

**“I am not a prostitute”:
Discords in targeted HIV/AIDS prevention interventions
in urban and trading centers in Malawi**

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Abstract

This article contributes to the discussion about HIV/AIDS prevention efforts for one of the so-called high-risk groups for HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa: prostitutes or commercial sex workers. To halt the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Malawi, the European Commission (EC) provided between 1991 and 2000 massive financial and technical assistance for peer education prevention interventions for high-risk groups for HIV/AIDS, including programs for bar girls and freelancers. The article raises questions about the challenges to promote safer sex among women who solicit multiple partner sex, but who do not embrace the identity of “prostitute” or “commercial sex worker”.

This article is based on findings from qualitative research predominantly conducted in 1996. It studied the dynamics of multiple partner sex in and around bars, and sought to understand who the women were who were sexually networking; why, where and when, with whom and how do they did it, and what they perceived as their costs and gains. High-density urban and trading centers in four districts were randomly sampled, and participants purposefully contacted women from all levels within society. A mixture of researchers and qualitative research methods were used. Male field assistants, who were trained and pilot tested, operated as

mystery clients¹, were told not to have sex with their informants and not to harm them. They contacted 124 bar girls and freelancers, who were all willing to have sex with them. On 26 occasions (19 percent), women told them that they were not prostitutes and decried being called “commercial sex workers”.

Interventions that focus on bar girls and freelancers and address them as “prostitutes” or “commercial sex workers” and exclude other men and women involved in multiple partner sex, may unwittingly contribute to further stigmatization of bar girls and freelancers. When interventions do not recognize the different reasons for why women sexually network, it is unlikely that they can adequately address risky multiple partner sex practices. This article underscores the need to pay attention to gender, not just notions of femininities but also masculinities. Policies and programs that fail to take the socio-cultural and political-economic contexts into account may seriously limit their effectiveness.

Key words : *Malawi, qualitative research, commercial sex workers, bar girls, freelancers, HIV/AIDS peer education interventions, health communication*

Background

One of the HIV/AIDS prevention efforts in the 1990s centered around targeting seemingly “fixed” high-risk groups. What appeared to have worked in one place, was copied and pasted in other settings without sufficient attention to the local contexts. Research in four districts in the Central and Southern Malawi suggests that when the targeted group — in this case

¹ In the literature mystery clients are also named “under cover clients”. In health services research the term “under cover care seekers” (Madden, Quick, Ross-Degnan and Kafle 1997), “pseudo patients” (Rosenhahn 1973), “fake patients” (van der Geest and Sarkodie 1998), “standardized patients” or “surrogate patients” are also used.

so-called prostitutes or commercial sex workers — reject that identity, and the rich local concepts of prostitution that include both men and women who practice multiple partner sex are ignored, serious challenges to the outcome of the intervention are posed.

HIV/AIDS prevalence rates in east and southern Africa have been raging. In Malawi, the estimated HIV seroprevalence rate among pregnant women who attended antenatal clinics in Lilongwe, Blantyre or Mzuzu, the three major urban centres, increased from two percent in 1985 to thirty percent in 1993. In rural areas, the estimated HIV prevalence rates among pregnant women who attended antenatal care, raised from six percent in 1992 to nineteen percent in 1998 (UNAIDS 2000: 3), indicating that the epidemic is rapidly spreading into the rural areas. Results from nineteen sentinel sites across the country, including the three urban sites, showed that in 1998 fourteen percent of women younger than 20 years, tested HIV positive (2000: 3).

An HIV vaccine or a magic bullet to treat AIDS patients, or prevent further HIV transmission, is still far from reality. While bio-medical research is ongoing, Ministries of Health (MOHs), donors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) promote preventive sexual behaviors, summarized in the A-B-C approach: A meaning ‘Abstinence or delayed sexual debut’, B: ‘Being mutually faithful’ and C: ‘Consistent condom use’. For people who cannot achieve A or B, correct and consistent condom use is encouraged.

Since the mid 1980s, the authoritative western medical and epidemiological AIDS establishment has identified female prostitutes and bar maids as a “major reservoir of Sexually Transmitted Diseases” (STDs) (D’Costa, Plummer, Bowmer *et al.*, 1985: 64), as a “high frequency STD transmitter core group” (Moses, Quinn, Piot *et al.*, 1987: 345), or as “high frequency transmitters of HIV infection” (Ngugi, Plummer, Simonsen *et al.*, 1988: 887), rather than as AIDS sufferers (deZalduondo 1991: 226-228).

One study on condom use and HIV infection among prostitutes in Kinshasa, Zaire, suggested that there was “a significant difference in seropositivity among the eight women reporting condom use by half or more of their partners” (Mann, Quinn, Piot *et al.*, 1987: 345)². Another study in “a well-characterised prostitution population in Nairobi” (Ngugi, Plummer, Simonsen *et al.*, 1988: 887) described that prostitutes (in Pumwani) who were educated on STD/HIV/AIDS prevention, “reported at least some condom use” (1988: 887). “Any condom use³ resulted in a 3-fold reduction in risk of seroconversion (OR= 0.34) (1988: 889)⁴. Those encouraging results made donors, NGOs and MOHs believe two things. First, that prostitutes form a homogenous group of women who could easily be identified (Kielmann 1997: 379); second, that programs targeting this homogenous group to reduce HIV and other STDs transmission could be effective and relatively inexpensive (Moses, Plummer, Ngugi *et al.*, 1991: 407; 410-411). Educating prostitutes was thus thought to be the most logical and cost-effective behavior-change intervention.

