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## Review article

## Revisiting the understanding of “transactional sex” in sub-Saharan Africa: A review and synthesis of the literature

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## ABSTRACT

In sub-Saharan Africa, young women ages 15–24 have more than twice the risk of acquiring HIV as their male counterparts. A growing body of epidemiological evidence suggests that the practice of “transactional sex” may contribute to this disparity. Over the last 15 years, the social sciences have contributed significantly to understanding the meaning of and motivations for this practice. The findings from these studies are rich, but varied, rendering lessons difficult to navigate for intervention and further research. We therefore contribute a historically-grounded, comprehensive literature review on the nature and motivations for women's participation in transactional sex in sub-Saharan Africa. Drawing from over 300 studies (through 2014), we distill three prominent paradigms observed in the literature that we review toward presenting a unified conceptualization of the practice. “Sex for basic needs,” the first paradigm, positions women as victims in transactional sexual relationships, with implications for interventions that protect girls from exploitation. In contrast, the “sex for improved social status” paradigm positions women as sexual agents who engage in transactional sex toward attaining a middle-class status and lifestyle. Finally, a third paradigm, “sex and material expressions of love,” draws attention to the connections between love and money, and the central role of men as providers in relationships. We find important commonalities in the structural factors that shape the three paradigms of transactional sex including gender inequality and processes of economic change. We suggest that there are three continua stretching across these paradigms: deprivation, agency, and instrumentality. This review proposes a definition of transactional sex and discusses implications for research and interventions aiming to reduce young women's risk of HIV through such relationships. We consider the consequences of drawing from too narrow an understanding of the practice, and highlight the benefits of a broader conceptualization.

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, 15% of women living with HIV are between the ages of 15 and 24, and of these, 80% live in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS, 2014). Young women aged 15–24 are three times more likely to be infected with HIV than their male peers (UNAIDS, 2014), and

comprise 31% of all new infections in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS, 2014). Alongside research highlighting the importance of biological susceptibility, gender inequality and poor access to healthcare, a growing body of evidence suggests that informal sexual exchange or “transactional sex” (TS) may be key to understanding the gender disparity in HIV among young people (UNAIDS, 2010, 2013). Depending on how its defined, TS is a relatively prevalent practice—one four-country study found between 36% and 80% of sexually active adolescent girls ages 12–19 reported ever having had TS (Moore et al., 2007). Epidemiological studies have demonstrated a significant association between TS and HIV (Wamoyi et al., 2016). In addition, TS is associated with a number of HIV risk factors or behaviors including alcohol use (Choudhry et al., 2014; Dunkle et al.,

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2004a; Norris et al., 2009; Okigbo et al., 2014; Shannon et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2012; Weiser et al., 2007); sexual or physical violence or abuse (Adudans et al., 2011; Choudhry et al., 2014; Cluver et al., 2011; Jewkes, 2006; Kalichman and Simbayi, 2004; Okigbo et al., 2014; Zembe et al., 2015); inconsistent condom use (Luke, 2005a; Luke et al., 2011) and multiple partners (Moore et al., 2007; Okigbo et al., 2014; Phillips-Howard et al., 2015; Steffenson et al., 2011). Alongside these epidemiological findings, a now vast social science literature describes the motivations and constraints that structure the practice across a number of settings.

But, what do we actually mean by “transactional sex”? The findings from the social sciences are rich, but offer a wide range of perspectives and meanings, rendering lessons difficult to navigate for intervention and further research. We focus this paper on reviewing this now extensive literature at a time when renewed energy is being directed toward reducing young women’s vulnerability to HIV. While TS takes place in many contexts, we focus our attention on sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) given both the pronounced epidemiological relevance for this region, and that the overwhelming concentration of literature on the topic is situated in SSA. The latter point is not a matter of coincidence. The use of the term “transactional sex” arose from critical analysis of how sexual exchange relationships were being described in SSA early in the HIV pandemic. In the 1990s, dominant biomedical discourse in HIV/AIDS prevention labeled prostitutes or commercial sex workers as a “reservoir of infection” in SSA (Plummer et al., 1991; Simonsen et al., 1990). Social scientists began to criticize what they saw as a careless use of the labels “prostitution” or “commercial sex work” in reference to all forms of sexual exchange (Day, 1988; de Zaluondo, 1991; Seidel, 1993; Standing, 1992). As Hilary Standing explained in 1992:

