

Sexual behaviour in the face of risk: the case of bar girls in Malawi's major cities



Paul Kishindo

University of Malawi, Chancellor College, Zomba, Malawi

Abstract

The first case of AIDS in Malawi was diagnosed in 1985. The close association of AIDS with sexual promiscuity led the Ministry of Health to mount a campaign to create awareness of the dangers of promiscuous sex. Surveys so far carried out indicate that about 80 per cent of bar girls carried the HIV virus. This study sought to investigate why young women became bar girls, how much they knew about AIDS, and why they persisted in what is regarded as a high-risk occupation. The study revealed that economic necessity was a major consideration in engaging and persisting in commercial sex. Poverty then may be a major factor in the rapid spread of AIDS in Malawi.

The first case of AIDS in Malawi was diagnosed in 1985. Since then it has become apparent that the causative HIV virus is widespread in all areas of the country. A Ministry of Health estimate in 1992 put the prevalence rate at ten per cent of the adult population (UNICEF/Malawi Government 1993:169).

It is now known that AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa is transmitted primarily through heterosexual intercourse with an infected partner. Since HIV infection is primarily transmitted through sexual intercourse, persons who have multiple sexual partners stand a greater chance of catching the virus than those who restrict their sexual contact to one partner. Commercial sex therefore exposes women employed in it as well as their male clients to increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS (Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell 1994a:101). Screening of 500 bar girls¹ in Blantyre, the country's commercial city, showed that 80 per cent were HIV-positive (UNICEF/Malawi Government 1993:169).

This paper discusses the reasons why young women enter what is regarded as a high-risk occupation and persist in it, in spite of the massive campaign by the Ministry of Health against promiscuous sex, and the evidence that there is currently no vaccine or cure for AIDS. It draws heavily on the results of a study of prostitution (Kishindo 1992) which covered the country's three cities and one municipality: Blantyre, Lilongwe and Mzuzu cities and the Municipality of Zomba².

The anti-AIDS campaign

It is widely accepted that pending the development of an effective vaccine or cure for AIDS, behavioural change is the only means of stemming the spread of the disease (Cleland et al.

¹ In Malawi bar girls and prostitutes are synonymous because although the former are officially employed to serve drinks to patrons, they also engage in commercial sex with the connivance of the bar owner.

² Former capital of the country; now university town.

1993:185). The Ministry of Health set up the National AIDS Control Programme in 1988 to co-ordinate efforts against the disease. Since then the program has mounted an information campaign using various media to educate the population on such issues as symptoms of AIDS, mode of transmission and preventive measures. The radio has played a very important role in reaching the country's largely illiterate population (National Statistical Office 1994:114). A 1992 national survey of AIDS awareness found that general knowledge of AIDS was almost universal among males (98%) and females (95%). Among both males and females, sexual intercourse was the most frequently reported mode of HIV transmission (93% and 86% respectively), followed by needles and blades, and blood transfusion (National Statistical Office 1994:111).

Bars and bar girls

An estimated eleven per cent of Malawi's population are urban-resident. These urban residents are engaged in formal employment in industry, government departments, and the informal sector; the government is the largest employer of labour in the formal sector. As small-holder agricultural production becomes an increasingly unprofitable occupation because of recurrent drought, shrinking holdings due to a high rate of population growth estimated at 3.2 per cent annually, and ever-rising farm input prices, rural-urban migration has been increasing rapidly over the last few years. The new immigrants, often with little or no formal education, find menial jobs in the informal sectors of the country's towns and cities. An increasing number of those migrating to the towns and cities are young women.

