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PURSUIT OF MODERNITY**

Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala

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The Administrative Officer
Centre for Social Science Research
University of Cape Town
Private Bag
Rondebosch, 7701
Tel: (021) 650 4656
Fax: (021) 650 4657
Email: kforbes@cssr.uct.ac.za

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May 2004

Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala is professor of anthropology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban.

Transactional Sex and the Pursuit of Modernity

Abstract

This paper explores meanings and understandings of sexual exchange for material gain in an urban township of Durban, South Africa. The analysis argues against the tendency to assume too readily that all forms of sexual exchange are oriented towards subsistence, and not consumption. This paper also argues that sexual exchange is the means used by women in this study to pursue images and ideals largely created by the media and globalisation. It is revealed that transactional sex is perceived as 'normal' leading many women to accept men's multiple partners and to put themselves at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS (despite having knowledge of the pandemic). Finally, the paper highlights women's power and agency whereby women are asserting themselves in order to exploit sexual relationships in the interests of new 'needs' – the commodities of modernity.

Introduction

As socially constituted behaviour, the meanings, values and motivations ascribed to sexual expression vary widely across cultures as well as within particular populations. Sexual expression encompasses a range of sexual behaviours and ideologies that include sexual activities, desires, attitudes, beliefs and moral codes whose shared meanings are mediated by historical and economic forces that vary over time. While it is widely acknowledged that HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa is primarily spread through normative heterosexual activity (Holmes 2003), we must acknowledge that our understanding of what constitutes normative heterosexual activity in the continent's various socio-economic and cultural contexts is far from complete. The effects of globalisation and the rapid pace of change in many communities of the sub-continent is such that the nature and patterns of activities once considered normative not so long ago are likely to be different today. Any description then of what currently appears as normative activity, whether sexual or otherwise, must take into account not only the spatial/contextual specificities of these ways but also their temporality in the settings in which they occur.

Through a close examination of the implicit meanings and shared understandings that underpin contemporary relationships in Africa, some light may be shed on the nature of the 'normative heterosexual activities' that continue to put people here at high risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.

This paper focuses on sexual exchange for material gain in an urban township of Durban, South Africa. It builds upon previous research on youth sexuality in South Africa, and draws on a wider literature on sexual exchange practices in Africa over the past 30 years. A central concern is the relationship between local sociocultural processes in the form of particular heterosexual dynamics, and global economic forces together with abstract narratives of modernity. Through living in South African urban areas, many young people today have their basic needs for food, shelter and other services largely met by parents or other older caregivers. For many women in these communities, exchanging sex for financial or lifestyle rewards is an important part of their orientations towards sexual encounters, and often have little to do with being poor. Here, words such as 'prostitution' or 'survival sex' misrepresent the character of relationships where implicit understandings link material expectation to sex and are not entirely separate from everyday life.

Young women exploiting their desirability in an effort to attract men who can provide them with expensive commodities such as jewellery, cellular phones, fashionable clothing and opportunities to be seen as passengers in luxury automobiles, seemingly has little to do with poverty-related survival strategies. Arguably, such practices are more about satisfying 'wants' as opposed to meeting 'needs', and may reflect a desire to acquire what Handler (1991) referred to as 'symbol capital', in this case symbols of a modern and successful life. Given the need to better understand what makes young people in sub-Saharan Africa so vulnerable to HIV infection, this paper represents an attempt to reveal some of the motives and meanings that some young urban women currently attach to their sexual relationships. By studying this particular group of KwaZulu-Natal township women, I am in no way implying that similar behaviours with similar motivations do not occur in other, non-African communities. The practice of women exchanging sex for material reward or gain is surely not unique to any part of the world. Women's motivations for trading sex are possibly as diverse as the societies in which it occurs and the particular forms that it takes. In the context of a rapidly modernising, increasingly globalised (and in some quarters increasingly prosperous) world, there is a need to look beyond common assumptions that link sexual exchange to economic necessity, and grapple with a wide range of motivations and complex

nuances of meaning that underpin sexual exchange, that may provide incentives for high risk behaviours.