The overarching problem arises from the tendency to label ‘risk’ populations using ... ‘prostitute’ without either questioning the appropriateness ... or providing any definition of the term. It should be noted ... that much sexual exchange in Africa has a monetary component but it would be quite inappropriate ... to define it as prostitution ... and ... that simply labelling categories ... without contextualising the behavior ... contributes nothing to an understanding of the social phenomenon lying behind the label (Standing, 1992, p. 477).

Standing’s critique drew on earlier anthropological work that detailed sexual relationship and union formation and the role of exchange in relationships from the pre-colonial period onwards (e.g., Schoepf, 1988; White, 1990). A number of in-depth studies have since contributed to “contextualising the behavior”—demonstrating that most forms of sexual exchange are not equated with commercial sex by participants or the broader community. Studies also drew attention to how gendered social and economic inequalities structured sexual exchange rather than any “African sexuality” (e.g., Ankomah, 1992; Schoepf, 1988).

Yet, as research on this subject rapidly expanded in the last 15 years, there has been a “drift” in the understanding of the practice, such that TS is now sometimes conflated with “sex work” or “prostitution” in meaning and measurement (e.g., Ferguson and Morris, 2007; Fitzgerald-Husek et al., 2011; Graham et al., 2014; Robinson and Yeh, 2011). This conflation has extended to some agenda-setting organizations and it belies the history of the concept, confounds efforts to track and understand the role that TS relationships may play in HIV risk, and stymies effective intervention efforts.

The aims of this paper are to review the meaning and motivations for women’s involvement in transactional sex, develop a

unified conceptualization and definition of the practice; and discuss implications for interventions with young women. We argue in this paper that TS should be defined as *noncommercial, non-marital sexual relationships motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits*. This conceptual paper is part of a broader effort to review the body of knowledge on TS in SSA (a companion paper reviews the association between TS and HIV (Wamoyi et al., 2016)), and provides a foundation for efforts to improve measurement, and therefore understanding, of the role that TS plays in HIV risk.

Our analysis of the literature revealed three ideal-type paradigms of the determinants and nature of women’s practice of TS: sex for basic needs; sex for improved social status; and sex and material expressions of love. The “ideal type” is a sociological construct that serves to build meaning by depicting “pure” representations of social categories or actions. Importantly, ideal types are not meant to be taken as realistic portrayals; they are explicitly reductionist in order to facilitate comparison (Weber, 1978). Most original social science research portrays a reality that draws from at least two of the paradigms we describe; however, there is a tendency among donors and civil society groups to emphasize one paradigm at the expense of others. By delineating ideal-type paradigms of TS, we highlight what is left aside when each is examined alone. This exercise generates multiple narratives, and helps to explain why defining TS has proven so challenging. It also serves as the basis for considering implications for intervention efforts aiming to reduce women’s HIV risk; and highlights the consequences of drawing from too narrow an understanding of the practice.

## 2. Methodological approach

We conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on TS in SSA through 2014. The review was designed to address multiple aspects of TS including its conceptualization, measurement, and associations with HIV and related risk behaviors. We used the following databases to identify peer-reviewed articles and monographs: PubMed, EMBASE, Global Health, POPline, Web of Science, ADOLEC, Scopus, and Anthropology plus. Grey literature and national reports were searched through a number of websites: Google Scholar, UNAIDS, UNFPA, WHO, the World Bank, FHI, Population Council, PSI, USAID, CIDA, DFID, PEPFAR, OSI, HIV/AIDS Alliance, Guttmacher Institute, African Population and Health Research Center, and Population Reference Bureau. Experts’ suggestions were used to identify relevant monographs, peer-reviewed articles, and grey literature papers and reports. Additionally, the following journals were hand searched: African Journal of Reproductive Health, African Health Sciences, African Journal of AIDS Research, East African Journal of Public Health, East African Medical Journal, African Affairs, Culture Health and Sexuality, Archives of Sexual Behavior, Gender and Development, Exchange on HIV/AIDS, Sexuality and Gender.