In the meantime, gay communities in the industrial world had, based on how they socialize and had organized themselves, effectively developed and used the peer education concept (Altman 1993: 10). Their successful health communication model was then applied to peer education interventions for prostitutes elsewhere in the world, including Yaounde (Mony-Lobe, Nichols, Zekeng *et al.*, 1989), Nigeria (Williams, Hearst and Udofia 1989), Senegal (Siby, Thior, Sankale *et al.*, 1989), and Zimbabwe (Wilson, Sibanda, Mboyi *et al.*, 1989). Similar developments also took place in Australia, where “sex worker peer education” had become the

² It is unclear from the one-page “Correspondence”, whether the prostitutes were taught about their HIV/AIDS risks and were encouraged to get their STDs treated.

³ Moses, Plummer, Ngugi *et al.*, 1991: 409) report on the same study and explicitly state that this should be understood as self-reported condom use.

⁴ This rigorous intervention acknowledged the importance of ready access to health services for women to get their STDs treated. If these would have been unavailable, “it is unlikely that the women would be so receptive to the health educational and promotional efforts of the programme” (Moses, Plummer, Ngugi *et al.*, 1991: 411).

new “buzzword” for AIDS funding in South-east Asia and India (Murray and Robinson 1996: 43; 49-50; 52). The Fifth International AIDS conference in Montreal in 1989, where several of those initial successes were presented, resulted in the mushrooming of prostitute peer education HIV/AIDS prevention interventions, including in Malawi.

To combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Malawi, the EC AIDS Project — in support of the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP)⁵ — used the peer education intervention strategy to provide bar girls knowledge and skills to negotiate consistent condom use (Project Team 2000: 1)⁶. However, contrary to the situation during the Pumwani intervention, bar girls’ access to STD treatment was not increased.

“Bar girls” are single girls and women employed by the bar owner to work in a bar, bottle store, or resthouse, and who live there. To make ends meet, they barter sex with male customers⁷. During the mid 1990s, the number of bar girls began to decrease while that of freelancers increased (van den Borne 1998: 61-63). “Freelancers” are women who predominantly operate in and around entertainment places and surrounding streets, secure their own accommodations, and move more frequently. In contrast to bar girls, freelancers are not registered with a bar, and did not go for the monthly STD⁸ checkups as did bar girls. Some bar girls believed that since they went for their monthly “service”, and freelancers escaped it, this latter group was a real threat to Malawi. Bar girls, experiencing increasingly fierce competition

⁵ I have elaborated on other activities on which the NACP, now called the National AIDS Commission, has embarked in my PhD dissertation (forthcoming).

⁶ The EC AIDS Project worked with five so-called high-risk groups: bar girls, truck drivers, the armed forces, college students and traditional healers. Throughout the ten-year project, the “bar girl component,” which has been called “commercial sex workers’ component” since 1998, had the biggest budget.

⁷ In my PhD dissertation (forthcoming) I elaborate on the cultural meanings of alcohol, drinking and bar environments in shaping masculinities and promoting multiple partner sex.

⁸ The food handling law requests those handling food and drinks to get a monthly medical check up. Bar girls who handled drinks were therefore asked to go for medical check ups where they were supposedly being tested and if needed, treated for any STD. This was a government regulation. However, during my entire stay in Malawi between 1996 and 2002, I did not see this followed through. Already in 1996 the EC AIDS Project (1996: 13) reported that

in “their” trade with freelancers (van den Borne, forthcoming), favored regulation and felt that freelancers needed to be controlled.

In Malawi, bars and resthouses are considered male spaces, and often associated with *chitani chigologo* (having pre-marital or extra-marital sex). Men visit such places alone, or with male friends and colleagues but rarely bring their wives or serious girlfriends along. Women there, predominantly bar girls and freelancers, are seen as deviants who transgress ascribed feminine sexual mores and practices. They are sexually available to men for a price. Society looks down upon those women, stigmatizes them, and speaks of them as a homogeneous group of *mahule*⁹ (prostitutes). People categorize them among the *anthu oyipitsitsa*¹⁰ (the worst people) for causing conflicts in the communities, breaking up families, and killing people. They also blame this group of promiscuous women for spreading the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Despite long-term efforts at peer interventions among the so-called high-risk group of prostitutes¹¹, this terminology is not consistent with how these women view themselves. This article explores the perceptions of bar girls and freelancers about their exchange of sex. It also explores the role of men in multiple partner sex since bar girls and freelancers consider them “male prostitutes”. Overall, it aims to examine in detail the incongruities between actions and perceptions and between programs and their “target audiences”.

Research design and process

The research aimed gaining an increased in-depth understanding of the dynamics of multiple partner sex in and around bars and other drinking spots. The Health Services Research

the foodhandler clinics no longer existed in most of the districts. The Project did not attempt to revive or modify them.

⁹ The singular word is *hule* (prostitute).

¹⁰ Note that the concept *anthu woyipsitsa* (worst people), is generic and does not refer to only women.

¹¹ The Laws of Malawi do not forbid prostitution but prohibit that others make a business out of prostitution.

Committee of the Ministry of Health and Population (MOHP) in Lilongwe approved the research proposal (van den Borne 1996a) and the European Union in Brussels funded the research. The field team consisted of 1 co-coordinator, 4 female and 2 male supervisors, 5 male and 12 female assistants, 1 driver and myself as the principal investigator (PI). The team was trained for seven days. A pilot phase of seven days followed training, and based on the results three training days were added (van den Borne 1996b). The major part of the fieldwork took place between July and October 1996 in randomly sampled high-density urban - and trading centers in Lilongwe, Blantyre, Mangochi and Zomba district.

Research methods included participant and focused observations, mystery clients, diary writing by field staff, audiotaped and verbatim transcribed semi-structured focus group discussions and a series of semi-structured in-depth conversations with individual poor single women, bar girls and freelancers to develop their life histories. During 1996, I stayed for six and a half months in various low cost resthouses usually associated with *chigololo* (pre-marital or extra-marital sex)¹².

