

# Ambiguous Agency

The conceptualization of HIV risk  
among young women selling sex

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# Presentation Outline

- ▶ Background to the problem: Reduced prevalence rate, unhinged infection
- ▶ Research context: Research Objective, Research Question & Methodology
- ▶ Findings & Discussions: The ambiguous agency of selling sex, HIV prevention and living for survival

# Background

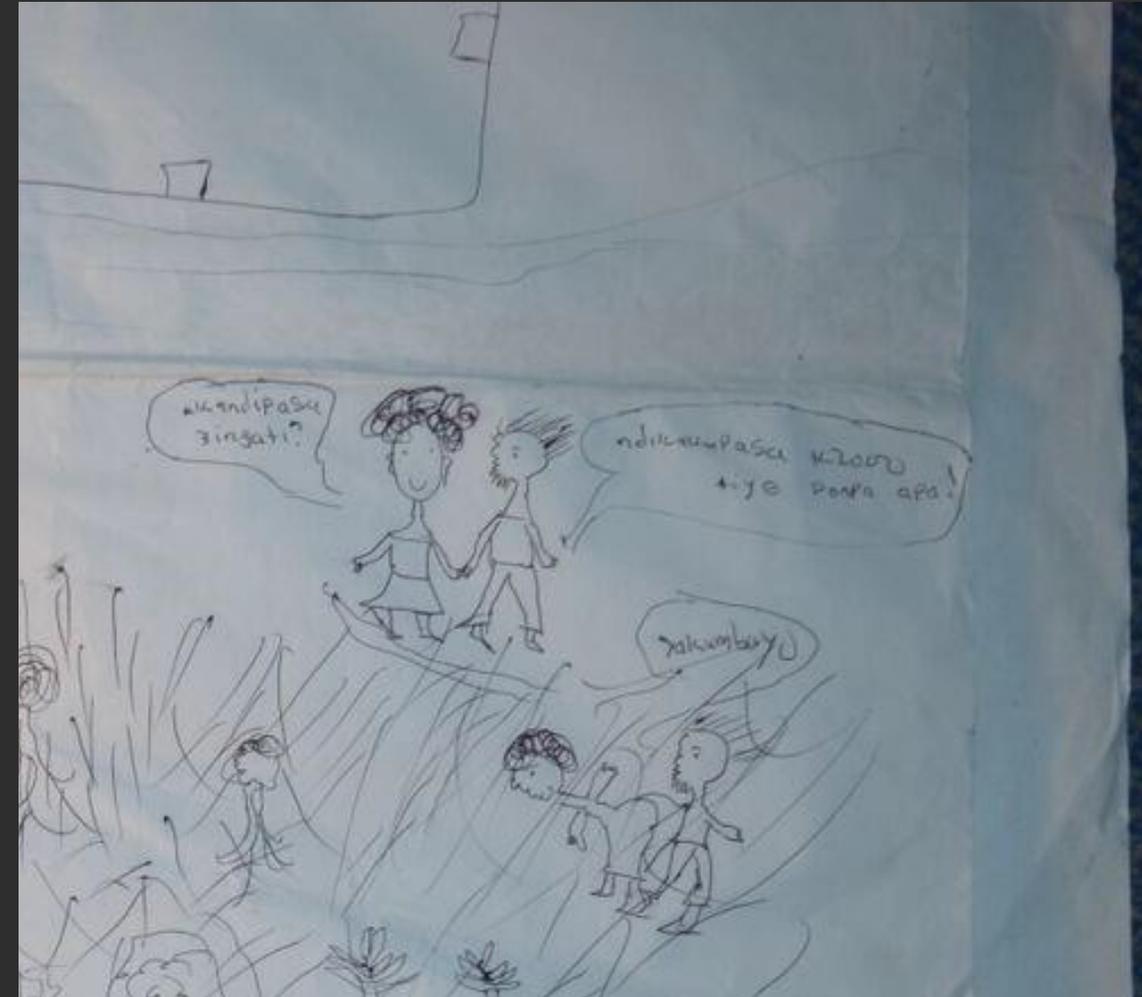
- ▶ HIV is a global health concern, with WHO listing the HIV epidemic as one of the top 10 threats to global health
- ▶ In Malawi, HIV is a major public health issue
  - ▶ The country is among the worst affected countries (2015/16 MDHS)
  - ▶ One of the major causes of death
  - ▶ 1 million PLWH
- ▶ Progress
  - ▶ 8.8% adult HIV prevalence (15-49, NSO/MDHS 2015-2016)
  - ▶ **BUT:** highest in Southern Region (12.8%)
  - ▶ The changing image of HIV: Paul Kaphuka's Ndichiriseni or the infamous Mdula Moyo
  - ▶ Prevalence among 10 countries with a higher prevalence rate

