to women’s (and men’s) risk to contract HIV, but should not for that reason be considered as victimizing women. As we have seen, women actively use these norms for their own purposes too. Nonetheless, it remains important to keep in mind that although most women prefer to uphold the norms, this is not because they unequivocally benefit from them.

**Structural change**

With the salary that Gertrude earned as my research assistant, she has set out to obtain a bachelor’s degree. During these studies she became involved with a young man she knew through her church. After some blissful months together, the young man began to express his doubts about their future. He feared that she would not become the proper housewife that he envisioned for himself, wondering whether she would cook and clean and kneel for him given her (soon-to-be) high education level. She repeatedly assured him that she would, but his doubts were too strong. He broke up with Gertrude, which left her sad and angry.

Several of the employed young women I know from the years that I worked in Malawi’s capital Lilongwe also long to settle down and start a family – without having to relinquish their financial independence. They too have trouble finding
a partner who is not scared off by the cultural flexibility that this demands from him. One of these women once sighed: “They try to offer me a cell phone, but I already have my own. Then a television, but I have one. Then they try to seduce me by promising to buy a car, but I already have that too. Then they just don’t know what else they can do to please me, and they slink off.” These women, just like Gertrude, pay a high price for their progressive (or ‘culturally deviant’) striving for self-development and self-reliance.

Structural change – in the sense of changing cultural norms such as those discussed in the previous section – does not come about easily. Bringing about gender equality or empowerment requires much more than offering poor rural women income-generating projects. As De Zalduondo & Bernard (1995: 178) have argued specifically about (the futility of) attempts to reduce risky sex by addressing women’s poverty:

[T]o alter sexual behaviour is to alter a system that includes not only sex, but the division of labour, the family and kinship, the economic system, the class structure, health beliefs, religion and ethics – the interrelated set of conditions upon conditions which prompt and constrain the wishes and actions of individuals as they cope with a particular social and economic environment.

Multifaceted structural change would be needed to alter these “conditions upon conditions.” Rather than merely ‘freeing women from external chains’, internalized cultural scripts need rewriting too. Both the interpretations of proper womanhood and proper manhood need change to allow for relationships that build on alternative forms of reciprocity. This raises questions about ways for male partners to shape their masculinity and express affection other than through material provisioning, and about ways women can be respectable other than through remaining near the house and being provided for by a husband. A study of women’s agency in an Indonesian fishing village (Niehof 2007) yields a potential alternative. There, although a woman’s role is grounded in house and hearth, good mothers are those who can feed their families well. The income-generating activities of women in the fish trade are seen as part of their role as responsible mothers. Hence, the domestic domain as a female sphere is extended to include certain economic activities of women outside the house. Women who successfully exercise their agency in income generation for the benefit of their families are respected by other women and men alike.

In Chapter 1 I described how Giddens’ structuration theory bridges the artificial dichotomy between structure and agency by contending that the two are actually interdependent, producing social reality through bi-directional interaction. The theory has been criticized for insufficiently recognizing the potential for structural change (Rütten & Gelius 2011: 954). Others have subsequently theorized about the coming about of structural change (e.g. Dolfsma & Verburg 2005, Sewell 1992). Although difficult, it is obviously not impossible, and need not necessarily
be brought about through abrupt, revolutionary alterations. Anke Niehof (2012) has described how African women’s role in caring for the increasing number of ill relatives seems to enhance their authority and strengthen their position in an otherwise patriarchal context. Gaynor Makura-Paradza (2010) found that the fast-changing environment in patriarchal Zimbabwe allows for new and innovative ways for women divorcees and widows to access land, which leads to shifts in gender relations. In an earlier study, I found that Guatemaltec women through watching *telenovelas*\(^\text{15}\) adopted the idea that female subordination was not as innate and natural as they had previously assumed (Verheijen 2005, 2006). Over time, inconspicuous daily life routines may so lead to incremental cultural change (see also Ehn & Lögren 2009).

**Concluding notes**

From the findings presented in this book, several methodological points remain to be noted that are of relevance for further research on (risky) sexual relationships in the region. The first concerns the almost exclusive concentration of transactional sex studies on unmarried youth. Although references to transactional sex in policy reports are usually concerned with women with hungry children to care for, studies that actually assess the practice of transactional sex tend to focus on unmarried youngsters (see Chapter 1). This focus seems to result from a presumption that sexual lives change fundamentally once an individual enters into marriage. Our Mudzi study shows, however, that this need not be the case, as is also suggested by data from elsewhere in Africa (e.g. Amornkul et al. 2009, Chirwa & Chizimbi 2009, Dodoo 2004, Dunkle et al. 2004, Luke 2005a, Van den Borne 2005a). By omitting married women, divorcees, and widows from studies on risky sexual practices, these women’s motives remain unnoticed or misunderstood, and, consequently, ineffectively addressed. An exclusive focus on youth is therefore not justified when trying to understand what drives women to expose themselves to the risk of HIV infection.

