The Implications of HIV Programming on Rural Girls’ Construction of Healthy and Productive Relationships in Rural Malawi

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Abstract

For 25 years HIV/AIDS has ravaged Sub-Saharan Africa, killing nearly 20 million people. Youth (10-25 years old) are left to chart new territory without the guidance of older generations, reversing the old African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child.” This unprecedented change in the social architecture of African communities has resulted in an international scramble to protect and develop these young leaders of today. In Malawi, the importance of young people to Malawi’s future has not gone unnoticed. Policy discourses on youth in Malawi proclaim ‘youth’ to be in a ‘state of emergency’ (Burton 1997), implying that future generations will be in peril if youth are not protected from HIV by preventing high risk situations like early marriage and school drop-out (Ministry of Youth Development and Sports 2007). Transnational health campaigns, using a human rights framework, aggressively target youth in Malawi and yet over 78% of girls marry before the age of 20 and many as young as 15; early marriage is strongly associated with increased risk of HIV for women (Wittenberg et al. 2007). Additionally, Englund (2006) found considerable resentment towards youth-targeted ‘rights’ programmes by elders who complain they lead, somewhat ironically, to ‘immoral’ and risky sexual behaviour by youth in the name of ‘rights’ and the neglect of kin in rural areas.

Lauren Classen is a PhD candidate in the field of Medical Anthropology at the University of Toronto, which emphasizes a multidisciplinary approach to examining global health issues. She works at the interface of the natural resource management, agriculture and health. Her 19 months of field research in northern Malawi worked collaboratively with youth to understand relationships between youth-targeted health policy and campaigns and rural youth health, paying close attention to youths’ own articulations of their ‘health identities’, goals and challenges as influenced by these campaigns. Lauren also continues to work with a participatory agricultural project in north-central Honduras that she first became acquainted with during her Master’s research in the field of Anthropology and International Development at the University of Guelph, and collaborates with Access Alliance, using visual tools to engage newcomer and refugee youth in Toronto in a project exploring mental health issues specific to newcomers. Her commitment to the participatory and collaborative research grew out of her experience in Honduras and work as an impact assessment consultant for participatory agricultural programmes with the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture prior to beginning her PhD. In her spare time Lauren likes to cook, works as a baker and butcher at a restaurant committed to local and sustainable food in Toronto, and enjoys running and cycling.

INTRODUCTION

Children and youth increasingly constitute the majority of the population in African countries. The shifts in the social architecture of African communities are unprecedented. Global ideas about youth as “dangerous”
or “in danger” (Brooks 2003, 3; Tilton 2010; Durham 2000) take on new importance in these contexts as youth emerge variably as potential “gifts” or “burdens” to future societies (Cheney 2007). Youth, and particularly young girls, become productive loci for what Adams et al. have called “anticipatory interventions,” i.e., interventions motivated by “the palpable sense that things could be (all) right if we leverage new spaces of opportunity, reconfiguring ‘the possible’” (2009, 246). They call for attention to the different forms of anticipation in contemporary political economies and their lived effects in the bodies and minds of individuals and communities.

In response, this paper draws on ethnographic research with rural youth (10–30 years of age) in northern Malawi to show how imaginings of the future state and democracy, transmitted to rural youth through transnational health campaigns, particularly HIV campaigns, get writ large gender performances in youth social, sexual, and intergenerational relations in rural villages. In Malawi, the future potential of youth has long been seen to be manageable through behavioural training, though pedagogical programming aimed at youth has changed dramatically very recently, particularly with broader changes in national politics from a dictatorship to democratic governance and also in response to growing concern about HIV/AIDS. Today anticipatory interventions take shape as peer-education programs1 aiming to create moral leaders for the future democracy through messages about human rights, independence, agency, formal education, and abstinence, the “A” of the ABC [abstinence, be faithful, use condoms] HIV prevention campaign. This paper will show that by promoting a sense of hope in girls and young women for future health and prosperity contingent on identities and behaviours that are only partially realizable in this rural setting, such interventions may justify certain forms of violence as “preparedness” for an anticipated future danger. I argue that the most damaging form of violence are the ways this anticipatory regime works to obscure the new vulnerabilities for young girls and intergenerational strife generated in their wake. Girls/young women in rural villages often cannot access the resources that would enable rights, freedoms, and forms of agency without subordinating themselves in some way or choosing a path that makes them vulnerable. Campaigns correlate independence, education, and agency with abstinence, but girls find that boyfriends and husbands are necessary to help pay the school expenses and access the land — resources that underpin those very goals. Persistent gender inequalities characterizing youth social and sexual relations, however, make relationships and marriages risky health ventures. Elders2 in rural villages express significant frustration with youth-targeted campaigns, which they feel promote a kind of selfish individualism that exacerbates vulnerabilities while abdicating responsibility for controlling and disciplining youth. Moral and religious backing for “modern” individualized lifestyles coupled with increasing rural poverty and livelihood vulnerability, however, leave elders with little power to offer or promote alternatives.