Informants were purposefully sampled and included representatives from multiple –levels including: the MOHP and the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP), donors¹³, non-governmental organizations, community and religious leaders, Members of Parliament, managers and staff of drinking spots, resthouses and restaurants, disc jockeys, police, drivers, bar girls, freelancers, male clients, as well as poor single women in communities who might or might not trade sex. We wanted to find out who the women were who were involved in multiple partner sex, what motivated them to do this knowing that they would compromise their reputation in

¹² After 1996, I can attest that in those “sleazy” accommodations Forster’s (2000: 6) statement that “considerable sexual activity” happens, is an understatement.

society and their personal health. Who were the men who used their services, and what motivated them to have sex with women they picked up in a drinking spot? Where, when and how did social and sexual networking take place? Did women negotiate condom use? If they did, how did they do this and with what result? Did they possess condoms? If so, how did this influence the condom negotiation process? What did women perceive to be their gains and costs, knowing the HIV/AIDS scourge? In addition, we wanted to know why the numbers of bar girls were decreasing and those of freelancers increasing.

Female assistants conducted and transcribed the audiotaped in-depth conversations with consented bar girls, freelancers and poor single women¹⁴ and developed 97 life histories: 23 with bar girls, 6 with freelancers and 68 with poor single women. They further directed and transcribed nine audiotaped focus group discussions with the above-mentioned three groups of women.

Mystery clients, all in their mid to late twenties, were trained to go to drinking spots and pretend to seek sex from women. They were encouraged to contact bar girls and freelancers, and among the freelancers those who operate from inside the bar as well as those who network from parking lots, or streets leading to the bars. Men were also asked to contact the very young and older women, pretty looking and those who were less beautiful in the eye of the beholders. Men were also told to allow women to contact them and to let the networking emerge. With those instructions, men talked with and developed 124 ethnographic field reports on bar girls and freelancers. When the men approached the girls and women in and around bar environments,

¹³ This included representatives of the EU, UNAIDS, WHO, DfID, GTZ, Dutch Embassy in Zambia, NORAD, UNFPA, UNDP and UNICEF.

¹⁴ Eligible single low-income women were between 15 and 49 years of age, head a household and lived in one of the randomly sampled high-density areas.

they assumed them to be potentially sexually available to them. Because of the stigmatization attached to women who have multiple partner sex, mystery clients were encouraged not to ask them whether they were prostitutes, but to explore their background: where they came from, their family background, what they did for a living, what or who had brought them to this place, how they liked or disliked the bar environment, and if they would agree to have sex with the men, whether it would be “short time” or “whole night”, with or without condoms and why, and the number of rounds the women could offer. Male assistants did not use a cassette recorder and women were never informed that their “client” was an undercover researcher. Men were told not to have sex with their informants and not to harm them in any way. Male supervisors and colleague mystery clients were around to rescue them from awkward situations (van den Borne, forthcoming).

Individual field staff were debriefed daily by one of the field supervisors or me in order to assess the legibility and the quality of the reports with regard to: completeness, accuracy and consistency of the information and to find possible explanations for inconsistencies. Field supervisors and I also helped assistants develop their daily discussion guides and encouraged them to explore emerging domains such as perceived differences between bar girls and freelancers, what were considered appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors and deviant sexual practices, and what were women’s notions on eroticism. I debriefed field supervisors almost daily, and held weekly meetings with field staff to discuss the management of the fieldwork and the quality of the research process. We analyzed the content and quality of data, looked for dominant concepts and charted the diversity of notions on multiple partner sex, assessed saturation levels, and agreed on which areas needed further researching. I was responsible for ensuring the confidentiality of the information gathered.

Between 1996 and 2002, I lived four-and-a-half years in Malawi where I worked first for the National AIDS Control Programme and from 1999 until 2002 for the MOHP. During this latter period, I also conducted a series of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and spoke with married and single women and men from all layers of society about our research topic. I also assessed with them the strengths and weaknesses of various HIV prevention interventions, such as blood screening, health education to other high-risk groups and the general public, and voluntary HIV testing and counseling.

Why women penetrate male drinking spaces

When mystery clients socially networked with the women in and around bars, freelancers replied to the men with a host of pleasantries and seemingly fabricated stories about what brought them to the bar environments. Some replied to the men by asking them the same question they had been asked and then boldly saying: “I too came here to have some fun.”

Bar girls, generally slightly older, born and raised in the rural areas, with children staying with close relatives, and less years of formal education, tended to emphasize their gainful employment status in the bar. Therefore, they did not need any initial justification for their presence in the bar:

I am a bar girl. I work here and I serve patrons, collect empties and fill the fridges. Men come to meet us here. We have no husband to help us and our children. And everything costs money nowadays. There are no other jobs we could do, because we did not go to school for long. That's why we are found here. We are helping ourselves the best way we can”

Many though, conscious of their shameful work environment, added that they did this work to resolve their poverty and make ends meet. “With this money I buy my children's food.” They underscored their responsibilities as single mothers, relied heavily on this economic discourse, and thus claimed to have sex with different men only to solve their financial problems. In their explanations, bar girls closely stuck to society's accepted gender roles for women. Nencel (1997)

who did research among “women who prostitute themselves” in Lima, Peru, heard similar remarks and notes that motherhood is one of the accepted gender roles in Peru, women try to fit themselves into that role by claiming that they prostitute for their children.

Some bar girls boasted, and shared with pride that they had sacrificed themselves for their family, had left home to reduce the burden of feeding an extra mouth, and had come to do this work to assist their families back home. They reported to give their relatives, of whom some took care of their children, money for food, fertilizers, school fees for their younger brothers, and to pay by-day laborers who worked on their family farms and gardens during critical periods. “I also send (second-hand) clothes, cooking oil, sugar, salt, tealeaves, and kerosene home.”