The bar is a very important after-hours and weekend meeting place for urban residents; the more popular bars provide music and snacks as well as the usual liquor. The regular bar patrons tend to be in the 30-50 age group, and in wage or salaried employment, or business. They tend to come to the bar unaccompanied by wives or girl-friends: the explanation they offer is that wives or girl-friends may not be very comfortable with the crude language which is often used in those places, and the likelihood of violence breaking out among drunken patrons. Observation, however, reveals that some patrons visit bars primarily for female company and sex. International hauliers from Tanzania are a conspicuous presence in the bars of the northern city of Mzuzu, where they stop over on their southward journey to the southern city of Blantyre. They are also conspicuous in Blantyre's bars, where Zimbabwean hauliers are also regulars. These international hauliers are the centre of attraction for bar girls and 'free-lance' prostitutes³ because they seem to have a lot of money to spend.

Although bar girls are officially employed to serve drinks and clean the bars, in reality this is only a cover for what they really are: prostitutes. These bar girls engage in commercial sex with the full knowledge of the bar owner, to whom the availability of sex for sale is one more means of attracting patrons to the bar. None of the 84 bars sampled for the study had fewer than four bar girls.

A typical bar has behind it single-room accommodation for the bar girls. The bar owners do not normally charge rent for the rooms, a fact which is used to justify the very low wages that they pay the bar girls. Many bar owners view their relationship with their bar girls as a business partnership: the girls attract patrons to the bar and increase the volume of business;

³ Those that are not attached to a particular bar, but move from one bar to another, and sometimes solicit in the streets.

in return, the bar owner provides premises and cover for the bar girls to operate their business⁴. The rooms behind the bar serve as venues for sexual encounters with clients.

Although bar girls may have their own favourite clients, the nature of their job is such that they have to have sexual intercourse with whoever is able to pay the ruling rate: if they are too selective they run the risk of having a limited clientele and hence reduced potential earnings. It is however not uncommon for bar girls to have clients with whom they develop a personal attachment. The special client gives the bar girl cash and other gifts, and he does not have to pay for each sexual encounter. It is this relationship that may ultimately develop into a marriage between a client and a former bar girl.

A total of 540 bar girls in Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu and the Municipality of Zomba were interviewed for the study. None of them was currently married, although 55 (10.2%) have been married at one time or another; and 64 (11.9%) reported having living children. They tended to have predominantly rural backgrounds: only 16 (2.9%) reported they were born and brought up in the city. These 16 reported fathers in wage or salaried employment and business, while the rest reported fathers who were subsistence farmers, small-scale businessmen, craftsmen or artisans. The bar girls tended to be heterogeneous in their ethnic backgrounds although one particular ethnic group may be predominant depending on what ethnic group is in the majority in the locality: thus in Blantyre and Zomba in the south, bar girls of Yao origin predominated; in Lilongwe in the centre, Chewa bar girls were predominant; while in Mzuzu, Tonga and Tumbuka girls formed the majority. The average age of the bar girls was 19 years, with an average of three years experience in the occupation.

An important feature of a bar girl's life is her geographical mobility: when a bar girl is no longer able to attract clients in one locality because she is a known STD carrier, or more popular girls have come onto the scene, or because she does not want to be found out by relatives who might disapprove of her occupation, she moves to a new locality where she hopes to re-establish herself. A bar girl will also move from one unpopular bar to a more popular one within the same area where the likelihood of attracting clients is greater. The geographical mobility of infected bar girls contributes to the spread of HIV.

Educational attainment

The highest level of education attained by bar girls was a Primary School Leaving Certificate (PSLC), obtained after eight years of primary school. The lowest level attained was Standard 5, that is five years of primary school. This means that all the girls had some formal education and were literate and numerate to varying degrees. This is worth noting in a country where the literacy rate for women is estimated at only 36 per cent (Malawi Government 1991:10). It is possible, although this could not be verified with the bar owners, that a measure of literacy and numeracy is a requirement for recruitment.

The reasons for failure to continue to higher levels of education were varied, although the lack of school fees was the most frequently cited reason (see also World Bank 1990:40). Table 1 gives the frequencies for the various reasons.