Transnational and national campaigns and those who deliver them have been extremely successful in increasing awareness of risks and modes of transmission of HIV and have created opportunities for girls’ education and aspirations for a better future,3 but there are some things program staff and hard-working volunteers cannot change. This paper aims not to discount their efforts or their many accomplishments, but rather to expose the challenges they face in their work.

1. Peer education is deemed most effective for change in youth sexual behaviour, based on the rationale that individual behaviour is strongly influenced by peers, that peers can more easily access groups marginalized from formal healthcare settings, and that they can more easily broach sensitive topics such as relations and sexuality (Medley et al. 2009). In Malawi, youth are engaged as volunteer participants in the project of educating their peers as well as elders in their respective villages about human rights, the risks of HIV/AIDS, and appropriate and sexual and moral behaviour for reducing risk. In exchange, youth volunteers frequently feel an increased status among age mates and receive financial remunerations for workshops and trainings (also see Englund 2004 for similar findings with human rights organizations in central Malawi).

2. This refers to both parents, who are primarily responsible for meeting financial and social needs of their children, and to grandparents. Grandmother and aunts, in particular, are traditionally responsible for teaching youth about appropriate sexualities in northern Malawi.

3. My research assistant frequently commented that “education is everything… [uneducated girls] cannot think through their options.” She implies that real options for alternative lifestyles aside, education in and of itself enables a Freirean “critical consciousness” that she finds inherently valuable.
DEVELOPMENT, GENDER, AND GENERATIONS

“Anticipation” is one of the defining qualities of contemporary social and political life in the West. Pointing out that a sense of the future has long played a role in the management of everyday life, Adams et al. argue that this is intensifying, “raising the stakes for analysis along temporal, epistemological and affective logics” (2009, 248). “The present is governed, at almost every scale, as if the future is what matters most” (ibid.). A key feature of neoliberal capitalism, anticipation is evident in particular in biomedical practice in the West (e.g., fetal management), and is transmitted globally through global health and development programs (Adams et al. 2009).

Anticipatory regimes necessarily implicate younger and younger targets as the goal is the “optimization of future citizens” (Adams et al. 2009, 247). For example, Cheney shows how, in Uganda, children have come to be known as the “pillars of the nation”; proper behaviour in childhood is seen to be critical to development of the person and of the nation (2007, 43). Similarly, Durham discusses how development programs in Botswana focus on empowering youth to become “independent, self-developing, and individualist people, freed from interdependencies and collective relations that constrain them as liberalist citizens of a nation or the world” (2007, 104). Dovetailing with universal notions of child rights, the freedom of youth to make educated choices becomes the “primary ends and principal means of development” (Sen 1999, xii).

The “girl” in particular, emerges, as “truly worthy of investment” (McRobbie 2007, 721). Harris (2004) and McRobbie (2007) both show how the feminist demand for participation and equality is co-opted by global political economy to reinforce urgency around the potential of girls’ untapped capacity. Adams et al. point out that, since the 1990s, investing in the education and preventative health behaviours of “poor girls” has been deemed the “greatest investment” both for future potential earnings and because of the relationship between education and future fertility, in which education emerges as a more cost-effective approach to population control than providing contraceptives (2009, 253, emphasis added). Enabling “agency” of young women to plan their families is a central component of anticipatory development framings (Sen 1999). 4

Recent work by anthropologists shows, however, that women often practice agency in arenas where they have conventionally been seen as powerless victims. For example Jackson, drawing on examples from Zimbabwe and Zambia, challenges assumptions about the “household and marriage as sights of gender subordination” by showing how marriage “works as a safety net for women in many contexts” (2007, 107). Cornwall (2002), Wardlow (2006a), and Poulin (2007) contest assumptions about the “powerlessness” of commercial sex workers, in Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, and Malawi respectively by providing more nuanced accounts of female sex workers’ control over their own sexuality in many contexts and the creative strategies commercial sex workers use to confront challenges (also see Campbell 2002). Poulin (2007) argues that one shortcoming of research on agency and sexuality is its tendency to focus on peri-urban or urban areas. The research reported on here extends current studies on gender, agency, and sexuality by working with rural youth in northern Malawi.

Others have shown that human rights injustices are concealed by the “high-visibility tropes of freedom” (McRobbie 2007, 720) in child and youth-targeted campaigns. In Uganda, international children’s rights discourses sanction disclosure of rights injustices. Children’s ultimate powerlessness to enforce their rights to freedom from abuse or to go to school, however, renders them vulnerable in unanticipated ways as little legal intervention is taken up on their behalf and adults, often parents, accused of committing rights injustices are angered by children’s public disclosure of their behaviours (Cheney 2007). Similarly, in south-central Malawi, Englund (2006) shows how the absence of institutions for claiming entitlements means that individualizing rights discourses create new inequalities among youth volunteers in human rights organizations, non-volunteers, and elders, and do little to address underlying inequalities which negate much of the potential benefit from human rights rhetoric.