The search terms included: [“transactional sex” or “survival sex” or “consumption sex” or “intergenerational sex” or “commodified sex” or “cross-generational sex” or “informal sex”, or “sex\* exchange”, or “sex\* trade” or “sugar daddy\*”, or “globalization and sex\*” or “modernity and sex\*” and Africa]. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were included. No types of publication or time restrictions were applied to the search. Only studies in English were included.

Following the removal of duplicates, we identified just over 3000 titles. In title and abstract review, the majority were found not relevant to TS. In total, 739 studies were retrieved for full text review. Of these, 339 met our inclusion and exclusion criteria (located in SSA; concerned transactional sex, not sex work; did not focus on

special populations [e.g., drug-users, prisoners]) and were extracted and included in the analysis. See [full reference list online](#).

Relevant studies were summarized in an extraction table that recorded detailed information on the study setting, sample size, research objectives, analytic approach, measurement of TS, and main findings, as well as information on the definition and theoretical framing of TS. In addition, we took notes on books included in the analysis. Two co-authors carefully reviewed the extraction tables and identified the main themes emerging from the conceptualization, determinants or motivations for TS as described in the studies.

These themes then served as the basis for content analysis of the articles, imported into the qualitative software program Atlas/ti (version 7, Scientific Software Development, Berlin, Germany). We coded the articles using “parent” codes to capture text corresponding to the themes. We used an auto-coding feature of Atlas/ti to selectively code chunks of text after verifying that the text represented the theme. For example, the code “masculinity” was used to capture an emphasis on the meaning of manhood and related gendered roles in relationships, and was attached to text that described this theme and included the following associated key words or phrases: male provider, provider role, men as providers, masculinity, masculinities.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Overview of the literature

The earliest study that used the term “transaction” or “transactional” sex was published in 1989 (Caldwell et al., 1989). Since then there has been a nearly exponential rise in the publications examining TS in SSA from an average of about eight publications each year between 2000 and 2003, to 31 each year between 2010 and 2013. We identified studies from every region of SSA; yet there is a higher concentration of studies from southern and eastern Africa, with 75 of the studies included in this review from South Africa, specifically. Although we note this range of settings, we did not set out to explore contextual distinctions; rather, our aim was to consolidate and assess different conceptualizations of TS.

Studies described both age-disparate (termed “intergenerational” if age gap is large) and age-concordant relationships. Transactional sex is sometimes inaccurately assumed to be synonymous with age-disparate sex, with sugar-daddies or “adult males who exchange large amounts of money or gifts for sexual favors from much younger women” (often operationalized as a 10-plus-year age difference) (Luke, 2005b, p. 6). Many of the studies included in this review are focused exclusively on TS in age-disparate partnerships (e.g., Bajaj, 2009; Cockcroft et al., 2010; Gbalajobi, 2010; Hope, 2007; Kuate-Defo, 2004; Leclerc-Madlala, 2008; Luke, 2003, 2005a; Potgieter et al., 2012). However, TS also takes place in relationships with similar-age partners (Jewkes et al., 2012a; Kaufman and Stavrou, 2004; Luke, 2005a; Luke et al., 2011; Nyanzi et al., 2001) and sugar-daddy relationships constitute a smaller proportion of exchange relationships than often assumed (Luke, 2005a; Wyrod et al., 2011). Evidence further suggests that the flow of resources is not unidirectional—young women also offer gifts and material support (though typically of lower value) to their partners (Luke et al., 2011). In addition, while not nearly as common, there are sugar-mommy relationships (Darabi et al., 2008; Gukurume, 2011; Kuate-Defo, 2004; Meekers and Calves, 1997; Mojola, 2014b; Morojele et al., 2006; Nyanzi et al., 2004). As most studies focus on the more significant male to female provision of resources in exchange for sex, we do as well, particularly in light of young women's disproportionate risk of HIV.