Lack of school fees was the single most important obstacle to proceeding to the next level in the school cycle. Although the primary school fees of K3.50⁵ per year for junior classes and K4.50 per year for senior classes at the time of the study may not seem much money to people in wage or salaried employment, for many families in Malawi who have to

⁴ Prostitution is illegal in Malawi, but law enforcement officials turn a blind eye to the activities of the bar girls, perhaps because technically they are not soliciting. The police seem to be more interested in those who solicit in the streets.

⁵ At the time of the study 1MK = US 22 cents.

eke out a livelihood on tiny holdings, this was a lot to be paid at once. They had to weigh their decision to use the little cash available to the family to send a child to school against spending it on immediate family needs such as food and clothing. The requirement that parents also buy school uniform and exercise books for their children was an added burden to the parents whose cash incomes are almost non-existent⁶.

Table 1
Reasons for not going to secondary school

Reason	n	%
Repeated failure to get into secondary school	123	22.8
Lack of school fee	289	53.5
Pregnancy	25	4.6
Had to help with domestic work	66	12.2
Early marriage	26	4.8
Bored with school	11	2.0
Total	540	99.9 ^a

^aFigures do not add up to exactly 100% because of rounding

A prevalent attitude in Malawi, especially in the rural areas, is that girls do not need to go to school since their material needs will be taken care of by the men who will marry them. According to this view what a girl really needs is training in the 'wifely skills' of cooking, washing, pounding the maize and farm work. The roles of wife and mother, which according to this view are the proper roles of women in society, do not require academic certificates for their efficient performance. It is therefore not unusual for parents to dissuade their daughters from going beyond a certain level of education. Parents who do not want their female children to have formal education, or to proceed beyond a certain level, conveniently use the 'lack of fees' argument. It is not uncommon for a family not to afford school fees for a daughter, but be able to afford them for a son. The reasoning here is that the son as head of household is expected to provide for his wife's and children's material needs and a good education will ensure wage or salaried employment. The daughter on the other hand will get married to someone else's son. The girls who are forced to leave school under these circumstances have to find means of economic support which may be in the form of menial jobs, or early marriage.

However, among some ethnic groups such as the Yao in the south and Tonga in the north, early marriage for females is the norm, and that in itself may force the girl to drop out of school to get married. Of the 26 who had indicated they dropped out of school because they had to get married 16 (61.5%) were from Blantyre, which is a predominantly Yao area, the rest were from Mzuzu (4) and Lilongwe (6). The average age at marriage was 14.5 years. At the time of the study these bar girls were divorced from their husbands, having been married only a few years.

A girl may also be compelled to leave school because her labour is needed at home. From a very early age a daughter makes a significant contribution to household labour: she helps look after younger siblings, thus freeing the mother to do other things; helps cook the food; fetches water and helps with agricultural tasks. This is believed to provide practical training for the females' culturally defined future roles as wives and mothers. A girl is a real

⁶ The United Democratic Front government which ousted the Malawi Congress Party from power in the first multiparty Presidential and General Election in 30 years on 17 May 1994 put in place free primary education in September 1994.

asset to her mother, especially in a family of many boys. All the 66 cases who had to withdraw from school in order to help with household work reported that their major responsibility was to look after young siblings when their parents went to the farms or to sell items in the market and generally to manage the household during the mother's absence.

Under Ministry of Education rules in existence till 1993 when they were changed, a girl who got pregnant while registered as a student in any government or government-assisted school was expelled from school, and could not be readmitted after delivery. She could however re-enrol in a private school. For those girls whose parents could not afford to send them to private schools, early pregnancy marked the end of a school career.

A Malawian pupil who reached the highest class in the primary school cycle (Standard 8) met the biggest obstacle in his or her academic career: the Primary School Leaving Certificate (PSLC) examination. This examination serves as the basis for selection into government and government-assisted secondary schools where places are extremely limited: fewer than ten per cent of those who sit the examination are selected every year. Those parents who can afford it send their children to private secondary schools; but many pupils repeat in the hope of improving their grades so as to gain entry into secondary school (UNICEF/Malawi Government 1993:145). Chances of getting selected at the second or third attempt are however not guaranteed. Ultimately one simply gives up. This was the experience of the 123 girls in the sample.