Women need money to satisfy their needs and wants. Money they do not have but men have. Without allowing men to have sex with them, women cannot get it. Bar girls tend to emphasize their transitional stage: “If I find a husband, he will rent a house, and I will leave this place.” “If my [financial] problems stop, I will go home and settle. But my problems have not yet stopped, that’s why I am still here.”

Most freelancers however, initially communicated that their presence in this environment was innocent: they had come to town for a purpose different from what usually goes on in such places, had just arrived, would leave soon, would not partake in sex with multiple concurrent partners, or hated “prostitution”. Some reported that they made a living by growing vegetables or tobacco, others said they were businesswomen who bought and sold potatoes, tomatoes, sugar, maize, *zitenje* (cotton or viscose colorful rectangular wrappers, worn by women), cooking pots or serving plates and dishes. The majority however, stated that they were unemployed and added that they “just stay”, “do nothing in particular” or “stay at home”. Many commented that they had come to that bar, tavern, bottle store or disco to relax, drink, meet with friends or make new

ones, listen to good music, dance and have a good time. For them, sexually networking has become a strategy to escape poverty, get access to a modern lifestyle or some of its gadgets, and maximize their autonomy.

All 124 bar girls and freelancers contacted by mystery clients in and around drinking places, however, were willing to have sex with them immediately or during the next week if they had a manfriend around or were in their menstrual period¹⁵. Twelve women, (some 10 percent) told the mystery clients openly and without probing that they were a *hule* (prostitute), *sasha* (prostitute), *woyendayenda* (freelancer). A few used the English words “hooker” or “bitch”. Others described what they did to make a living: “*Ndimagulitsa maliseche* (I sell my private part) to any good buyer” [laughs], “I sleep with men so that they give me money”. Some said that they believed that “a woman cannot go hungry because there is money between her legs”¹⁶, and pointed at their crotches.

In the Malawian context, in 1996, these were unusual and remarkable statements. Most women who accepted their society’s prescribed roles as wives and mothers, even if they themselves had concurrent or serial affairs with men, looked down upon this group of women who “misbehaved”, transgressed their gender roles, not only penetrated into male space but also actively initiated contact with men and solicited sex from them. They would do their best not to be associated with those *anthu oyipitsitsa* (the worst people) for fear that their husbands, relatives and friends might think that they were in the same business as the “prostitutes”.

¹⁵ Chewa religion clearly regulates when to have sex, with whom, where, why, how and how often. On many occasions, men and women are to abstain from sex (Rangeley 2000: 8- 75). Transgressing those sexual taboos, would cause ill-health problems or even death to the offenders or close relatives. It was believed that men who had sex with menstruating women, or women who had just delivered or aborted, would get *ntayo*. If untreated, it could kill the men. Overgaard Mogensen (1995: 84) observed similar practices among the Lozi in Zambia.

¹⁶ This is a variation of late president Kamuzu Banda’s favourite statement: *Chuma chili nthaka* (wealth is in the soil; there is money in the soil), which he used to encourage the people to farm and stay in the village, because “there is money in the soil.”

Other freelancers commented that they “meet with men who buy them drinks”, “become creative and get money from men like you”, and “chat with men to be given money afterwards”¹⁷. Later, when I asked my neighbor in Lilongwe, a married man with six children, what this “chatting” could possibly mean, he immediately replied that it could mean only one thing:

In our culture men and women have no business in chatting with each other, unless they are brother or sister or husband and wife. I tell you, when you see a man and woman somewhere chatting, they are discussing where they will meet to have sex together. Believe me, there is no other reason for a man and woman to chat together¹⁸.

Those who did not volunteer that they coaxed men to make ends meet, were assertively evasive. Or they reminded the men that they were “too talkative”, that you “don’t reveal your secret deals”, “find the money myself” or that they “manage in one way or the other because God does not desert His children”.

Ethnographic field reports

The majority of bar girls and freelancers initially told female field assistants and me that they were not prostitutes. Two female assistants gave an account of two female participants from Blantyre who had dropped out of the study. They did not want to continue chatting any further because they felt that they were no longer eligible to do so because they were not “prostitutes”¹⁹.

During my stay in resthouses, only three freelancers told me that they were having sex with different men to meet their needs and wants; the others indicated in one way or the other that this was a taboo subject. I never asked them about their movements, unless they volunteered

¹⁷ The verb *kucheza* is translated into English as: to chat. *Kucheza* between the two sexes might be taken as a loose synonym for sexual intercourse. *Nkaziyo ndacheza naye* (I have had sex with that woman).

¹⁸ In neighbouring Zambia, people assume that without any good reason a man alone with a non-kin (married) woman of reproductive age, are together for the purpose of illicit sex, and can therefore charge the man of adultery (Dover 2001: 101).

¹⁹ It appeared that the two women knew each other, had shared their experiences with each other, and agreed that this research was not doing them and their reputation any good and had decided to drop out.

to talk about it. In several of our conversations, women rather tried to save their face or denied their sexual networking to me. Occasionally I was with them while they were soliciting men, but even then, I never heard them telling me that what they were doing was “prostitution”.

When the young women’s rooms were not far apart from mine, I could see or hear men entering or leaving their rooms. When freelancers introduced them to me, they never told me that this man is their client or customer and I never asked them either. Sometimes, they respectfully informed me, “This is my uncle”, “that was my brother”, “that one was a colleague of my late husband”, “that was my old classmate who is now working here in town”. Sometimes they volunteered that they got money from them or were helped by this or that man to whom I had been previously introduced. When they sporadically borrowed money from me, they would say something like, “The man you saw last with me owes me money. He will give me my money next week, when he gets his salary.”

Mystery clients too were told by bar girls and freelancers, with whom they had already agreed to have sex, that they were not prostitutes. On a few occasions women would explicitly state that not they, but “those women sitting there”, were prostitutes [pointing]. Male field assistants wrote in their ethnographic field reports that they were surprised to hear statements like, “*Ine sindine hule*” (Me, I am not a prostitute) from women who were willing to have sex with them now or in the near future in exchange for assistance. To the mystery clients these women were therefore “prostitutes”. I thought along the same lines.