### 4. Paradigms of transactional sex

A number of key themes emerged in our review of the literature. These included agency, consumption, gender inequality, globalization, income inequality, love, masculinity, poverty, survival, and victimization or helplessness. We also noted an emphasis on intergenerational sex as well as the role of peers in motivating young people, in particular, to practice TS. Some of these themes captured broader forces, structuring TS more generally, while other themes were highly interrelated and together represented one of three paradigms referenced in the literature and described in detail below. For each paradigm, we begin with a stylized portrayal, discuss its origins and use, and then describe more nuanced aspects of each perspective.

#### 4.1. The vulnerable victim and sex for basic needs

The “sex for basic needs” paradigm portrays women and girls as vulnerable victims who have little choice but to exchange sex for money, food, or other material support as a result of their gendered economic and social marginalization. This paradigm extends from a broader discourse that frames women as vulnerable victims within the HIV epidemic (Higgins et al., 2010). The emphasis on structural inequalities also helped to dismantle assertions that “African sexuality” explained the rapidly increasing rate of HIV prevalence in SSA. Attention was drawn instead to gender inequality and the gendered impacts of economic change. While academic social scientists contributed to earlier studies emphasizing this perspective, we found that recent research drawing more exclusively from this paradigm tended to come from publications authored by NGOs or written for agenda-setting donors (e.g., Hope, 2007; Leach et al., 2003; Lungu and Husken, 2010; Neema et al., 2007; United Nations Secretary-General's Task Force on Women, 2004). Exceptions to this were studies focused on particularly marginalized groups of women or girls, e.g., street children (Dube, 1997; Cluver et al., 2011; Evans, 2002) and refugees (Muhwezi et al., 2011), or studies that sought to examine linkages between TS and violence or coercion (Dunkle et al., 2004b; Mosavel et al., 2012; Petersen et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2012).

##### 4.1.1. Economic dependence

A key feature of this paradigm is poverty, with specific emphasis on women's economic dependence on men (Albertyn, 2003; Juma et al., 2013a; Kim et al., 2008; McCleary-Sills et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2012; Wojcicki, 2002b). In addition, the paradigm draws attention to gendered labor markets: women's disproportionate representation in low-skilled jobs, seasonal work, work in the informal economy (Hunter, 2010; Romero-Daza, 1994; Stark, 2013); economic desperation in the face of male labor migration (Hunter, 2002; Romero-Daza, 1994); or increasingly, young women's own migration for economic opportunity, e.g., (Camlin et al., 2013; Hunter, 2010; Singh et al., 2012). Several studies describe the gendered impact of macro-level economic policy changes and women's acutely unequal access to economic capital as forcing women to rely on TS and multiple sexual partnerships to access cash in increasingly monetized economies (Bajaj, 2009; M. Hunter, 2002; Mill and Anarfi, 2002; Schoepf, 1988, 1993). Women's economic dependence on men is expressed at the household level in a study from northern Mozambique (Bandali, 2011), as follows:

Unmarried women with children who do not receive financial support from the father become the sole providers for their children. With minimal education or income opportunities ...

his absence means that women often resort to using sex to gain resources ... (p. 579).

There is also some quantitative evidence that household-level poverty (Hallman, 2004) or specifically, food insecurity, is associated with TS (Cluver et al., 2011; Pascoe et al., 2015; Weiser et al., 2007) or influences TS (Bryceson and Fonseca, 2006; McCoy et al., 2014). In addition, women's unequal position in certain industries sometimes requires them to practice TS: one example that has received a lot of attention is “fish-for-sex” within the fish trade in the Great Lakes region (Bene and Merten, 2008; Camlin et al., 2013; Kher, 2008; Kwenya et al., 2012; Lungu and Husken, 2010; MacPherson et al., 2012; Merten and Haller, 2007; Mojola, 2011; Nagoli et al., 2010). Finally, in some contexts household poverty can lead parents to directly or indirectly encourage their daughters' participation in TS relationships (Barnett et al., 2011; Komba-Malekela and Liljestrom, 1994; Mac Domhnaill et al., 2011; Remes et al., 2010; Wamoyi and Wight, 2014).

