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

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Summary

The ‘transactional sex paradigm’

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

Malawi and AIDS

Malawi is one of the least developed countries worldwide. Within Malawi, poverty and malnutrition are most severe in the rural areas and in the Southern Region. Ever since HIV prevalence became monitored Malawi has also been among the top ten countries with the highest infection rates. It is currently estimated that 11 percent of the population between the ages 15 and 49 lives with the virus. As is the case throughout sub-Saharan Africa (but, notably, nowhere else) infection rates are higher among women (13%) than among men (8%). As in most of the world, prevalence is more prominent in the urban areas (17%) than in the rural areas (9%), but it is increasing in the rural areas while diminishing in the urban areas. In Malawi, HIV rates have always been substantially higher in the Southern Region (15%) than in the Central (8%) and Northern (7%) Region. Although national HIV prevalence has slowly declined, HIV incidence remains highest in the Southern Region.

Because both poverty and HIV prevalence are extraordinarily high in Malawi, peaking in the Southern Region and on the rise in the rural areas, I expected that a possible link between the two would be most pronounced and best discernible here. A village community in one of Malawi’s southern districts was therefore selected as the research site for this study. Intriguingly, most village communities in Malawi’s south are matrilineally and matrilocally organized. This means that as a rule it is the women who hold the rights to land and who remain resident near their (maternal) kin. Upon marriage a woman is joined by her husband, who is supposed to help cultivate her field and build a house that is hers to keep in case of divorce. Various studies found that, as a result, these women’s livelihoods are relatively secure compared to that of other rural Malawian women. In other words, the very
site that was selected because of its extremely high levels of both food insecurity and HIV prevalence – which, following the transactional sex paradigm, would suggest a low socio-economic status of women vis-à-vis men – seems a rather favourable environment for women. These women’s comparatively good socio-economic position makes them particularly interesting to study, as an analysis of their sexual choices may shed light on the hypothetical impact of female economic empowerment on HIV transmission.

**Data collection**

The data on which this study draws are largely ethnographic, collected through daily participant observation and many informal chats during a one-year stay in the research community between August 2008 and July 2009. The data were collected by me – a Dutch woman with a degree in cultural anthropology, work experience in Malawi during the three years prior to this study, and some fluency in the most commonly spoken language – with the invaluable help of my research assistant – a Malawian woman with a secondary education degree, who is not originally from the research area but fluent in both languages spoken there. The main method of informal data collection was greatly facilitated by a spontaneous gathering of village women at our house each afternoon to learn to knit from my research assistant, meanwhile chatting with each other and us. Additionally, we interviewed all ninety adult women living in the research village on several occasions during the research period, had four women keep financial diaries, interviewed thirty randomly selected small-scale businesswomen selling various types of merchandise on one of the three markets near the research village, and retrieved birth statistics from the two health clinics in the area.

**Balancing men, morals and money**

Notwithstanding high levels of awareness about HIV and ways to avoid it, partner switches and concurrent partnerships were found to be common at the research site. Moreover, the village women often accepted relationship proposals from men whose sexual and health histories were unknown, which further added to their risk of contracting HIV. By disentangling the interrelated historical, cultural, and material dynamics that affect women’s daily decision making, this study endeavoured to comprehend women’s risky sexual practices.

Based on the insights gained, I argue that the ‘transactional sex paradigm’, which is increasingly used to explain the continued spread of HIV throughout sub-Saharan Africa and consequently inform policy, overlooks certain important cultural and socio-economic aspects of women’s sexual choices. While confirming the widespread assumption that the need for support plays a role in poor women’s decisions to readily accept sexual proposals from men, my data demonstrate that the interrelations between livelihood insecurity and risky sexual behaviour are more complex and less straightforward than usually presumed.
The harsh living conditions and the struggles to overcome them permeate every aspect of daily village life, including, but reaching far beyond, sexual relationships. Central to villagers’ survival amidst the frequent occurrence and persistent threat of livelihood shocks is their ability to mobilize resources in times of need. It is this vital importance of access to multiple sources of potential future support rather than acute deprivation per se that underlies many of the daily life decisions of women, including those concerning sexual relationships. Throughout this book women’s tactical navigation is revealed between the various, and sometimes conflicting, sources of potential support in order to maximize access and minimize blockage to it.