Background

The terms ‘prostitution’ and ‘commercial sex’ are commonly used to describe sexual exchange that involves a pre-determined contract, usually a cash payment to a woman (in most cases) who provides sex on a more or less professional basis (de Zaldondo 1991). Where the exchange is not necessarily a straight-forward cash transaction and where sex is not pursued on a professional basis, the term ‘survival sex’ has gained currency, and has generally been interpreted as a consequence of women’s poverty and economic dependence on men (Muir 1991). However, some studies have suggested that not all forms of sexual exchange (or transactional sex) are engaged in for either straight commercial or survival reasons. A main point raised in most all early studies on sexual exchange in the African context was the problem of using the Western category of ‘prostitution’ to describe a variety of exchange relationships. Based largely on studies from West Africa, works by Little (1973), Bleek (1976), Pellow (1977), Huston and Cate (1979), Dinan (1983), Nelson (1985), and Tabet (1989) all demonstrated the conceptual difficulties of using this western-derived category with its narrow and morally laden assumptions.

It was only when the existence of an HIV/AIDS epidemic was firmly established in Africa by the mid-1980s that more researchers began to focus attention on particular patterns of sexual behaviour in relation to HIV transmission. Ankrah (1989:272) argued that the ‘prostitution of poverty’ was a practice clearly distinct from professional prostitution as understood in the West, and called for closer attention to be paid to the different meanings of sexual behaviours in differing socio-economic and cultural contexts. In the 1990s, studies that described common non-professional sexual exchange practices in a number of African countries began to emerge. These included studies from Ghana (Ankomah 1992, Fayorsey 1996), Lesotho (Spiegel 1991, Romero-Daza 1994), Mali (Castle and Konate 1999), Namibia (Mukonda 1998, Katjire *et al* 2000), Senegal (Niang 1995), South Africa (Varga 1996 and 1997, Webb 1997, Luiz and Roets 1998, Preston-Whyte *et al* 1998), Tanzania (Bond *et al* 1992, Luna and Rotheram-Borus 1992, Haram 1995, Nnko and Pool 1997), Uganda (McGrath *et al.* 1993, Agyei and Epema 1994, Seely *et al* 1994), Zambia (Nzovu and Lwanga 1997), Zaire (Schoepf 1991, 1992) and Zimbabwe (Basset

and Moloyi 1991, Vos 1994, Basset and Sherman 1994).

With the close of the 1990s, the words ‘survival sex’ and ‘informal sex’ had gained wide usage amongst social scientists writing about sexual exchange relationships in Africa. By emphasising the survival and economic components that drove many women to engage in sex-for-money liaisons, use of these new terms provided for both a more accurate description of sexual exchange in this part of the world, and a ‘safer’ way to speak about sexual behaviour that was less eurocentric, emotive and politically fraught.

More recent studies have suggested that even the improved terminology is inadequate. There is currently an emerging body of literature, much of it based on detailed qualitative research with South African and Tanzanian youth that argues for the need to challenge theoretical assumptions that sexual exchange is primarily a poverty-induced economic survival strategy. Most significant of these studies are those by Stavrou and Kaufman (2000), Leclerc-Madlala (2001), Leclerc-Madlala (2002), Nyanzi *et al* (2001), Silberschmidt and Rasch (2001), Hunter (2002), Thorpe (2002), Selikow *et al.* (2002), Wojcicki & Malala (2001) and Wojcicki (2002), and Wight *et al* (2004). In the urban, rural, and peri-urban settings where these studies took place, there is a different motivating force behind the sexual exchange practices of young unmarried women. Rather than seeking and maintaining relationships for subsistence purposes, many young women today are seeking and maintaining relationships primarily for consumption purposes. Not unlike the young women of Dar es Salaam described by Silberschmidt and Rasch (2001:1822), ‘they are active agents, entrepreneurs who deliberately exploit their partner(s)’.