#### 4.1.2. *The vulnerable victim*

The “sex for basic needs” paradigm also places an emphasis on women's powerlessness within heterosexual relationships. In some cases, women are described as victims who have been coerced, exploited or abused. In the case of age-disparate relationships, the language is sometimes strengthened by referring to adolescent girls as ‘children’ with whom sexual relationships are by definition sexual exploitation (e.g., Petersen et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2012); and older men are described as preying on young girls (Jones and Norton, 2007; McCleary-Sills et al., 2013; Njue et al., 2011; United Nations Secretary-General's Task Force on Women, 2004). This understanding of TS is evident in the following excerpt taken from a report from Uganda:

A rural, out-of-school 17-year-old female related how the financial dependency that she had on her partner, who was 15 years older than she, trapped her in a physically dangerous and emotionally damaging relationship. ... Money encouraged the young woman to take greater risks in the sexual relationship and fosters a cycle of financial dependency ... (Neema et al., 2007, p. 47).

Terminology such as “trapped” strongly implies that this girl has no alternatives or capacity to resist. A subset of this literature focuses on the “sex for grades” phenomenon as a specific manifestation of intergenerational, coerced sex within the school setting (see: Bajaj, 2009; Dahn, 2008; Hope, 2007; Leach et al., 2003; Morley, 2011).

A number of studies, the majority from South Africa, have drawn on work on “masculinities” to explain the gendered basis for women's position in TS (Casale et al., 2011; Dunkle et al., 2007; Gilbert and Selikow, 2011; Jewkes and Morrell, 2012; Jewkes et al., 2012b; Morrell et al., 2012; Muparamoto, 2012; Selikow et al., 2002). A few have drawn from Connell's concept of “hegemonic masculinity” (and corresponding “emphasized femininity”), specifically. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity practiced in a given context that serves to reproduce gender inequality and suppress other ways of being a man (Connell, 1987).

In studies from marginalized communities in South Africa, women's vulnerability in TS is exacerbated by a hegemonic masculinity that is associated with “proving heterosexual success with women (gaining the ‘best’ and most female partners) and asserting control over women” (Dunkle et al., 2007, p.8) through “unequal

and often violent relationships” (Jewkes and Morrell, 2012, p. 1729). Providing material goods and money could be considered “a key strategy to secure female partners that can well be understood with the broader context of this idea of masculinity” (Dunkle et al., 2007, p. 8–9). Emphasized femininity is complicit in upholding hegemonic masculinity. When there are few alternative means to access social or economic capital, it may be advantageous to express an emphasized femininity, but in doing so, women reproduce unequal gender dynamics (Bhana and Pattman, 2011; Hunter, 2010; Jewkes and Morrell, 2012).

Overall, the sex for basic needs paradigm stresses the importance of gendered poverty as constraining women's options and forcing many to rely on TS for their survival (thus “survival sex”). This paradigm emphasizes women's lack of power in intimate, heterosexual relationships and describes women as victims of men's privileged status. When viewed from this perspective, efforts to prevent HIV contracted through TS would involve both economic empowerment to reduce women's economic dependency on men, as well as mechanisms to protect women and girls from sexual exploitation and coercion.

#### 4.2. *The powerful agent and sex for improved social status*

The “sex for improved social status” paradigm took hold in the early 2000s following studies that began to question the unidimensional portrayal of TS from the vulnerability paradigm (see, especially: Silberschmidt and Rasch, 2001; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). The critiques expanded the paradigm beyond the “basic needs” portrayal in several ways: To begin, they noted that TS is not limited to the destitute and the substance of exchange often extends beyond basic needs. They also maintained that most women have at least some degree of agency in these relationships and should not be viewed only as passive victims. And finally, they provided evidence that TS may be a means through which participants gain not just economic but also social capital.

##### 4.2.1. *Relative deprivation, social capital and transactional sex*

The sex for improved social status paradigm suggests that the motivations for engaging in TS are not always borne out of desperation, but can also result from relative deprivation within the context of rising economic inequality and the increasing social value of consumer goods. The experience of relative deprivation is described as being fueled by economic processes of globalization, namely the introduction of neoliberal economic policies (privatization, liberalization of markets) that saw a few benefit while many did not (Fox, 2012; Groes-Green, 2013; Hawkins et al., 2009; Stoebenau et al., 2013). These policies also opened markets and led to increased importation and visibility of consumer goods, spurring a “consumer culture.” Studies drawing on this paradigm describe immense peer pressure felt by young people, in particular, who cannot afford to maintain the lifestyle of their wealthier friends or peers (Baba-Djara et al., 2013; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Zembe et al., 2013). This peer pressure can extend to engaging in risky sexual practices that are associated with a modern lifestyle (Groes-Green, 2013; Longfield et al., 2004; Stoebenau et al., 2013) including maintaining one or multiple transactional relationships (Jewkes and Morrell, 2012; Wamoyi et al., 2011).