# Reduced prevalence rate, unhinged infection [for FSW]

- ▶ Human behaviour in terms of sexual practices, willingness to acknowledge infection and medication compliance, especially among key population groups: FSW (UNAIDS/MW HIV Prevention Strategy)
- ▶ The Modes of Transmission model (2013) estimates
  - ▶ FSW sub-group at 2% (0.65% for 15–49)
  - ▶ i.e. 24.9% prevalence rate: HIV infection is yet to slow down among FSW
  - ▶ FSW are not alone: clients (18% 15-49 buying sex) and partners all have higher incidences, only second to MSMs
- ▶ **Evidence, rights based:** address the **structural and cultural factors** increase vulnerability in a criminalised, morally charged spectrum.

# Aim & Methodology

- ▶ **Objective:** The perception and conceptualization of HIV and HIV risk among adolescent girls and young women selling sex
  - ▶ Why do girls and young women engage in prostitution
  - ▶ How do they make sense of their involvement in and experiences of prostitution
- ▶ **Participatory research** approach, drawing on stories by 19 participants in 2 MW cities who have been selling sex since their childhood.
  - ▶ Participatory research, modelled version of **PAR** (Kindon, Pain, Kesby, 2007)
  - ▶ 18 young women below 35 and 1 adolescent girl in two cities
  - ▶ Qualitative: participant observations, narrative & in-depth interviews, KII, FGD, with visual methods and photovoice as dialogue facilitators



# Mpaseni's Pen Portrait

- ▶ MPASENI, 39, did not remember precisely how old she was when she first got involved in prostitution. She had 13 siblings and her father died at a very young age. Her father's relatives grabbed all the property her father had left in her mother's possession. This left them destitute because her mother was a housewife without any qualification or professional skills. For survival, Mpaseni settled for street begging with her mother which saw them walk several hours a day from her maternal village in one district to District Y to beg. Her mother passed away three years later.
- ▶ Soon after, Mpaseni married a street vendor, a decision she made because marriage was the quickest means of support that she lacked. Her husband was the primary breadwinner. Together they moved to City X where he died of AIDS, leaving Mpaseni with two daughters to look after; yet, without a sustainable means to earn an income. Mpaseni has three children, the last born through prostitution. Her daughters know she is involved in prostitution, which has made them a target of ridicule by their friends. Her children also engage in casual work due to limited support which she said may lead them into prostitution. She fears that her own involvement and example may also lead her daughters, against her advice, to take up prostitution.
- ▶ Prior to joining prostitution, Mpaseni started undertaking maganyu (casual jobs) such as doing people's laundry and working as a maid. But the income she earned through these activities was not enough to meet all her daily needs to the extent that they spent some days without food. It was then that she was introduced and oriented to prostitution by her friend, a sex worker. She described her friend as having well-wishing intentions. Her friend had once supported her with money and food. Mpaseni used to wear some of her friend's clothes while going out at night when she was first engaging in prostitution. Even with her involvement, her income has not improved and she combines prostitution with working as a guard at one of the hotels in city X. She explained that she could not quit [prostitution] because she does not earn enough income from either job.
- ▶ Mpaseni has tested HIV positive. She meets clients who demand unprotected sex but she tells them about her HIV status. She is currently looking at alternative ways of generating income to be able to leave prostitution. Commenting on the poor prospects of prostitution in the future, Mpaseni also drew attention to the increased recruitment of children and young people to prostitution in the local pubs.

# Making sense of HIV and HIV risk among young women selling sex

- ▶ Competing theoretical underpinnings of engaging in prostitution
  - ▶ Involvement as an economic 'choice' and survival strategy
  - ▶ The socioeconomic contexts as reinforced by chronic poverty and deeply embedded patriarchal practices and gender power imbalances
- ▶ Ambiguous agency: how and why do young women sell sex, and what does this say of how they conceptualizes HIV and the risk of HIV?
  - “chilipo akudalira”
  - “kwathu maliro, basi kwaonso maliro”
  - “survival” “anandiba” (coercive & trafficking): uneven power relations.
- ▶ Young mothers: *left to look after their babies without support, fathers often refuse to accept responsibility, weaker system for child support; pregnancies outside marriage: sinful and immoral*



- ▶ Re-positioning young women selling sex within the HIV context?
  - ▶ High in economic hubs
  - ▶ Twice as high in urban areas
  - ▶ **15-19 females is 3 times as high;**
  - ▶ The social and cultural context
  - ▶ What is prostitution: exchanging money, favours, or gifts for sex, associated with compromised power relations and limited agency (external and internal): 30% of the 18 per cent **men** buying sex do not use condoms.



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