4. Sen (1999) uses the word “agent” to mean “someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives” (19).
One of the social consequences of the urgency around the potential of young girls is heightened age and generational consciousness. As opportunities are made available to younger women, age has become “crucial in new forms of difference and inequalities between women” (Walby 1997, 41 in McRobbie 2007, 719). Cole and Durham (2007), in their edited volume Generations and Globalization, argue that studies of globalization have consistently polarized “the global” and “the local,” overlooking interactions among global political economic shifts towards market-based economies and intimate age-determined social relations. Cole further argues that “in emphasizing the concepts of both youth culture and youth agency, this position [taken by contemporary studies of youth] runs the risk of fetishizing and reifying the category of youth, separating youth off from the families and communities in which they live” (2007, 78).

No more acute is the relational embeddedness of youth than in rural livelihood practices in northern Malawi. By examining the intersection between elders’ constructs of ideal youth (Parikh 2005; Kaler 2001) and transnational discourse targeting youth through health campaigns, I found that generation became a central category of analysis in this paper.

PHOTO-LENS AS PART OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PROCESS

The data below is based on 19 months of ethnographic research with youth from two rural villages in northern Malawi (2007–9). I engaged in participant observation by staying with 20 youth and their families in two rural villages for anywhere from five days to two months. During this time, I talked with, played with, and went to school with hundreds of youth. As part of the ethnographic process, this research developed and piloted a participatory approach called Photo-LENS (Life-Experience Narratives of Significant concepts) to understand lived experiences of key concepts employed in youth-targeted policy and programming in Malawi. Photo-LENS builds on traditional anthropological ethnography, including participant observation and individual interviewing, by combining it with visual and participatory techniques such as “Photovoice” (Strack et al. 2003) and Most Significant Change (Davies and Dart 2005). Discourses on “youth challenges” and “good health” persistent in policy and programming are reflected in public discourse in Malawi. In initial interviews, youth challenges were reduced to individual behaviours in such discourse (e.g. early marriage, school-drop-out, and drug substance abuse) and good health to abstinence and proper nutrition. After much experimentation, this research found that asking youth to photograph “suffering” and “long-life” was effective for eliciting personal, lived experiences of challenges and good health. One hundred and eighteen youth were asked to photograph (1) “what most brings you joy,” 2) “what most makes you suffer,” and 3) “someone who will live a long life.” The stories accompanying over 500 photographs were elicited in semi-structured interviews guided by the photographs. The photographs also served as launch pads for talking to very shy youth about their families, school performance, boyfriends/girlfriends, best friends, children, and marital ideals. Key grouping variables for understanding rural youth health and local inequalities emerged in the photos, including gender, age, kin relations, class, caregiver education, ethnic identity, alcoholism in the family, and marriage. These variables were incorporated into a dietary diversity and food security survey (FAO 2007; Mtumuni et al. 2006) administered to 278 youth from 10 villages in the catchment area. Thirty interviews with elders, school teachers, and youth workers as well as 32 focus groups on key themes emerging in the photo-interviews with youth and elders served to triangulate the findings from Photo-LENS.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC, GEOGRAPHIC, AND ECONOMIC SITUATION

Malawi is a long, lean, landlocked country characterized by rural indigence with an estimated 65% of the population living below the poverty line (UNDP 2006), 88% living in rural areas, and 90% practicing subsistence agriculture (DFID 2004). Over 50% of the population is under the age of 18 and less than 3% who attend secondary school graduate (NSO 1998). The large majority of youth, therefore, is embedded in social obligations of families and communities in rural villages. These villages rarely have electricity and thus youth have little to no access to mass media or tourism. As a result, they receive limited and specialized access to global knowledge. So-called “modern” ideas about healthy relationships reach these youth not as they have in other areas, through mass media and globe-trotting backpackers (Parikh 2005), but rather through HIV campaigns. The “globalization of desires and expectations” noted among African youth more
generally (Diouf 2003, 2) takes on a life of its own in the Malawian context, where youth experience a limited and controlled access to global flows.

Youth (15–24) are one of the highest risk groups for HIV/AIDS, with female youth at substantially higher risk than their male counterparts. In 2004, 12% of the population aged 15–49 and 6% of youth were living with HIV/AIDS (MDHS 2004). Breaking youth prevalence down by gender, female youth are four times more likely to have HIV/AIDS (9%) than male youth (2%). Whereas there is a slight difference between rural and urban rates overall, among youth no difference in prevalence rate was found (ibid.). Since the majority of the population lives in rural areas, the greatest burden of disease is in rural communities.