Male assistants commented 26 times (19 percent) in their reports that their informant told them: “I am not a prostitute”. Women said this in response to things the mystery client had spontaneously told or asked them. And while the majority of the reports did not state anything on

this issue, this did not necessarily mean that the other 71 percent²⁰ of informants perceived themselves as prostitutes or accepted being called as such. I felt these 26 incidences were remarkable enough to require a better understanding about the concept of prostitution and what those participants thought would make one a prostitute. These findings could inform policy and public health program development because several interventions focused on “prostitutes”, including the one organized by the EC AIDS Project, for which this qualitative study was conducted.

We incorporated mystery clients’ findings as part of a discussion guide for focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth conversations with bar girls, freelancers and poor single women in Blantyre and Lilongwe. This was done to allow us to validate our previous observations, provide a more coherent and complete picture, and deepen our understanding.

Commercial sex workers

If bar girls and freelancers denied being prostitutes, how did they feel about the term “commercial sex workers”? In 1995, Shawa and Mkamanga (1995) conducted a feasibility study for the same EC AIDS Project on income generating activities for “commercial sex workers” in Blantyre and Lilongwe districts, both districts we also studied. Shawa and Mkamanga, however, took the terminology for granted and do not explain it. When I asked in 1996 one of the women who had told me that she “hooked” men, how she would feel if people would refer to bar girls and freelancers as “commercial sex workers”, she responded in English:

What? What are you saying? Say that again. ... Where does that word come? [I write down the three words in full]. Please, no. That word [commercial sex workers] is even worse than *mahule* (prostitutes). It does not apply to us. Perhaps you have those women in your country but not here in Malawi. What we are doing, that does not fit any of the three words you wrote down. You know that we are not “workers”. This is not

²⁰ Some 10 percent identified themselves to mystery clients, without probing, as prostitutes; 19 percent reported that they were not. So officially, we do not really know how the remaining 71 percent of bar girls and freelancers contacted by mystery clients saw themselves.

our work. This is not a job. We are only helping ourselves the best way we can. And commercial? No we are not like the Indians who run their stores on commercial business: you pay what you take. If you can't pay, you can't take [laughs]. No, we are not like that: with some men we do it on credit. We trust them. Or sometimes they give us advances, depending on our needs or when it is at month' end. We are just helping each other. ... And that middle word, eeeeh. That's difficult [pauses for a moment]. That's a very difficult word. It's rude to use that word. All three [words] are not good [shakes her head]. Eeeeeeh [squeezes her face] No, we respect ourselves. Those are not good words in our culture. People might think we do it [going out with different men] intentionally. As for me, I don't like that new word and I don't think you can find any of us here who can like it. I don't want to be called *hule*, because it is an insult, but at least, it is better than the one you wrote down [refuses to read the words aloud].

Indeed, she was right. Two female assistants explored this concept with bar girls and two mystery clients with freelancers. None of them had ever heard of it and they could not identify with the new terminology because they did not conceptualize prostitution as a profession. One bar girl replied: “No, I am not a prostitute. So I don't know how prostitutes feel about that new word. You have to ask them about it. I don't know anything about that word.” Another one felt: “No, those words are not helping us. They make our case worse. I am a bar girl, that is my job. Not that commercial eeh What was that new word again?” Somebody else explained: “No, that is not what I do. I don't agree with that. It does not show respect.” Freelancers made similar comments and thought it was “a very bad name”. “Everybody would know what we are doing. No, that is not a proper word.”

For self-respecting people it is uncommon to use the word “sex” in public speech. In 2002 the Minister of the MOHP opened a workshop in Blantyre on reproductive and sexual health, sponsored by DfID. However, prior to the opening he informed the organizers that he would open the workshop but would not use the word “sexual”. When reading his speech, he just omitted it and thus opened a workshop on only “reproductive health”.

With the numbers of bar girls decreasing and that of freelancers increasing, the EC AIDS Project felt that bar-based peer education interventions were no longer cost-effective. Strongly

inspired by Wilson's work²¹ with "sex workers" in Zimbabwe (Wilson *et al.*, 1989), and following two fashions in international public health, i.e. promoting community based interventions, and working with "commercial sex workers", the Project went ahead and changed in 1998 the "bar girl component" into "commercial sex workers component". Subsequently, Msiska and Sichale (1998) did a study on "adolescent commercial sex workers in Malawi" and Walden *et al.*, (1999) measured the impact of peer education interventions for "commercial sex workers" and their clients.

Agreement

Although bar girls and freelancers tended to accuse each other of being prostitutes²², they agreed on additional things. First, prostitutes did not operate from only within the bar environments. "Anybody who is involved in *chigololo* (pre-marital or extra marital sex) is a prostitute". Women with or without a husband, job or money could be going out with different men who were not their husbands:

We see them coming here to the resthouse. But in the place where they live, people might not know them as prostitutes. They know them as Mrs So-and-So or as e.g., the mother of Chikonde. They only know that she is married, that she works in a bank or that she is a nurse. Nobody might think badly about her because she is respectfully married and gainfully employed. But in fact, some of those so-called respectful women just cover up and misbehave. They sleep with other women's husbands just like we do but they are very secretive about it. But they are prostitutes as well.

On one occasion, the resthouse manager of a place in Blantyre where I stayed for a couple of days, told me that "the woman who had just left the resthouse with the man driving that blue Toyota Corolla, with the xxxx number plate [mentioned the car plate number] parked under that shady tree [pointing] is a nun." I recalled the woman and challenged him, telling him that he "just wanted to make the stories more fantastic" because he knew about my research topic.

²¹ Since 1994 Wilson consulted the EC AIDS Project on various occasions.