But not everyone finds school exciting and wants to proceed. In the eleven (2%) cases where the girls left because they found school boring, it was found that they enrolled in school at higher ages than the official age of six: their average age on enrolment in Standard 1 was 9.5 years. They therefore found themselves among classmates three or four years younger than they were, so it is likely they found some of the class activities designed for younger pupils such as reading aloud, and writing on the ground, childish and uninteresting; and by the time they got into Standard 5 or Standard 6 they had developed interests outside the classroom which made it difficult for them to like school.

Reasons for becoming a bar girl

All the 540 bar girls involved in the study were aware that working as bar girls would involve having sexual intercourse with multiple partners, and knew the risks such behaviour entailed. Three reasons were given by the respondents for becoming bar girls: 501 (92.8%) reported they became bar girls primarily to earn money to support themselves; 29 (5.4%) hoped to meet a man with a regular income to marry them; and ten (1.9%) wanted somewhere to live and companionship after being disowned by parents for behaviour regarded as shameful, which included hemp smoking, pregnancy and abortion. None of the bar girls in the sample, even those who had become bar girls primarily for financial security, regarded their job as a lifetime occupation: they all expected ultimately to settle down to married life (cf. Orubuloye et al. 1994a:108).

With PSLC and lower the only jobs that were open to the girls were menial, such as cleaners, child minders, and housemaids. These jobs commanded only the statutory minimum wage which at the time of the study was K1.75 per day or K52.20 per month in the cities and the municipality. The statutory minimum wage is rarely enforced unless the worker actually complains to the Department of Labour, and very few workers know that they have a right to complain, or that there is such a thing as a minimum statutory wage. It is very easy for employers to pay these workers a wage below the statutory minimum.

Among the bar girls in the sample the average monthly wage earned was K33.50, less than the statutory minimum wage; the bar girl was expected to make up the shortfall by engaging in commercial sex. But even the meagre wages that were due to the bar girls for doing their official duties were often not paid, thus compelling them to live almost entirely on

the proceeds of commercial sex. Since the agreements between the bar girls and bar owners were usually verbal it was not always easy for Department of Labour officers to compel the bar owners to pay the bar girls what was due to them. The bar girls were also reluctant to report bar owners because such action would invite eviction from the premises and loss of a base for their operations.

Compared to normal employment, and taking into account the bar girls' level of formal education, commercial sex is very profitable. The rate of remuneration per encounter varied from one city to another, with K21.50 (about US\$4.75) as the average rate. The average number of clients per bar girl was eleven per week. At the rate of K21.50, and assuming there was only one sexual act at each encounter, a bar girl's earnings would be K236.50 per week or K946 per month. At prevailing salary scales this was more than what a beginning graduate in the civil service earned. These earnings were often sent home to build houses, support children and other relatives, or pay for farm inputs. Only 130 (24.1%) of the bar girls reported their parents or other relatives were aware of the kind of work they were involved in: the majority of parents, therefore, assumed the money they received came from a respectable job.

The average weekly or monthly income however masks large differentials in the bar girls' earnings. How much business a bar girl is able to attract depends on such factors as age, beauty, cleanliness and reputation for sexual performance. A bar girl rated high on these aspects is likely to be more sought after than one who is rated lower. At month-ends the more popular girls may have as many as five clients in one evening (cf. *Daily Times* 1995). These popular bar girls are often resented by their less popular colleagues, and fights, accusations and counter-accusations of witchcraft are not uncommon. Given the large number of clients with whom a bar girl has sexual intercourse she clearly is a focus of infection (cf. Orubuloye, Caldwell and Caldwell 1994b:34).