Previous studies

In 1998, a popular South Africa weekly newspaper featured a story about female students at a Gauteng university who were engaged in the exchange of sex for account payments and fashionable clothing¹. The reporter described how these young women were using their sexuality to access commodities that

1. This article appeared in the *Mail & Guardian* on 18 September 1998. Having interviewed several female students about their sexual exchange relationships, the author reported that all were adamant that they were not prostitutes and their behaviours did not constitute prostitution.

conferred a certain status and represented a sophisticated lifestyle. Within days, university authorities ordered the writer of the article to provide them with the names of these women, publicly retract the story, and formally apologise to the university community. Authorities there were angered by what they saw as reports of prostitution on their campus and concerned about possible damage to the university's reputation. The following year, a KwaZulu-Natal daily carried a story entitled "Gangs in flashy cars purposefully spread HIV". Explaining why the gangs were succeeding with their heinous plan, one former gang member stated; "it is a pity, but our girls are so obsessed with luxuries"². In 2000, the same newspaper that carried the 1998 story of 'prostitution' on a Gauteng campus featured an article that described common consumerist sexual exchange relationships amongst women at a KwaZulu-Natal university³. Over the next few years, similar reports began to reveal what seemed to be increasingly common sexual exchange practices that bore little resemblance to what was generally understood as 'prostitution' or 'survival sex'. With the start of the new century, there has been a steady growth of studies on transactional sex and the ways in which young people in South Africa construct their sexual identities and conduct their sexual lives.

From Wojcicki's (2001 and 2002) studies in the Soweto and Hillbrow areas of Gauteng, we see how understandings of 'informal sex' in the taverns differs from 'commercial sex' in those communities. Wojcicki argued that sex-for-money exchanges in the form of 'informal sex' operate through a system of implied consent, and linked both practices with high rates of HIV infection and high levels of social acceptance of violence against women. Wojcicki concluded that violence needs to be addressed if HIV transmission in South Africa is ever to be slowed. With a general focus on youth culture in the Alexandra township, Selikow *et al* (2002) argued that the combination of poverty with the current materialist/ consumerist culture underpinned the wide prevalence of women's engagement in sexual relationships for conspicuous consumption. These researchers made the important point that sexual transactions are not usually preceded by verbal agreements, but are rather

2. Article appeared in *The Daily News*, 22 October 1999.

3. This article, entitled 'The silences that nourish AIDS in Africa' appeared in the *Mail & Guardian* on 11 August, 2000. Here the author quoted women students as saying they traded sex to secure items of jewelry and fine clothes, as once married, husbands would more likely buy these things for girlfriends rather than wives.

governed by shared understandings that link sex to money and are not necessarily related to poverty.

In KwaZulu-Natal, on-going ethnographic study on popular responses to HIV/AIDS in the peri-urban community of Mariannhill revealed an increasing trend of younger women - older men relationships from the late 1990's (Leclerc-Madlala 2002). These relationships were conducted with the expectation of material gain on the part of women, and were analysed against wider social and infra-structural changes that were taking place in that community during that time. The growth in the number of modern taverns that brought non-resident men with money into the community was identified as significant in the rise of cross-generational 'sugar daddy' liaisons and what community members perceived as increasingly exploitative behaviours of young women. In a study by Hunter (2002) entitled 'The materiality of everyday sex', sexual exchange practices were analysed through a historic study of two neighbouring communities in northern KwaZulu-Natal; Matadeni and Isithebe. Here the distinctions between sex for subsistence and sex for consumption were drawn against the differing forms of gendered material inequalities and lifestyles typical of a township and an informal settlement. Hunter argued that the association between sex and gifts was a central factor driving multiple-partnered sex and supporting a particular masculine construction that drove the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Thorpe (2002) focused on the sexual dynamics amongst students in two township schools. Thorpe argued that the financial element inherent in relationships was of great concern to boys who felt anxious that they could not meet the financial demands of girlfriends. Analysing the linkages between sexual exchange and violence, Stavrou and Kaufman (2000) focused on the economic dimensions of contemporary adolescent sexuality in KwaZulu-Natal, and discussed these in relation to the continued high rates of HIV transmission in that province.

This current study builds upon the growing body of research that describes forms of contemporary sexual exchanges oriented towards consumption rather than subsistence. In an attempt to explore the wide occurrence and underlying meanings and motives of sexual exchange relationships, this paper builds upon continuing ethnographic study of changing patterns of sexual culture and transactional sex in KwaZulu-Natal (see Leclerc-Madlala 2002), and incorporates new findings from an exploratory study of this practice in a large urban township setting.