Transactional sex is described as a practice through which young women, especially, can access material goods associated with a modern life to improve their social status. The stuff of exchange is not restricted to basic goods but rather extends to “commodities of modernity” (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003), i.e., goods that associate their owner with cosmopolitan youth culture:

In poverty-stricken township contexts, fashion is hotly pursued by many young people identifying with the allure of the middle class, differentiating themselves as they do from the poverty of the township but also from poorer rural-based counterparts. (Bhana and Pattman, 2011, p. 965).

Therefore, as the above quote from South Africa suggests, TS allows young women to differentiate themselves from poorer peers, or maintain lifestyles otherwise unaffordable in order to associate with desired peer networks. Studies that describe TS practiced for such aspirational motivations often focus on populations expected to be able to uphold or define the parameters of modern youth culture in various settings, such as female university students (e.g., Amo-Adjei et al., 2014; Gukurume, 2011; Hoeffnagel, 2012; Masvawure, 2010, 2011; Shefer et al., 2012).

Women are shamed and blamed under this paradigm: research has emphasized how community members hold women who practice TS for the consumption of modern goods at least in part responsible for generalized moral decline, viewing them as both superficial and dangerous (Fielding-Miller et al., 2016b; Stoebenau et al., 2011). Yet, there are alternative explanations for such women's actions as well as the community's response. For example, some have highlighted how women use modern goods to access new social networks for social mobility, thereby creating new forms of social power (Cole, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2009; Hunter, 2010). Thus, underlying the blame may be unease with social change and women's increased access to economic and social capital (Cornwall, 2002; Smith, 2014; Stoebenau et al., 2011).

There is also a compelling argument that women's pursuit of consumer goods is fueled in part by economic constraints on men. Mark Hunter details changes in marriage systems, specifically declines in marriage in South Africa as a result of social and economic change, including many men no longer being able to afford bride wealth. Therefore, rather than expressing desire and commitment through bride wealth and establishing a home, men provide commodities. Where women used to fashion their homes as brides, they now fashion themselves as girlfriends (Hunter, 2010). Sanyu Mojola, in turn, provides a strong case for how the advertising industry, alongside the march of global capital, has produced the "woman consumer" and manufactured this "need" in women, in particular (Mojola, 2014a).

#### 4.2.2. Women's sexual agency and its limits

The sex for improved social status paradigm also differs significantly from that of the vulnerable victim in emphasizing women's roles as active, sometimes powerful, agents in transactional relationships (Bell, 2012; Bhana and Pattman, 2011; Groes-Green, 2013; Hawkins et al., 2009; Hoeffnagel, 2012; Hunter, 2002; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Luke, 2003; Silberschmidt and Rasch, 2001; Stoebenau et al., 2011; Wamoyi et al., 2011; Zembe et al., 2013). That women may be engaging in TS to access modern goods implies that they are doing so as a result of deliberate action. In fact, expressions documented in different sites capture how women describe their ability to extract resources from their male partners including, for example: "milking the cow," (Mozambique: Hawkins et al., 2009); "skinning the goat" (Tanzania: Maganja et al., 2007); "de-toothing" (Uganda: Bell, 2012; Bohmer and Kirumbira, 2000); or "tearing open the pocket" (Madagascar: Stoebenau et al., 2011). As one young woman outside of Johannesburg, explained:

He is called a chicken because all you want to do with him is get him to give you whatever you want. We say *uyamcutha* [plucking the chicken] (Selikow et al., 2002, p. 26).