She has been coming here before with that man. Perhaps she is doing some kind of retreat with him [opened his eyes widely and stuck out his lower lip]. She is also a human being. We all need sex, it's natural, not so?! ...When she goes back to the convent, she removes her wick and puts on her veil ... You don't know what is going on here. But I am working here and I am telling you.

When I asked him how he knew about this, he told me that one of his customers knew her brother. I could not verify this particular story, but some of my senior colleagues at Lilongwe DHO told me similar stories. However, they were all members of the Presbyterian and other protestant churches, and — although familiar with a series of sex scandals in the Roman Catholic church — I wondered whether those statements were also ways to express their disbelief about the possibility for priests and nuns to really live a celibate life. “It is not only unnatural, but also very unhealthy”, the health professionals insisted.

Second, men with different sex partners outside their regular union(s), were also prostitutes. They called them *mahule achimuna*²³ (male prostitutes) or *mayendayenda*²⁴ (the same word that is used for freelances, thus implying those who are *movious* and who kept on changing women outside their formal union).

Constructing sexualities, moralities and gender roles

A bit of history is needed to understand why women agreed that men involved in multiple partner sex were also called “male prostitutes”. Up to a century ago, pre-Christian local rain cults helped the Chewa, a conglomeration of matrilineal speaking ethnic groups in what is currently called the Central and Southern Region of Malawi, to organize their society, and give

²² I am aware that in other African countries it is also common that competing categories of women in bars say negative things about each other.

²³ The singular form of *mahule achimuna* is *hule la limuna*.

²⁴ *Kuyenda* is the Chewa verb for “to go”. *Kuyendayenda* could be literally translated as “to go-go”, but is often used for going up and down, back and forth, implying busily moving up and down, being “movious”.

meaning to their lives. Peasant farmers heavily depended for their subsistence and thus survival on only one rainy season per year.

Their men-women relationships and sexuality were strongly linked to the fertility of the land, its people, and their livelihoods. People were ensured of ancestral protection, provided they stuck to cultural teachings. Communities had a strong allegiance to their village head or chief, the perceived mediator between the people and ancestors. To increase their chances of survival, people not only had strict regulations about when and how to burn their farms, and when and how to hunt, but sex belonged in the marriage and was also highly regulated and ritualized. They had strict rules about with whom, when and why to have sex, where, how, and how often. In this context, periods of abstinence were quite common (Rangeley 2000: 8-75). Not to follow those taboos, and not following constructed masculinities and femininities were perceived to threaten the moral integrity and survival of society.

Young boys and girls were brought up with the idea that they must get married and have children. To remain single was deviant. A married woman was allowed to have sex with only her husband: the *mkazi wa mwini* (the owner or guardian of the wife). To commit adultery was, with murder, theft and witchcraft, one of the four major offences (Rangeley 2000: 35). A man who had sex with somebody's else wife, also committed adultery and could be charged for it. For a man to have sex with an unmarried girl and not to perform the marriage rites, was another crime (2000: 38). *Ukwati* (marriage) was a synonym for being sexually active according to strictly prescribed regulations. Nobody could be sexually active outside marriage or when men were, they were expected to marry the girl. Transgressing those regulations was punished, and it was believed that it could lead to the ill-health or death of their partner or child. Public punishments also served to deter others from misconduct. Risk was identified with vice and anti-social

conduct (see also Rangeley 2000; Schoffeleers and Roscoe1987; van Breugel 2001). In this context it becomes clear why some women call others involved in multiple partner sex: *anthu oyipitsitsa* (the worst people). “They ever were! *Base* (That’s it). It is not only now because of this modern disease,” a female teacher told me.

To single poor women in the focus group discussions, and many others we spoke with during the period between 1996-2002, bar girls and freelancers are prostitutes and belong to the “worst people” because they sleep with many different men. They are perceived as “husband poachers” who break up homes, bring diseases into the family, and suck money away. They are accused of being anti-social and consenting to immoral acts that bring about chaos:

We [poor single women] are all poor and single women here. You don’t have to do that [having sex with many men]. It is their laziness, greed and selfishness that makes them [bar girls and freelancers] misbehave.

They don’t want to work but want to get plenty money, every day. They want money quickly and spend it on useless things to seduce men. They are thieves. Can you imagine what would happen if we would all go about somebody’s else her husband? That would be a real disaster. No, they are people with very bad and shameful behaviors, they are the scum of the earth.

Many study participants, both men and women, used metaphors like *namasupuni* (water hyacinths) for freelancers because like water hyacinths, they grow fast in numbers, look beautiful but harm their environments because of their entrapment capabilities: gradually they kill the ecosystem. Poor single women in focus group discussions but also married women I spoke with, blamed bar girls and freelancers for disrespecting their cultural moral values and the teachings of the elders. They are alleged of destroying life, and ruining Malawi. “We will all go [die] because of them. That’s why we call them ‘walking death traps’.” Bar girls and freelancers were the antitheses of what a good woman was supposed to be.

Any one who did not adhere to the historical cultural teachings and mores, transgressed sexual taboos, lacked self- respect and misbehaved, was disinterested in their productive and reproductive roles and responsibilities, and in general did not stick to the culture and

transgressed sexual taboos, was believed to be a threat to the community's survival. They were socially condemned and categorized as the worst people.

Proper conduct

Bar girls tend to be more familiar with their cultural teachings and claim to stick more to it than freelancers. In writing this, I do not want to create strict categories and I am aware of the fluidities of the two groups. Having said that, bar girls were more often formally or partially initiated into womanhood and prided themselves on having self-respect and respecting men, authority and hierarchy. Overall, more than freelancers, they had internalized their place and position within society, accepted their productive and reproductive tasks, and agreed that men were not only their providers but also their authority. Freelancers tended to be younger, had more years of formal education, and less dependents, appeared more independent and rebellious against cultural mores.