Relatedly, marital status should not be taken as a static given and a stable measurement factor. Few women in Mudzi were continuously married or unmarried, and few households were permanently ‘female headed’ or ‘male headed’. Categorizing women or households into such separate groups because of their at-that-point status (which is often somewhat ambivalent anyway), and assuming that these are structurally different groups, would be of little value in Mudzi. Overall, the great majority of women face the same struggles and employ

\(^{15}\) The Latin American version of soap operas.
the same tactics to reduce their livelihood insecurity, with quick entry into marriage being one of these. In sum, our data warn against a false dichotomy of married versus unmarried, and female-headed households versus male-headed households. The number of past marriages and duration of the current marriage (e.g. less or more than five years) may be better indicators of a woman’s marital situation and household stability.

Another point of concern is women’s common discourse about destitution driving them into sexual relationships. I have argued that this representation reduces the multiple factors at stake to only one. Women’s emphasis on this particular consideration at least to some extent just expresses compliance with the cultural norm prescribing that proper women are provided for by a partner. Many studies have deduced from such self-reports, third-party reports, and focus group discussions that women’s poverty has led to a proliferation of sex exchange. I hypothesize that in many cases, informants’ emphasis on women’s destitution as underlying the spread of HIV only partially represents reality. I suggest that it is also a clever means for respondents to avert the blame for AIDS and meanwhile redirect attention to what really matters to them: the structural lack of services and commodities they face on a daily basis, or, put more broadly, their overall livelihood insecurity. The discourse of destitution driving women to engage in risky sex and so further the AIDS pandemic is one that is apparently well received by the international donor community, and therefore fits the agendas of affected communities and the mediating development agencies alike. A study assessing the impact of a particular microcredit service (Day 2007) may be taken to exemplify women’s tactical employment of risky sex and AIDS to pursue other goals. When the researcher inquired about transactional sex, the majority of respondents answered that this occurs because women are pressed to repay loans on unfavourable terms set by the particular institute that happened to be under assessment (Day 2007: 52–3).

My last point concerns the notion of transactional sex itself, which seems out of place for most sexual activities in Mudzi. Gifting and sex are both indispensable elements of ‘marital’ relationships in Mudzi and beyond. The utilitarian or instrumental approach to many of these relationships is evident. The term ‘transactional’ may be used to refer to this characteristic of mutual dependence between men and women united in sexual relationships. However, when understood, as it usually is, as a mere exchange of sex for money or material support, the concept becomes too narrow, and fails to capture the other relational aspects involved. It would be incorrect to speak of or presume the ‘selling of sex’ in this context, particularly because this is not the way in which the people involved

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perceive it. As noted, we have heard of and observed some cases in and around Mudzi in which (young) women were quite obviously and straightforwardly after the resources that they could access by faking interest in a sexual relationship or actually sleeping with a man who proposed. However, these cases, in which the transaction was hollowed out to an almost direct exchange of sexual favours for material benefit, do not represent the relationship practice that poses the greatest or main HIV risk for the general population. It is rather most women’s continuous search for a steady, reliable, helpful husband combined with the frequency of breakups that seems to facilitate the spreading of HIV (combined with other earlier-mentioned factors such as men’s frequent migration, which ‘imports’ the virus into the community, and the low priority given to HIV prevention amidst more urgent problems).

In part, this study was set up with the aim of formulating recommendations for improving HIV prevention policy. I have aimed to achieve this by assessing to what extent the currently common assumption that women need economic empowerment to reduce their vulnerability to HIV infection is justified. As explicated throughout, I do not expect that Mudzi women would make safer sexual choices if they were offered additional means to gain an independent income. The interrelations between livelihood insecurity and risky sexual behaviour are more complex and less straightforward than usually presumed and cannot simply be remedied with income-generating projects. Instead of persisting with the perception that women lack agency to change their sexual behaviour, it should be acknowledged that women have certain reasons for engaging in risky relationship practices. Moreover, they may also have good reasons to refrain from or limit their involvement in independent income generation. Understanding these underlying reasons is a prerequisite for formulating any attempt to assist in changing the current situation, and I hope that this study has contributed to such an enhanced understanding.

This should not be interpreted as an argument against a policy focus on poverty reduction. Although I found in Mudzi that it is not acute poverty per se which motivates women to risk HIV infection, many of women’s daily life choices – including those related to sexual interaction – are shaped by pervading and persistent livelihood insecurity. If a woman would have access to other safety nets besides

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17 E.g. P2 1560, 1721, 1728, 1740; P3 2470. Notably, even these cases did not seem void of relationship symbolism, of a performance of normative gender expectations. Interestingly, furthermore, these cases particularly concerned the younger women who were reasonably taken care of at home. They therefore did not desperately need a husband, but could have many flings in order to access as many gifts as possible. With other words, destitution was less of a threat to them than to others, which was exactly what allowed them to engage more freely in casual sexual encounters.

18 As described in Chapter 4, this research has been co-funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of their IS-Academy, an initiative aimed at stimulating policy-relevant social science research.
her primary social network, the social exclusion that may result from an unmarried status would be less life threatening, and thus reduce the pressure on women to acquire a partner. Furthermore, if the problems that are now experienced as more direct and urgent than the threat of AIDS can be successfully addressed, villagers may begin to prioritize HIV prevention. A brighter future may encourage Mudzi villagers to make longer-term investments, including in their health. The findings presented in this book do therefore not deny the need to reduce rural women’s livelihood insecurity. To the contrary, as an HIV prevention focus it remains valid and important – provided that this insecurity is understood as only partially explaining women’s relationship choices, and the causes and consequences of the insecurity as broader and more complex than female economic dependence on men.