Methodology

This study was conducted in Umlazi, a sprawling formal urban settlement some 20 kilometres from the city of Durban. Current estimates put its population at over 1 million mostly Zulu-speaking people, with an unemployment rate of 40%. The opportunity to delve more deeply into transactional sexual practices there presented itself when the researcher was approached by a group of HIV/AIDS counsellors who worked in the community. Their experiences suggested that they needed to know more about the motivations of young women who spoke to them about unsafe sexual practices with their partners and the material expectations that were an integral part of their relationships. This led to the identification of several women already known to the counsellors who were prepared to discuss their relationships for research purposes. From an initial 8 women from one particular section of Umlazi, a purposeful snowball sampling technique was used to recruit an additional 53 over the course of three months. The total number of women interviewed was 60. They ranged in age from 15 to 25, and were all unmarried residents of different sections of Umlazi township, and claimed to be involved in one or more sexual exchange relationships.

Much research has sought to describe the varieties of women's experiences and their struggles for agency in the face of AIDS. The aim of this research was to better understand women's agency through an analysis of their motivations and the subjective meanings that they attached to their lived experiences of exchanging sex for material gain. A qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate, with an open-ended interview format used in conjunction with a narrative research methodology and supplemented with participant observation over the four months of May and September 2003. The women were asked to recount their sexual histories with particular reference to the commencement and maintenance of their current relationships. In addition to recording women's descriptions and capturing their thoughts on the subject, close attention was paid to the manner in which the women attempted to read their own moral compasses while reflecting on these liaisons. By incorporating narrative and allowing the voices of women to be heard, the aim was to produce a richly contextualised study of young women and transactional sex.

Interviews were conducted individually in Zulu and English, taking on average one hour. Interviews usually took place in the privacy of the women's homes with only the main researcher and the female research assistant present. English translations were checked with the women throughout the interview session in

an effort to achieve maximum accuracy in translation and interpretation. There were several occasions at which more than one woman was present so that group discussions were carried out. The research setting provided an opportunity to engage the women in more in-depth discussion on issues of sexuality and HIV/AIDS, an opportunity much appreciated by the research assistant who was also an HIV/AIDS counsellor.

Girl Talk

‘If he wants a woman like me, a man must pay. Life is hard for a woman today. Forget about marriage...that was something for our mothers and grannies, its not for us’.

‘Today you need money, it’s not like before because everything is expensive in town. That’s why we do it. Before it was just men who could enjoy everything and do anything they liked. Now it’s our time’.

Discussing the pressures of modern life, these two 20 year-olds captured several themes that were prevalent throughout the interviews. Firstly, the idea that things today were costly, and that sex could be used in an instrumental manner to secure relationships that were financially rewarding. The common underlying postulate was the idea that sex was something valuable and therefore a man should not expect a woman to give it away for free. The exchange aspect of sex was implicit, whether it was an exchange of sexual favours for basic subsistence or for conspicuous consumption. The expectation of women was that men should demonstrate their appreciation for having enjoyed the women’s sexual favours by sharing their material resources. Whether appreciation was expressed in the form of gifts such as jewellery, money, account payments, high-prestige food items, lifts to-and-fro, cash, or favours in the form of babysitting of children or siblings, there was an expectation of a reciprocating gesture.

Significantly, the language of ‘survival sex’ framed discussions about material expectations. Regardless of whether the women spoke about their ‘need’ for food or transportation, or their ‘need’ for fashionable items of clothing or outings to expensive hotel, all compensations by men were construed as helping to meet their ‘needs’. For these young women, sex had a definite commodity value, and that value had increased in pace with the current cost of living. The notion that ‘everyone was doing it’ was likewise a widely held view. Women

were keen to portray their engagement in transactional sex as commonplace and normal for unmarried women of their age group living in an urban environment. Many professed little interest in marriage, while others who were interested viewed it as simply unlikely. There was a general belief that women from rural areas were also active in transactional sex, but did not need many partners because they were not under the same pressure to look good and maintain a certain lifestyle. Reference to men's previous monopoly on 'enjoying life', a reference that was often expressed in terms of multiple sexual partners was another popular theme in women's narratives of relationships. Multiple sexual partnering was frequently linked to discourses on changing times and the present representing women's time to enjoy any number of concurrent partners. An 18-year-old put it this way:

'It's very hard with one boyfriend today, as we are young we must enjoy ourselves... do things, go places, look smart. You cannot do this when you are poor or old. Men must wake up. A modern woman needs three or at least two boyfriends to satisfy her these days'.