The rural youth involved in this research identified with six tribal groups — Tumbuka, Ngoni, Nkhonde, Tonga, Chewa, and Yao — the first two being the most predominant in the research area. The first four are patrilocal and patrilineal groups, which means that land is passed down to males from the father's side at marriage, and girls access land through their husbands when they move to their village upon marriage. This has important implications for agricultural resource allocation to young people and significantly impacts their goals and challenges.

“DEMOCRACY IS DOUBLE-TIMES BAD”: ABANDONED BY THE GOVERNMENT WITH NOTHING BUT “FREEDOM”

Youth have long been recognized as an important target group in Malawi, but the national approach to youth programming has changed significantly in recent years. Under Malawi’s 30-year dictator, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda (1964–94), the Young Pioneers Programme (MYP) mobilized youth for national development by providing agricultural and technical skills training to out-of-school youth. Their political role was to be exemplary supporters of Kamuzuism, projecting the four cornerstones of Dr. Banda’s nation-building strategy, Unity, Loyalty, Obedience, and Discipline (Phiri 2000). Eventually the MYP turned into a military wing: as watchdogs for public observance of the four cornerstones, it was authorized to harass and persecute those who did not conform to the autocracy’s program. The MYP was ardently supported politically and financially by Western liberal democracies at the outset, but by the 1990s pro-democracy forces backed its dismantling (Phiri 2000) and the first democratic governance in 1994 ushered in a focus on individual human rights or “freedoms” (Englund 2006).5

Elders, however, frequently express a longing for greater intervention in youth development on the part of the Malawian government, missing the discipline and respect instilled in youth by the MYP. One elder, well informed of Western critiques of the MYP, expressed, “Young Pioneers was not military…they [donor countries] were afraid of youth and that’s why they say it was militaristic, they were afraid of youth power.” Deeply frustrated with democracy, elders called it “double-time bad” because it ushered in a human rights discourse that pits youth against their elders coupled with increasing poverty for rural households. As one grandmother put it,

R: Mmm, as of now, the problems that the youths are facing are in terms of living, because they have met with new things that are pulling their lives down... You can say that behaviour is a problem to them because of freedom [“ufulu,” which sometimes also means “rights”] they are given.

L: How is freedom a problem for youth?

R: Freedom causes problems to the youth because what is being said, they don't understand. It is like there are some stories that we say, that the time of now, the world today, is becoming dangerous.

L: What do you mean by dangerous?

R: As you know the world is dangerous because of the disease that has come in [AIDS]. We should say that it started changing when we entered multiparty. Oh, freedom has brought about this time

5. Harri Englund (2006) shows how the literal translation of “rights” as ufulu in Chichewa, the national language in Malawi, means “freedoms.” He argues that this constrains popular understandings of the discourse, which is reduced to individual freedoms over collective rights.
that the youth, they don’t have fear…they can do anything that [they] want. They do anything that is bad, that cannot benefit them.

The abdication of responsibility for controlling and disciplining youth came with diminishing socio-economic well-being among the rural poor since the 1980s, seriously limiting elders’ ability to help youths to fulfill their goals, or to command youths’ respect. Despite national and international efforts to jump-start the Malawian economy, the liberalization of agricultural markets beginning in the 1980s, the promotion of high input hybrid maize and burley tobacco, and the complete liberalization of fertilizers and other inputs by 1995 reinforced Malawi’s dual economy and saw poor farmers suffer (Frankenberger et al. 2003; Englund 2006). High rates of HIV/AIDS have depleted labour resources, exacerbating the situation (Frankenberger et al. 2003). Increasing restrictions on migration in South Africa and Malawi, the latter in an attempt to curb the growing rates of HIV, have virtually eliminated migration to South African gold mines since the 1990s, one of the only economically productive options for rural youth (ibid.).

Elders also feel that national and transnational educational campaigns promote a kind of selfish individualism, a frustration which they most often express in critiques of youth intimate relationships today (Kaler 2001). A central difference between relationships of the past and present is that today there is a period of courtship during which time the couple gets to know one another and makes decisions about their relationship in the absence of their families. This reflects shifts in desire in various locations of the world towards “companionate marriage.” Companionate marriage has been used to describe a “marital ideal in which emotional closeness is understood to be both one of the primary measures of success in marriage and a central practice through which the relationship is constituted and reinforced” (Simmons 1979 and Skolnik 1991 in Wardlow and Hirsch 2006, 4). Additionally, it is used to discuss relationships in which the conjugal partnership is more important than familial kinship ties and in which the idea of companionship and “individual fulfillment and satisfaction” are primary goals (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006, 4). “Today there is chatting, chatting with each other — ‘chibwenzi’ [courtship between girlfriends and boyfriends],” one elder shared. Companionate marriages do not imply the same social relations between in-laws as is the case with traditional marriages, or the same bridewealth payments. As one grandmother laments, “Today, in-laws don’t love each other, doesn’t understand each other. Yes, you can even spit saliva at each other on the way. It is because the daughter in-law and her husband are cooking on their own and the mother in-law is also cooking on her own. Can there be understanding? They [youth] are selfish. Maybe it is greedy. They are boastful.”