Awareness of AIDS

All the bar girls in the sample were aware that AIDS is primarily transmitted through sexual intercourse, that it has no cure, and that people in their occupation can avoid catching the disease and prevent its spread by using condoms during sexual intercourse. The radio was predominantly the initial source of the information which was later reinforced in health talks given to them by community health personnel at hospitals where they attended routine medical examinations⁷. However at the time of the study only 126 (23.3%) of the bar girls had ever used a condom during sexual intercourse although these were available free from the hospitals. The reasons given for this situation are listed below:

1. Clients' negative attitude: clients claimed that the condom reduced sexual excitement and made sexual intercourse unexciting and mechanical. Sexual intercourse with a condom was often likened to eating a sweet that is still covered in its wrapper.

2. Bar girls' own misconceptions about the condom: a widespread view among women was that a condom can slip off a client and lodge itself in the woman's uterus, causing sterility. It was also believed to cause vaginal itching.

⁷ Malawi public health laws require that people who handle food served to the public undergo regular medical examinations. It is under these laws, I was informed, that bar girls are examined for STDs. At the time of the study, bar girls were expected to report for these examinations once a month. An infected person is barred from handling food; and if an infected person knowingly passes on an infection he or she is liable to prosecution and imprisonment (see e.g. *Nation* 1995). It would appear that this law is rarely enforced because public health officials believe it is not really their responsibility, and police believe they have more pressing issues to attend to. However, news spreads and STD-infected girls lose their clients and are forced to leave.

3. The belief that the particular individual was not in imminent danger of catching an STD, including AIDS (see Kishindo 1990).

According to the bar girls the clients' refusal to use condoms was the greatest obstacle to their more widespread use among bar girls. Twenty four (4.4%) of the bar girls reported that on a number of occasions when they suggested the use of condoms to their clients they were abandoned for someone willing to have sexual intercourse without the condom. This represented loss of potential earnings. Twelve (2.2%) of the bar girls reported that they have been offered several times the normal rate for unprotected sex by clients, mostly international hauliers and tourists. All the bar girls indicated that they would not refuse unprotected sexual intercourse if the price was right. Generally the bar girls did not demand the use of condoms in their sexual encounter: where condoms were used, it tended to be at the instigation of the client. All the bar girls who had used condoms reported reduced sensation during the sexual act.

All the bar girls were aware that there was as yet no vaccine or cure for AIDS. However, they generally did not, as individuals, believe they were in any greater danger than anyone else. Their own persistence in a high-risk occupation tended to be rationalized in terms of predestination: one's manner of death is preordained, and no human act can change it (Kishindo 1990:22). A few believed that since the incubation period of the disease may be as long as ten years, a cure would be found before they developed full-blown AIDS.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that young women who become bar girls in Malawi's cities do so out of economic necessity. A person with only a PSLC or less commands only a statutory minimum wage in the formal sector, and even less in the informal sector, where they may get employment in menial jobs. It is easy to exploit this kind of worker, who often is not aware of the law stating the minimum wage, or where to lodge disputes over pay. Serving in a bar does not require any high academic qualification, and therefore is one of the few jobs available to girls with low education. When service as a bar girl is combined with commercial sex, there is a good chance for a girl to improve her financial security, which is not possible in those jobs which command only statutory minimum wages. But commercial sex creates an unequal power relationship between the client and the service provided. The client determines the timing, nature and frequency of the sexual act. The average bar girl who is often in desperate need of money for her immediate survival avoids making demands which might drive away her clients, such as the use of condoms, if the clients are not disposed to protected sexual intercourse. Thus the bar girl is exposed to STDs of various types. An HIV-positive bar girl may in a single month infect more than 100 men, who would in turn infect their own wives, girl-friends and other sexual partners. It may be argued then that bar girls and other prostitutes form the foci of AIDS infection in the country's urban centres from which, given the close ties that Malawian urban dwellers have with their villages, the disease may have found its way to the villages.

As long as poverty remains at present levels and the female, for whatever reason, cannot get a good job or profitable self-employment, commercial sex will remain an attractive option. And in the context of current male attitudes where penetrative, unprotected sex is regarded as the only 'normal sex', the high rate of AIDS infection in the Malawi population will continue.

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