Maintaining relationships with more than one partner concurrently was viewed as a 'modern' activity and not uncommonly framed by discourses on gender equality and human rights. Such associations have been noted in other studies with urban women, and highlight women's engagements with issues of power in relationships (Selikow *et al* 2002, Hunter 2002). While acknowledging how women's choices are constrained by complex historical, cultural and material forces that shape their lives, such associations may reflect one way in which young women are attempting to assert themselves. Such views represent a challenge to the implicit social norms that dictate men's control over sexual encounters. As discourse theorists such as Frosh *et al* (2002) point out, such statements are valuable not only as descriptions of characteristics of current gender identities, but as accounts of processes by which respondents are producing and negotiating gender identities in interaction with existing discourses, both old and new.

Cheating, sharing and tolerating

Expectations of men's unfaithfulness were clearly articulated through the women's narratives about relationships. Men's inability to be loyal to one woman was spoken about in a very matter-of-fact manner. Although women did

not claim to be happy about this, it was presented as something inevitable that required tolerance. While several local studies have revealed similar patterns of widespread acceptance of men's unfaithfulness (see for Varga 1997, Wood *et al* 1998 and Harrison *et al* 2001), they have not revealed the extent to which women positioned themselves to exploit this situation. Women take cognisance of the fact that a man's popularity and prestige in the community was boosted through his association with girlfriends. In particular, women whose appearance was said to be beautiful and 'classy' were believed to be those most sought-after by men as girlfriends. Such women were said to make a favourable impression amongst the man's peers and invited their envy. Gifts of jewellery and fashionable clothing accrued a double value, one in terms of how these adornments contributed to women's status, and another in terms of how they bolstered a man's own prestige in the eyes of his peers. A 19-year-old stated:

'If he's proud he will want you to look good and up-to-date. He wants his friends to be jealous of him. He wants to show off what he can get'.

The women seemed well aware of the role they played in boosting their partner's sense of manliness. Exploring the issue of exploitation in relationships, most women maintained that exploitation was a two-way process, with men exploiting them as much as they exploited men. The women recounted the risks they took exposing themselves to the possibility of disease including HIV infection and pregnancy, as a result of partners' refusal to use condoms.

'It's the men who actually exploit us. We are the ones who fall pregnant and get infections. They also beat us. So if we use them to get what we want, we show them we're not stupid'.

The latter quote was that of a 21-year-old who claimed to have two boyfriends, both married men in their 30's. The ability of older men to better provide materially was one reason given for women's preference for these relationships. Other reasons had to do with the man's lesser demands generally and the infrequency of his visits. The majority of women claimed that an ideal relationship was one in which a partner was not around all the time. Married and older men were also said to be better listeners and more tender lovers.

Amongst the problems that young women found sympathy for amongst older men was the problem of meeting the high cost of modern life. Young women said that older men understood this better than younger men, who were more

likely to deride them for being greedy and materialistic. They did not need to fight and argue with older men the way they did with younger men in order to have them provide the items that women desired. For such reasons, older men were seen as more capable of behaving like 'real' men. They could take women to trendy restaurants and buy 'real' presents such as expensive CD players or furniture for their rooms.

Taxi drivers were identified as one such group of 'real' men. Many of the younger women under age 20 saw taxi drivers as desirable partners. For them, being a 'taxi queen', a woman who occupied the passenger seat as the current girlfriend of the taxi driver, was a coveted position. As a 'taxi queen', the woman could expect free transportation to and from wherever she, her family, and selected friends might choose to go. The drawbacks to being a taxi queen were identified as having to tolerate the man's often-abusive language and behaviour, which the women perceived as being related to the man's easy ability to attract any woman he desired. In the words of one 16-year-old:

'Those guys, they can beat you anyhow, anywhere, even in front of your family. They don't care, because they can have so many girls. I was a taxi queen for two months last year. I went everywhere. Then I became afraid of AIDS because I knew he had many girlfriends...Sis, those guys can be trouble'.