The trend towards youth seeking intimate relationships independent from the opinions and preferences of their families spreads beyond courtship and the marriage ceremony to include, as this grandmother pointed out, selfishness in marriage during which the wives no longer cook for their mother-in-laws. A proper relationship from the perspective of elders is one that provides for patrilocal — especially older — kin.

GIRL-CENTRED REPRODUCTIVE POLITICS IN MALAWI

Youth social and sexual relations are not only targets for expression of frustration among elders, however; they are also targets for policy and development programming in Malawi. Proper relationships according to youth-targeted programming are characterized by abstinence, monogamy, and faithfulness. These relationships are touted as not only the route to national salvation from HIV, but as the cornerstone for the success of Malawi’s future democracy. The Malawian Ministry of Youth Development and Sports (2007) focuses on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) and HIV/AIDS education and services for youth. Its National Plan of Action for Scaling up SRH and HIV Prevention Initiatives for Young People claims, in the title of the document, that prevention of HIV is the “Foundation for Safeguarding Malawi’s Future.” The preamble to the document asserts that youth will be the “leaders of tomorrow,” but that “leaders are made, not born.” It is implied that the nation has one chance to make leaders of the youth or a “relentless drift of events will make the decision[s] [for their future]” (MYDS 2007, iii).

Girls in particular are targeted by HIV campaigns which encourage education, gender equality, and individual human rights or “freedoms” (Englund 2006) as strategies for ensuring “proper” relationships and

6. Both crops are heavily reliant on chemical inputs and have led to significant soil erosion (Frankenberger et al. 2003).
improvement of the future economy. Repeated over and over again by youth workers in Malawi was the slogan “educate a boy, and you’re educating an individual. Educate a girl and you are educating the nation.” Kaler (2004) refers to this as the “agency” perspective on HIV/AIDS. As the theory goes, if girls are empowered with confidence and knowledge, they will act in ways that protect themselves from HIV. Of utmost concern is that youth, girls in particular, are empowered enough to abstain from sex and to refuse “early marriage.”

**HIV PREVENTION, MORALITY, AND INDIVIDUALITY: “MEDICINE IS SELF-CONTROL”**

Discourses on abstinence and early marriages are translated almost exclusively through Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) in the region of this research. Christian institutions have long cared about protecting and developing Malawian moral, spiritual, physical, and political well-being. The Scottish Presbyterian Church established missions in Malawi following David Livingstone’s arrival in 1859. The role of FBOs in providing health, education, and other infrastructure throughout Malawi (Rankin et al. 2008) and in challenging political oppression (Englund 2006; Frankenberger et al. 2003) is invaluable. Active engagement in HIV campaigns is a natural progression from ongoing activities and as Rankin et al. have noted, “in a country where most of the population lives in rural areas, they provide the only reliable infrastructures reaching the villages” (2008, 3).

However, as in other areas of Africa, the FBO HIV/AIDS outreach in Malawi has faced critique. Risk of HIV/AIDS and adds a new justification for old Christian values of abstinence before marriage, monogamy, and fidelity. In a recent publication in the Kachere Series, printed by the publications arm of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Malawi, Molly Longwe asks, “What kind of approach is necessary on the part of Baptists to successfully replace ‘chinamwali’?,” an adolescent ritual for girls common among the Chewa of central Malawi and long a target for Christian intervention. Longwe uses HIV prevention in her response as a central motivator for encouraging youth to “honour God by keeping their bodies pure” (2007, 122). One song Longwe suggests as part of the “new” revised Baptist puberty rite ceremony has these lyrics,

Me, no, no, me no, no.
Medicine is not condom, me, no, no
AIDS I have refused it
Medicine is self-control,
Self-control, you children, self-control
AIDS I have refused it. (ibid.)

This song, which emphasizes sexual control, advocates both the prevention of transmission of HIV/AIDS and the protection of girls’ moral and spiritual well-being. Rankin et al. (2008) argue that while virtues of monogamy and fidelity are feminized, effectively making women responsible for stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS, the Christian emphasis on abstinence over condoms as protective behaviour fails to provide Malawian women with adequate protective options. I add that by blaming girls’ individual behaviour, FBOs also help to obscure the role of broader socio-political factors in rural girls’ risk of HIV/AIDS. By cementing girls’ behaviour with morality, they further prevent youth and elders from pointing out the inherent contradictions and ironies of such campaigns in rural villages today. A central question in this paper asks how this approach, which positions girlhood as a key intervenable site for the protection of Malawi’s future and emphasizes agency, education and abstinence, fits with rural girls’ strategies for protecting their own well-being and plays out in girls’ aspirations and social and sexual relations in rural villages today.