In the village studied, sexual liaisons are a means to material support par excellence because it is traditionally expected that men provide their partner with the necessary extras beyond the foods she cultivates from her own field. Women are thus entitled to receive, and justified to claim, support from their sexual partners. However, (right to) direct receipt of support from men is not the only reason for women to engage in sexual relationships. Being in a relationship provides women a respectable status, which enhances their access to community support. This is an important reason for many women to enter into or stay involved in relationships with men, even if they do not directly benefit their household. Factors that thus also play a role are the wish to conform to cultural norms, gaining or maintaining a respectable status, and averting suspicion, jealousy, and consequent community exclusion. Further reasons are longing for affection, sexual satisfaction, and offspring, and benefitting from other duties that husbands are supposed to perform besides providing money. In other words, most of the reasons for women to be involved in a relationship cannot simply be resolved by an independent income. Moreover, considering the high value that the village women attach to spreading risk by fostering multiple sources of potential future support, sexual relationships are likely to remain treasured as an important means to access support even when other income sources are made available.

The assumption that access to income-generating options will affect women’s sexual decision-making is furthermore challenged by our findings concerning women’s means to earn money. Notably, independent income-generating options are already available and regularly resorted to. They do not, however, improve women’s livelihood security as advocates of female economic empowerment commonly assume. Women’s involvement in money making signals a number of messages that potentially block other channels of support, and is therefore a generally less preferred option. Income generation is culturally considered a male responsibility, which in principle makes it unnecessary, inappropriate, and disrespectful for women to engage in. As money is so intrinsically associated with men, women with wealth are routinely suspected to have obtained it through (illicit) sexual relationships. A woman’s access to independent income may furthermore give husbands and fellow villagers a justification for withholding additional
support, as it can be argued that she does not need it. At the same time, fellow villagers may assume from a woman’s ‘resort’ to money making that she has no other sources of support to turn to. This assumption makes her unattractive to help in times of need as she seems unlikely to be able to reciprocate. Although sharing is a social obligation, it is – out of necessity – preferably done with people who are likely to return the favour. Arousing suspicion that one lacks access to support may thus be detrimental to one’s livelihood security, and is therefore avoided when possible. In sum, a woman’s money making threatens her marital status, her image as respectable woman, and her potential access to additional sources of support. Overall, accessing support through relationships with men is in line with the prevalent ‘gender contract’, and therefore more advantageous to women’s overall livelihood security. In the current circumstances, women have much to gain from upholding these gender norms, which allow them to leave the laborious task of finding money to men, but still capitalize on the fruits of it.

Hence, while Western analysts tend to assume that a woman’s involvement in sexual-economic exchange signals destitution that leaves her no choice, my informants held quite an opposing view. They instead tended to interpret women’s involvement in non-sexual money making (be it ganyu, business, or wage labour) as forced by, and thus as sign of, deprivation. Meanwhile, a man’s material support to his sexual partner is considered obligatory, and thus irrespective of either his or her economic status.

Overall, this study shows that women’s choices concerning their sexual relationships usually have little to do with an acute need for direct support. Instead, their daily life choices in general – including those related to sexual interaction – are related to their attempts to assure or improve their vulnerable livelihoods. The relatively high degree of autonomy granted to women by matrilineal institutions is curtailed by their severe livelihood insecurity and the resultant dependence on support from others, including, but not restricted to, sexual partners. Their struggle for survival requires a constant juggling of diverse resources and a continuous readjustment of priorities to make the most of each situation. It is this judicious opportunism – the clever manoeuvring to keep open as many options as possible – that reveals women’s agency within the structural constraints they face.

It appears that the common depiction of poor women as powerless victims, forced by acute destitution to exchange sex for direct support, does not do justice to the everyday reality of southern Malawi. The implied expectation that women will readily switch to safe sexual practices when offered the means to generate an independent income fails to acknowledge the major role played by cultural conventions, the complexity of women’s economic survival strategies, and the agency that women exert in upholding and using to their advantage the prevalent gender norms.