The idea that there was a dearth of suitable men in their communities, while there were many presumably suitable women looking for partners, was a perception that most women shared. This perception was used to support women's view that there was fierce competition amongst unmarried women for suitable men. For this reason, jealousies needed to be allayed. A woman who attempted to keep a desirable man to herself was likely to be accused of selfishness. Women spoke about the necessity of tolerating the other girlfriends of one's partner, so as to maintain peace in the relationship and assure the continued favours of the man. According to one 22-year-old:

'We try to share these good guys because there aren't many. You see men here, drunk, sick, no job. The good ones will have girlfriends so you must just get used to it. So what? If he has money he can get you your things and get the others their things. You mustn't be jealous and selfish'.

Women's motivations to form liaisons with men who could provide them with

the commodities of modern life are being shaped by a plethora of contemporary factors, not the least of which is peer pressure and popular media. Young urban township women are exposed to multiple signifiers of modern life on a daily basis through magazines, billboards, radio and television. The opening of the South African economy with the dawn of democracy in 1994 has brought with it a proliferation of global images of material wealth, including images of easy sex and glamorous lifestyles portrayed through local and foreign soap operas that are extremely popular with the youth. Amongst other things, young women are imbibing images of romantic love coupled with a comfortable life, an ideal combination which women hope to obtain through their relationships with men. Such images, which seldom portray evidence of mundane daily work routines, are all representing the modern and sophisticated lifestyle that these women aspire to achieve and personify.

A continuum of ‘needs’

The language of ‘survival’ and material necessity, as previously discussed, predominates in the discourses of sexual exchange. This is a lexicon replete with reference to the ‘need’ for consumer goods and the ‘necessity’ of acquiring commodities from boyfriends. Owning designer clothing and mobile phones, or being taken out to beachfront hotels were represented as ‘needs’ not dissimilar to the ‘need’ for food or shelter. Discourses of sex-for-subsistence extending into the realm of sex-for-consumption reflect the fluidity of the women’s transactional sexual practices. A partner who rewards a woman for her sexual favours with a gift of expensive jewelry may also provide her with food or rent money if requested to do so. Sexual exchange linked to subsistence and sexual exchange linked to consumption are not mutually exclusive. The nature of the transaction is fluid, ranging from the provision of a basic ‘need’ to the acquisition of a consumer ‘want’. Thus, the practice of transactional sex might best be illustrated by a continuum, where rewards or gifts can vary between what are generally understood as ‘needs and what are generally understood as ‘wants’, while both are always represented and expressed as ‘needs’ (see Figure 1).

When trying to understand the meanings that women attach to their participation in transactional sex, it is the perception of ‘need’ rather than an actual ‘need’ that is important. From the perspective of these urban young women, owning a mobile phone or similar modern hardware is construed as a necessity in their lives. Urban ‘survival’ is equated with pressure to acquire commodities that are

symbolic of sophistication and a lifestyle commonly perceived as modern. The women legitimate their behaviours by seizing upon the language of survival sex and locating their efforts to acquire luxuries within a paradigm of sexual exchange for subsistence purposes. By representing transactional sex as a form of the poverty-related practice of survival sex, I would suggest that women are attempting to maintain a certain social and psychological defense against not uncommon accusations of sexual exploitation.

Figure 1: A continuum of 'needs' in transactional sex.

NEEDS	WANTS
Food/phone	Cellular/ jewellery
Rent/Entertainment	Entertainment/Travel
Essential clothing	Fashion clothing
School fees	Tertiary education fees
Basic transportation	Luxury transportation

AIDS and its Contradictions

Women in this study demonstrated a relatively high degree of knowledge about HIV transmission and prevention. They were aware of the dangers involved in multi-partner sex where condoms were not always used. Knowledge about HIV/AIDS did not necessarily imply a willingness to change their behaviour. Many thought that the threat of AIDS was not likely to diminish young women's engagements in multi-partner transactional sex. With a higher monetary value placed on condom-less sex and women eager to exploit their desirability for maximum gain, these women reported little consistency in condom usage with sexual partners. In the case where the relationship was especially lucrative from the woman's perspective, she was inclined to 'take a chance' for the sake of maintaining the relationship. Insisting on condom usage by partners was viewed as a near-impossibility. The ultimate decision to use or not use a condom was left to the men. In the case of married men, women reported higher condom usage due to what they said was the man's fear of making his girlfriend pregnant. Many reported to be using injectable contraceptives, but partner mistrust often led men to use a condom.