7. Early marriage is defined by the WHO (2006) as marriage below the age of 18 years.
THE RIGHT RISKS?

Figure 1 is a photo of a poster stuck to the earthen wall in the home of one of the youth I stayed with. The same poster is found on hospital walls, in resource centres, at schools, maize mills, and grocery stalls. The poster (Figure 1) combines messages about girls' individual right and responsibility to go to school, the Christian emphasis on abstinence in the ABC campaign, gender equality (by showing Malawian women literally wearing their success on their sleeves (i.e., in uniformed employment), and self-respect. These messages are ironic given the rural situation of girls in many ways.

The introduction to a skit written by youth and performed at a youth advocacy event I helped facilitate in August 2009 demonstrates that the promises of uniformed careers in this poster do not match the realities of rural unemployment in Malawi.

**Performers:**

Perform 1: Hi, I’m Brianna. I finished Form 4 [final grade in secondary school] with 26 points. I’m unemployed.

Perform 2: Hi, I’m Martin. I finished Form 4 with 15 points. I am just staying.

Perform 3: Hi, I’m Chimwemwe. I finished Form 4 with distinction. I can not find a job.

Although I met a few girls who did not rely on boyfriends to pay their school fees, and in fact felt education freed them of dependence on men (by enabling them to find a good job) (see Poulin 2007 and Stambach 2000 for similar findings in Tanzania), many girls found the reverse. In these cases, sexual relationships with boyfriends in exchange for money or gifts of basic necessities such as soap, lotion, underwear, salt, or sugar, were central to enabling girls to complete their studies. Rural girls explained that they are heckled for smelling bad after long walks to school, or are turned away at the door for not wearing a bra. In an autobiographical story, one girl wrote for me about “love” in her life: she said, “Love is a source of everything . . . at the end of the day I will find myself getting employed from his [my boyfriend’s] money which he paid school fees.” In exchange, this girl had to sleep with her boyfriend so that he would not leave her. As with many girls, she found that to stay in school she inevitably failed to fully “value her life” and “abstain from sex” as this poster suggests. In fact, desires for abstinence until marriage, equality, and independence are not commensurate with other nationally endorsed goals. As this girl explained, to be independent later, you have to be dependent now.
Recent statistics on HIV risk groups in Malawi reaffirm that school is no place of safety from HIV for girls. The 2007 Sexual and Reproductive Health of Youth Strategy for Malawi reports on several studies showing that girls in secondary schools are at significantly higher risk than non-school-going girls for HIV, and the Malawi Demographic and Health Survey 2004 shows that women with secondary school education had an HIV prevalence of 15.1% compared with 12.3% among women with only primary education (NSO 2005). As one officer in the Ministry of Youth Sports and Development in Malawi said to me, “People used to say education is a vaccine for HIV/AIDS, but that has been proved otherwise.” The officer explained that when rural girls leave villages to go to school, they are exposed to radio, TV, videos, Internet, and magazines which encourage “immoral [sexual] behaviour.” Being far away from their parents’ “control,” and engaging in risky sex with urban men who have higher rates of HIV/AIDS than village men, according to this officer, is what has lead to increased rates of HIV/AIDS among school-girls.

The rural demographics in Malawi coupled with the concentration of schools in urban areas thus play a large part in explaining the relationship between school and HIV/AIDS risk for girls in this context. The officer’s assertion that consumer media leads girls to engage in high risk sex, and the assumption that parents in rural villages can “control” youth, however, both show how policy makers ignore the very point that this apparent contradiction between education and HIV risk should illuminate: anticipatory expectations of the economic potential of well-behaved, educated girls and the interventions they justify do not overcome the highly disempowering effects of increasing rural poverty and livelihood insecurity. Furthermore, scented lotions and soap are basic needs of rural girls trying to fit in at urban secondary schools. Gifts from men to women in intimate relationships are important components of “love” in Malawi (Poulin 2007). Receiving gifts from their boyfriends signals respect and security for school girls rather than disrespect and risk. Even as theories linking education and health risk among rural girls are challenged, the “anti-politics machine” (Ferguson 1994) chugs along, finding new justifications for the management of girls behaviour and ignoring badly needed structural change.

ii. “Right to be loved:” Marriage, Sex, and Social Security

Seeming to recognize the paradox that Englund (2006) illuminates between discourse encouraging human rights as individual “freedoms” in Malawi and the absence of institutional resources for claiming entitlements, girls sometimes employ the rights rhetoric to demand their right to collective nurturing, or their “right to be loved.” Sometimes implying a particular kind of “modern” love, characterized, to elders’ discontent, by greater importance placed on the individual couple than on familial kin (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006), girls frequently asserted their right to be loved as a segue to a description of the benefits of being married. In order to access resources to be able to practice agriculture, the only real livelihood option, rural girls must marry and have sex. Living in a patrilineal and patrilocal society, girls access land through their husbands upon marriage, the first indicator of which is pregnancy. As much as elders feel neglected, many youth expressed conflict between their responsibility to care for elders and their desire to go to school. Whereas marriage provides access to a livelihood that simultaneously enables youth to fulfill responsibility of care for elders, school requires them to move away from rural communities and to spend money that would otherwise be used for health needs of older kin (Classen et al. 2008a).