Bar environments, although the antithesis of what was perceived as proper, also often reminded me of a microcosm of Chewa society and its culture, where head bar girls and bar managers were responsible for instilling and maintaining a hierarchical order which people had to respect to prevent chaos. Workers and visitors were expected to behave well and put up with the bar's rules and regulations. Not abiding was perceived as misconduct and was punished.

Despite the fact that bar girls were in this "shameful environment", they felt that they "behaved". They stuck to the culture and regulations of the bar, were gainfully employed, were humble, respected themselves and their clients, waited respectfully to be approached by men, and claimed not to go to the wives' houses to cause havoc, and did not steal each others "husbands".

“The men find us here. We serve them with whatever drinks they want, talk gently with them and if they want to sleep with us, why should we say ‘no’? What will we eat?”

Freelancers, however, in the worst case scenario, walked into the bar, did not know — and showed with their actions that they did not want to know — of the bar rules and regulations. They accepted no authority, chased “the men with the four c’s”: car, cell phone, clothes and cash²⁵, and if possible, snatched bar girls’ “husbands”. Several freelancers confirmed that they would not search for another job because their financial gains from trading sex were higher than any regular job could offer. “I will begin thinking about getting a job when I am facing problems.”

Overall, bar girls felt that freelancers misbehaved and lacked self-respect. To them freelancers were prostitutes. Yet, freelancers accused bar girls of being the “professional prostitutes”. “That’s their work. That’s why they are there [at the bar] all the time.” Other freelancers defended themselves and believed that men had a demand for sex with different women: “The men don’t want to eat rice everyday.” “So as long as there are men who have the money and want to spend it on me, why shouldn’t I seek them out? I am free, we live in a democracy. I can do what I want: nobody can control me.”

Socio-genesis of the prostitute construct

Christianity preached against many of the Chewa cultural practices and values, including their sexual morality and taboos. According to Ott (2000: 210), a German theologian who studied the enculturation processes after Christianity was introduced, the Chewa perceived Christians as people who wanted to destroy their sexual mores and who turned them into “prostitutes” (2000: 210). In this context a prostitute had become the antithesis of what the

Chewa culture described as a well-behaved person who observed the cultural rules and regulations, including the sexual taboos.

Very little is written about prostitution during the late 1890s and early 1900s: the period that the British colonised the country and the Christian missions had established themselves. In 1907, Hector Duff noted in the Blantyre District Notebook the presence of “prostitutes” in Blantyre market (in Power 1995: 84). He lamented that there was no ordinance under which they might be prosecuted, and recommended periodic police checks in the market to rebuke those women. In 1924, the Southern Province Native Association petitioned the governor to issue all married women identity “tickets”. This would help identifying “unchaste women”, many of whom had travelled between the large towns “with the intent of immoral practices”. This practice was expected to spread venereal diseases, and would encourage male domestic servants to steal to pay for sex (in Power 1995: 84).

Marwick (1965) analyzed the roots of the Chewa construct *hule*. He reasoned that it likely has been borrowed from the Afrikaner word *hoer*. As far back as the beginning of the previous century, women followed male migrant laborers to the mines and estates in South Africa and Northern and Southern Rhodesia. They offered men domestic services, and emotional and sexual comfort. From those contacts a range of relationships could emerge: from relatively stable to temporal friendships to casual encounters. He reasoned that Chichewa words normally do not start with an “h” (1965: 48, 48n). The Afrikaner language is quite similar to Dutch and a common Dutch word for a prostitute is “hoer”. Furthermore, in the Chichewa language the “l” and the “r” are often interchanged, making the words *hule* and *hoer* even more similar.

Forster (2000: 5) argued that the Chewa faced difficulties when incorporating a Western-type notion of a “prostitute” — *hule* — into their indigenous concepts. However, I feel they

²⁵ The - c - for “condoms” is notably missing.

actually did a good job. They used the concept of *chigololo* (pre-marital or extra-marital sex) and, being conscious that this could be practiced by both women and men, they added the male version to the new construct of *hule* (a woman who has pre-marital or extra-marital sex): *hule la limuna* (a male person who has pre-marital or extra marital sex).

The colonial masters, however, introduced a judicial system that did not necessarily take into account Chewa's tribal laws (Rangeley 2000), mores and values of that time. During the colonial era, almost all reported juvenile delinquents were male. "Their female counterparts in colonial thought were prostitutes²⁶ (Iliffe 1985: 271). The first known protest against (female) prostitution dated from 1924. By so doing, the colonial masters, with their justice system, were the first group we know of to narrow the construct of "prostitution", with its male and female equivalents, to female prostitutes only.

The fixed Euro-American bi-variate concepts of prostitutes and of commercial sex workers are not useful in understanding why the majority of Malawian women who are willing to engage in multiple partner sex did not identify with and perceive themselves as prostitutes or commercial sex workers. I see two major problems with defining a prostitute as a person who exchanges sex for money, drugs or other goods or services. To begin with, only one person, the one who offers the sex service, is referred to as a prostitute, not the person who asks for it. In the Malawian context, men involved in multiple partner sex outside their regular unions are also called prostitutes. Furthermore, although exchanging sex for cash, goods or services might be an essential element of prostitution, as I show above, it is by itself insufficient to make men and women prostitutes and thus among "the worst people" or very bad people in society.

²⁶ With colonial rule, prostitution was illegal. In the current situation, prostitution is legal, however, loitering and other people making money from prostitution, are illegal.

Defining the other: the antithesis of well-behaved women

Bar girls and freelancers who sexually network with men, are not a homogeneous or monolithic group, and do not speak in one voice. Behavior change interventions that make assumptions about women involved in multiple partner sex, and intend to promote consistent condom use among “prostitutes”, sadly miss out, and seriously limit the effectiveness of their HIV prevention efforts.