Along with avoiding pregnancy, the possibility of contracting a sexually transmitted disease from the woman was said to be another reason why men would wear a condom. Very little was said about the possibility of the men themselves harbouring infections and using condoms as a way to protect their women partners. When questioned on this issue, the women reported that their partners wore condoms primarily out of self interest, that is to protect themselves against possible disease including HIV infection and the problems involved when a girlfriend falls pregnant. Women insisted that few men chose to wear a condom out of concern for their women. The non-committal and fragile nature of these women's relationships was clearly evident. One 18-year-old stated:

‘These guys don't really care like that. They care about themselves, finish. If he gives you AIDS, so what? No man will say it came from him anyway. It'll just be your own problem’.

All these women had first-hand experience of people in their immediate vicinity either currently sick or believed to have died of AIDS. While the public stigma surrounding AIDS was strong, there appeared to be much gossip and rumour that circulated about people suspected of having contracted the disease. Nearly all the women knew of somebody whom they believed to be HIV positive. Some suspected that they themselves might be carrying the virus, but not one claimed to have been tested. While all professed to be afraid of HIV/AIDS, they still hoped to avoid infection. Yet, at the same time, many young women were aware that their behaviours were putting them at direct risk for acquiring the disease.

These inherent contradictions between knowledge and behaviour were not lost to the women. Rather than using their experiential knowledge of the epidemic and its visible impact of morbidity and death to adopt a lifestyle likely to reduce exposure to the disease (i.e. regular condom use, partner reduction, and faithfulness in relationships), the women seemed to use their knowledge to justify a lifestyle that had the effect of increasing their risk of HIV exposure. The reality of HIV/AIDS was not uncommonly used to justify women's efforts to seek a rapid improvement of their lifestyles through the acquisition of material goods and services from men. According to one 20-year-old:

‘AIDS is everywhere today. Even old women are dying of this thing. That is why we are trying to enjoy ourselves while we are still here. Things are bad for too many people’.

One 17-year-old added:

‘Around here people are getting sicker, and sicker, and then you hear they are gone. I want to move away, but I think everywhere it’s the same. At least I have my few little things...I’m not so bad, my life is O.K. I can say’.

A 21 year-old stated:

‘Where did this HIV come from really? Now what must we do? Just sit at home and do nothing? No, no, go out there girl and live!’.

Another 18-year-old:

‘AIDS has finished trust between partners. You can only live for yourself today and trust no one’.

While such attitudes might be described as fatalistic, women’s responses in the face of an overwhelming AIDS epidemic is far from passive. In the current South African context where widely accessible and easily affordable anti-AIDS treatments are still to become a reality, ill health and rapid death through AIDS has left its mark in communities. This new context has informed the meanings that these young women attribute to life and their vision of a future that is far from guaranteed and presents limited possibilities. Exploiting the immediate benefits that can derive from maintaining sexual relationships with well-resourced men may be one way that urban young women seek to add value to lives that have increasingly lost their meaningfulness.

The threat of a shortened life-span due to the visible presence of HIV/AIDS illness and death in their community appears to be a factor driving young women to engage in multi-partnered transactional sex that increases their risk of exposure to the disease. The immediate benefits of an improved lifestyle and sophisticated public image have become important to women who are currently experiencing the death of friends and relatives at close range. The sense of apprehension that they might be the next ones to fall sick puts a special urgency on their attempts to secure the trappings of ‘the good life’ while they can. There continues to be a need to better understand and address those factors that drive young people to choose short-term pleasures over the long-term gain of life and the possibility of a healthy future.