As Jackson (2007) has found for Zambia, marriage acts as a safety net for some women in Malawi. Despite significant evidence that marriage is associated with higher risk of HIV (Boileau et al. 2009; NSO 2005) and early pregnancy with obstructed births, low birth weight, and poor infant and child nutrition (WHO 2006), some of the girls/young women I interviewed had strategically become pregnant with the hope and expectation that the father of the baby would marry them. This was particularly common with women who felt they were getting older, were abused by or unhappy living with their parents, who were doing very poorly at school, or who had a physical disability that may make it more difficult to marry by different means. For instance, in a focus group with married girls between the ages 15 and 17 years in the village, 3 of the 4 girls were brought by their parents to their ‘husbands’ home village because they were visibly pregnant. While only one girl said she had purposefully become pregnant, when I asked how they felt about school, they responded, “pachoko waka” [so, so], “according to me I was trying my best [but] I was failing some subjects,” and “I do not like schooling.” If school offers the only replacement for a husband in Malawi,
and schooling is not going well, marriage seems necessary. Trial (16), who had purposefully become pregnant, explained, that “when I did not go to school, at home I suffered.” “I did not want to move far from home,” she explained, “but at home I had some quarrels so I decided to marry.” Her husband, later that day, added,

My wife was in troubles, being tortured by her mother who chased her to Matuli [her late husband's village and household]. When I told her to use a condom she was refusing. So, she just wanted to marry. Her mother chased her [to her in-law's village] because her mother has another man outside of marriage. My wife, knowing that man very well, told her mother that she knew and encouraged her not to do that [cheat] so that is why she [her mother] chased her [away].

Assertiveness among youth who today feel they can and should educate their elders, elders feel, is a direct result of the human rights discourse and youth-targeted peer-education programming that empowers young people to tell their elders how to live. It infuriates parents, sometimes causing them to send their children to live with other, often poorer kin. Poverty, physical abuse at home, and disability were other common reasons for strategically getting pregnant in an attempt to secure a husband. Of course, it is not always successful.

One of many examples of this that stands out is the mother of a baby named Tikhane, which translates as “they hate us.” Tikhane's mother was missing an arm. When I asked her about her baby, she pointed out her other two children, each fathered by a different man who had refused to take responsibility when they learned she was pregnant. She said that she had “tried three times” and with each one, “even with their child,” the father would not marry her. That is why her mother named this third and last baby Tikhane. Women in rural areas have very limited economic opportunities (Kishindo 1995), and marriage can therefore be important for agency from abusive parents as well as for economic and social security.

One of the only other options for independent agency and economic security of rural women is to engage in sex trade (ibid.). In my research, I found that the girls/young women who most often said they would not marry in the future and had managed to avoid marriage were young sex workers. Whereas some women I interviewed hoped to find a husband to provide for them, enabling them to stop selling sex (also see Kishindo 1995), other women I interviewed felt very differently. Tina (16 years old) for instance explained that her 19-year-old sister worked in the same bar. Her sister had been married, but her husband beat and neglected her and her children. When she left her husband, she found she was not welcome back home and so she took Tina with her, telling her she should never marry and this was how they would prevent her from having to. Affirming Wardlow's (2006a, 16) finding that it is “Huli women’s sense that they are becoming socially ‘owned,’” that motivates some to become painja meri [to work in sex trade],” some girls/young women in Malawi turn to sex trade as a way to assert independence, agency, and the responsibility to make their own decisions about their well-being. As one sex trade worker (26 years old) stated succinctly, “the most things which make me happy is I am enjoying myself because no one controls me and I find money and I manage to support myself and my children.” While this woman may fail to fully “value her life” as the poster that began this discussion suggests, she has found a means of acting as an independent agent, in control of her own life.

iii. Achieving “Jenda” and Persisting Gender Inequalities

Despite all the rhetoric of empowering girls through education, conceptualizations of gender equality, pronounced “jenda” in rural Malawi, (also see Beznier-Kerr et al. 2008) are often reduced to a kind of quantifiable or countable gender equality in youth-targeted programs and this is reflected in youth social and sexual relations. In other contexts, Latin America for example, donors of development and health programs will sometimes request quantifiable reporting on girls’ participation levels in such programs, as though understandings of gender equality are countable (Classen et al. 2008b). In Malawi, similar understandings exist evidenced by the way leaders of HIV and Life Skills trainings alternate equally between girls and boys when seeking oral contributions and form “gender empowerment groups” with female-to-male ratios exactly as promised in project proposals even when it means taking girls away from paid employment to do so. Kara and Kelvin's relationship is an example of how this plays out in intimate relations
among youth. When I ran into them in the market one day, Kelvin was asking his girlfriend where they should go for lunch. She responded that it didn't matter to her. In reality, the restaurants in town represented very few options. Whichever way, Kara would have been happy. But Kelvin was frustrated with this non-engagement in the decision at hand. Exasperated, he responded, “but we have ‘jenda.’ I don't want a wife who cannot say what she wants each and every time.” Jenda to Kelvin was the quantifiably equal participation in every decision made, something Kara usually also seemed to value. This was the first and only time I saw her acknowledge the meaninglessness of this kind of jenda.