Women provided different and often contradictory explanations for why they were not prostitutes. However, on several occasions I heard them and other women insulting each other as a “prostitute”, using the construct as a metaphor, without necessarily implying its original meaning (see also Goffman 1968: 15). They conceptualized prostitution as an act committed by a another, and defined themselves by constructing the “other”, the prostitute. Three areas appeared crucial for them in which they showed how they saw themselves and constructed their own identity of “self” by constructing the “other”. Those areas strongly mirrored the antitheses of appropriate gender roles for well-behaved women. First, their appearance and conduct, which included the way they dress, their make-up, hairdo, smoking and alcohol consumption, their active soliciting of men for sex, as well as accepting any proposal from any men, even those who are much younger than themselves, and those who look “sick”. Second, the way they had sex with men and its frequency: whether it is “again and again”, “short time”, “bush sex”, or “whole night”, with or without condoms, and whether they would accept having sex with men during their menstrual period or immediately after an abortion. Third: this includes the entire bartering and bargaining process: it also takes into account the area of charging a man, and telling him how much to give her, and “trying to make a business out of sleeping with different men” instead of merely “helping” each other.

Impression management

I initially thought bar girls' and freelancers' denial, to me and female assistants, that they were prostitutes, was merely a way to hide from us that they were in the business of trading sex. I could easily identify with the general attitude of women I met in resthouses, as well as that of the two participants who dropped out of the study. On various occasions I was told and had experienced myself that Malawians, like so many other people in the world, look down upon prostitutes, and blame them for the fast spread of AIDS, "the killer disease".

So why would any person voluntarily tell others that they belong to this stigmatised and devalued group? What would they gain from it? Nencel (1997: 270) had a similar experience in Lima, and noticed that women who told her that they were "prostitutes", would rather take on unfixed, fluid and multiple identities that would give them space to maneuver. I understood the bar girls' and freelancers' attitude as impression management (see Goffman 1968) and thus as self-protective, avoiding being labeled "the worst people" and keeping open as many options as possible.

Impression management could perhaps also explain why the majority of the women told mystery clients that their presence in drinking environments was innocent, and why they would not partake in sex. However, why would a woman be willing, often within less than an hour, to have sex with a man and afterwards still remind him that she is not a prostitute? By so doing, would she not worsen her case by creating discordance between what she said she was, and what she was actually willing to do? Could mere impression management explain this obvious contradiction?

By portraying an image that the meeting with the man was out of the ordinary and a mere fortuitous set of circumstances, she role played at least three potential meanings. One, she used it

as an emotional defense mechanism to deny her role and responsibility in high-risk multiple partner sex. Second, she emphasized that this occasion was spontaneous and special. An eventual sexual encounter would make this one more romantic, beautiful and “sexiting” [my own coining] because she was not like the others, a vulgar and stigmatized HIV infected “walking death trap”. Since she was not a prostitute, she acted out in front of him that he was not a “John”. By so doing, she created space for him to act as the responsible and respectful man; she made him feel good about himself, and about any subsequent transaction(s) with her. Third, by reminding him that she was not a prostitute, even after having agreed to have sex with him, she enticed the man further by reassuring him that this particular sexual encounter would not mean to her a mere casual HIV high-risk activity. By so doing she increased her chances to hook a “provider” or “helper” now and for the near future. She expressed, at least acted out, her interest in having a prolonged relationship with him instead of a mere hit-and-run contractual agreement. In addition, it showed again how incredibly strong the stigma, thus the denial is, for fear of being stigmatized as a prostitute.

Conclusion

Focusing AIDS prevention interventions on only bar girls and freelancers, leaving out the “male prostitutes” adds to the blame and marginalisation of women who have sex with multiple partners (Murray and Robinson 1996: 50). It is doubtful that the copied interventions, like the peer education programs introduced and implemented in Malawi, although successfully used within gay communities in the industrialized world (Murray and Robinson 1996), had the desired outcomes. They did not take into account the specific cultural and politico-economic contexts of

multiple partner sex in the area of study in Malawi, and did not address its root causes (van den Borne, forth coming).

In this article I introduce the two groups of women who sexually network in and around the bar environment in urban and trading centers: the bar girls and freelancers. Although society looks down upon them as prostitutes, and groups them among the “worst people”, women willing to have sex with mystery clients told them that they were not prostitutes. They also did not identify themselves with the modern construct of “commercial sex workers”. Their sexual networking was neither purely commercial nor purely social: they tried to keep the relationship between themselves and their clients fuzzy and undefined to increase their chances of finding “helpers”. To deny their role and responsibility in high-risk sexual practice, and to avoid stigma and being blamed for the “killer disease”, women constructed their identity and defined themselves through constructing the “other”: the prostitute, who has been turned into the antithesis of what a good, well-behaved and respectful woman is supposed to be. I use the impression management paradigm to explore why they deny being labeled as prostitutes.

Furthermore, I provide a socio-genesis why bar girls and freelancers are grouped among those who are the “worst people”. They do not follow the cultural teaching and mores, break up families and bring diseases into it, cause chaos and disorder, and are thus perceived as a threat to society’s survival. In addition, I illustrate that the Euro-American construct of a prostitute as a person who exchanges sex for money, drugs, food or other forms of assistance or favors is not useful for developing culturally appropriate HIV/AIDS prevention strategies in Chewa society among people who are involved in high-risk multiple partner sex. It removes the *mahule achimuna* (men who have pre-marital or extra-marital sex) from the equation, worsens the stigmatization of the *mahule* (female prostitutes), and makes them solely responsible for the

spread of the AIDS epidemic, which may result in further denial. Last, I observe the dissonance between how women in multiple partner sex define themselves, and how NGOs and the donor community develop interventions targeting the “prostitutes”. I doubt the interventions’ effectiveness since they ignored the cultural and politico-economical context of multiple partner sex.

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