Conclusion

While this study has focused on microlevel dynamics and meanings attached to transactional sex, we need to acknowledge the macrolevel forces that provide important shaping influences on these women's behaviours. For reasons not unrelated to post-apartheid 'liberalisation' of markets, privatisation, growing urban unemployment, and the media promotion of conspicuous consumption, multi-partnered transactional sexual relationships have come to play an integral role in the lives of many urban young women. With their needs for adequate food, shelter and other necessities of life being met by others, acquiring the commodities of modernity have emerged as new 'needs' that can be met through sexual relationships. Increased access to media images of conspicuous consumption and comfortable lifestyles together with the promotion of consumer values, is likely to ensure the growth of transactional sexual practices amongst young women. Such relationships are not assigned the same negative connotations of prostitution. Rather, their meanings are governed by a similar set of meanings that underpin sexual exchange practices for subsistence purposes. To some extent, these latter practices are socially acceptable and legitimate for women who have limited means of providing for themselves and/or their children. Young women are attempting to shape the meaning-making process accompanying their transactional sexual practices by seizing upon the same set of meanings, values and ideologies that lend legitimacy to survival sex.

Along with notions of what constitutes normative heterosexual activity within a society, notions of what constitutes womanliness or manliness are also in constant flux, being contested and varying over time. For these young township women, discourses on contemporary womanhood celebrate multiple partnering as a signifier of modern life and sexual equality. Understanding women's agency in activities that potentially increase their exposure to HIV requires a more sophisticated approach to the complex issue of power. As Selikow *et al* (2002) argue, there is a need to go beyond the pervasive understanding that strongly links gender power relations to the near-total oppression of woman, a shortcoming of most scholarly deliberations on gender and HIV/AIDS. Foucault's (1979) theory of power as being more nuanced than a one-way hierarchical relationship between dominant and subordinate is a more helpful approach when analysing women's agency in sexual exchange practices. One 19-year-old woman compared men's and women's multiple partnering in this way:

'If you educate a man these days you are educating a pervert. He'll have lots of money and lots of girlfriends... married women young, old, or even little girls he can go for. With us, we are careful to pick good boyfriends who can help us. We're not like dogs. We want nice things, to go to nice places, and to live a good life.'

Women's power and agency within the confines of current economic and gender inequities must be clearly understood if we are to develop more effective HIV prevention interventions. Women who consciously choose multiple partners and engage in transactional sex are seeking to assert themselves and further their own interests. They are fully aware that they are acting in a calculating and exploitative way. Using their sexuality to access goods and services is construed as a pragmatic adaptation to modern and costly urban life. Maintaining such material expectations in sex provides important incentives for partner change and condom-less sex, both contributing to put women and their partners at high risk for HIV. While it has become increasingly clear how many women's coping strategies in the face of AIDS, most notably those driven by the need to survive, have resulted in their destruction, we have not yet begun to take the measure of women's participation in transactional sex as a contribution to their destruction and the growth of HIV/AIDS.

I would suggest that the sexual exchange principle that allows women to view their sexuality in an instrumental way is widespread not only in South Africa, but also throughout the sub-continent and possibly beyond. The consumptive nature of what is described as transactional sex in the African context today can be viewed as linked to urbanisation, the emergence of consumerism and the wide disparities of wealth, and are not unlikely to become more 'normative' in the future. Ultimately, women's access to material goods and women's participation in the economy as controllers of financial resources is required if women are to forego the material rewards that are a central component of their relationships with men. While the wider socio-economic projects to address poverty and gender inequality will likely impact positively on HIV infection rates, they do not directly challenge the exchange principle that is inherent in sexual relationships. Future HIV prevention programmes will need to focus attention on challenging and counteracting this principle more directly.

Many factors have contributed to propel the spread of HIV on the African continent, and many factors continue to propel its growth. New patterns of sexual behaviour are emerging as economies grow and shrink, communities

develop and disintegrate, and the AIDS epidemic continues in its maturation and stride. A research agenda that sets a course to study the changing meanings, beliefs, values, gendered ideologies, cultural constructions and social expressions of sexual behaviours will continue to be required. It is only through such research that we will arrive at a common understanding of why HIV infection continues in its perpetuation in a country such as South Africa, despite high levels of HIV/AIDS awareness and years of massive financial resources directed at preventing its transmission.

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