More deeply ingrained gender roles in the context of the household are not seen as incompatible with the successful achievement of jenda. Within marriage it is uncommon for a husband to prepare food for himself or his family. In one interview, an 11-year-old girl spoke about the marriage she envisioned for herself, which was characterized by her husband's respect for her. When asked what her relationship with her husband would look like after they were married, however, she responded with only one line, “I will cook for him.”

Frequent stories of alcoholism, verbal and physical abuse by husbands/fathers elicited from “suffer” photos, and girls' accounts of troubles using condoms because the boys are holding their wrists to keep them from running away are further evidence. Following a conversation with three young women (ages 17–21) about condoms, I recorded the following in my fieldnotes on April 24, 2009:

“Lauren, it’s hard. It's impossible to use a condom correctly. You know, to use them there are steps to follow. Almost 10 steps. It is not easy. If they [boys] are rushing, they could open it with their teeth and then that's not correct.” “So, why don't the girls put it on their boyfriends if it's so difficult for the boys,” I asked? “It is impossible. The girl can't have a condom there because she doesn't know before that they will have sex. The boy doesn't say, OK, now we are going out, so next time we meet we will have sex. He just does it as surprise.” “And for him, he is holding the girl's wrist, to keep her there because otherwise she will run.”

To complicate matters, the girls explained, running away from sex sometimes indicates non-consent on the part of girls, but it also sometimes indicates appropriate display of feminine modesty in the face of desire and consent. The difficulty boys find in negotiating the similarity between displays of non-consent and feminine modesty, while not countable, is of critical importance for addressing gender inequalities related to HIV infection.

**CONCLUSIONS: RURAL REALITY INCOMPATIBLE WITH DESIRES**

In African contexts, children's and youths' behaviours are managed through various transnational “anticipatory interventions,” which are calculated to “prevent and/or enable imagined futures” (Adams et al. 2009, 251). In Malawi, behavioural messages encouraging independence, certain forms of agency, education, and abstinence are imbued with the potential to change the futures of girls, their families, and the nation. However, girls in rural communities find their own hopes and desires for such futures thwarted by the reality that in rural villages the pursuit of one of agency, education, or abstinence often precludes another.

Armed discursively with the potential for new identities, few girls have successfully taken up new subject positions in practice. This is largely because the language and hope for constructing new, independent subjectivities among girls have not been paired with structural and social changes necessary to enable their realization in rural villages in northern Malawi. In this context of unemployment and lack of opportunities, and where marriages mean opportunity on the one hand and health risk, abuse, and persistent inequality on the other, young women sometimes turn to sex trade as a way to assert control over their lives. In other cases, intergenerational conflict is an effect, as parents increasingly experience pressure to provide discipline and opportunities to youth at the same time that the necessary social and economic resources are rapidly diminishing.

Several mechanisms converge to obscure these problems and contradictions. First, as McRobbie has argued, “the attribution of apparently post-feminist freedoms to young women most manifest within the cultural realm in the form of new visibilities, becomes, in fact, the occasion for the undoing of feminism” (2007, 719–20). In Malawi, by constructing “moral singledom,” characterized by self-interested concern with education, “freedom,” “agency,” and abstinence, as the single most important factor determining the future
potential of girls, the effect that decreased gender subordination in marriages may have on girls’ ability to both marry and go to school are overlooked. Program evaluations that count girls’ participation in lieu of attempting to understand the contextual intricacies of gender inequality contribute to this. Second, the near exclusive translation of girl-targeted campaigns in rural communities by FBOs subordinates rural girls by making condoms unavailable (Rankin et al. 2008) while cementing sex with immorality in ways that make the logic of campaigns impossible to critique and leave the structural inequalities unaddressed. Finally, problems are undisclosed by studies that have overlooked the impacts of transnational health campaigns, youth identities, social, sexual and intergenerational relations, and health on highly marginalized rural youth in African contexts.

While girl-targeted interventions driven by the hope and fear of anticipated futures need to be balanced with realistic examinations of their ability to be realized, particularly in the social contexts of rural African villages, anthropological studies that engage youth in articulating interactions between nationally endorsed campaigns and local goals, values, and challenges may help in finding more appropriate, context-specific opportunities for girls. In Malawi, deeply ingrained gender inequalities and the disempowerment of youth, parents, and grandparents in rural communities due to severe poverty and livelihood insecurity need to be recognized if hope is to be realized by the future Malawian girl.
Bibliography