Therefore, within the context of a TS relationship, women express power and agency—they understand, and can thus manipulate, traditional gendered assumptions in relationships. They utilize their "erotic power" (Groes-Green, 2013) to charm wealthy men, and access social and economic power in return. Yet, such manipulations are not without risk. For example, women in Uganda who attempt to "de-tooth" men by extracting resources without providing sex in return face the threat of sexual violence (Bell, 2012; Bohmer and Kirumbira, 2000; Nyanzi et al., 2001). More broadly, women's power may not be consistent across and within relationships over time, and, importantly, is structured by broader gender-unequal systems. Researchers have emphasized important limits to women's agency in TS relationships, especially with regard to sexual decision-making (Albertyn, 2003; Jewkes and Morrell, 2012; Luke, 2003; Stoebenau et al., 2011). While women may hold power with respect to partner choice, findings have indicated that "once the choice was made, their power was greatly circumscribed ..." (Jewkes and Morrell, 2012, p.1732), particularly with respect to when sex takes place and whether condoms are used, carrying implications for women's vulnerability to HIV. Important also are the broader structures that constrain women to having *erotic* power as opposed to alternative forms of power. That said, Groes-Green argues that women's possession of erotic power indicates that "even within societies that appear heavily patriarchal we might find spaces for female assertiveness" (Groes-Green, 2013, p.103).

In summary, the sex for improved social status paradigm suggests that growing economic inequality and the increasing importance placed on the ownership of material goods for social mobility motivate women's engagement in TS. From this perspective, HIV prevention efforts would need to acknowledge women's perceived agency in relationships and work with women to critically assess its limits. While not inconsistent with all economic empowerment approaches, small micro-loans or similar poverty alleviation efforts may not provide adequate capital to meet consumer needs.

#### 4.3. Sex and material expressions of love

The previous paradigms fail to adequately address the extent to which transactions occur within emotionally intimate relationships (Bhana and Pattman, 2011; Groes-Green, 2013; Mojola, 2014a; Moore et al., 2007; Nyanzi et al., 2001; Poulin, 2007). While early work on TS discussed the emotionality of these relationships (Ankomah, 1992; Calves and Meekers, 1997; Meekers and Calves, 1997; Orubuloye et al., 1992), attention then shifted to the heightened sexual risk this practice posed within the dominant biomedical discourse on HIV transmission. More recently, led by critical social science, there has been a resurgence of attention to love and desire (Clark et al., 2010; Higgins et al., 2010; Padilla et al., 2008), including in accounts of TS (Bhana and Pattman, 2011; Cole and Thomas, 2009; Hunter, 2010; Mojola, 2014a). Some of this work follows from broader analyses of the changing meaning of "modern" relationships across different contexts in SSA. Globalized ideals and images of modern relationships have increasingly come to emphasize romantic "companionate" relationships marked by deep emotional bonds between individually chosen partners (Cole and Thomas, 2009; J. Ferguson, 1999; Hirsch et al., 2009).

The "sex and material expressions of love" paradigm draws attention to the centrality of gift exchange in romantic relationships, and emphasizes the expectation of a gendered flow of resources from men to women. This paradigm adds to the understanding of TS in two important ways. First, it introduces the notion that love and money are inextricably linked in romantic relationships, including transactional relationships. Second, it

emphasizes the importance of widely held gender beliefs regarding the role of men as providers of material support, and women of reproductive labor, within heterosexual relationships.

#### 4.3.1. *The intimacy of love and money*

Studies throughout the region emphasize the degree to which love and money are tightly intertwined in relationships (Mains, 2013; Ethiopia; Mojola, 2014a; Kenya; Groes-Green, 2013; Mozambique; Bhana and Pattman, 2011; Hunter, 2010; South Africa; Maganja et al., 2007; Tanzania; Poulin, 2007; Malawi; Ankamah, 1992; Ghana). One university student in Kampala summarized this culturally obvious fact by asking: “How would I know he likes me if he does not buy me nice things?” (Hoeffnagel, 2012, p. 35). In drawing on the work of economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer, Sanyu Mojola has argued this conflation also exists in the West; the difference, however, is in the West the relationship is actively denied—money pollutes “pure love” (but buys it anyway) (Sanyu A. Mojola, 2014a). By contrast, in many contexts across SSA money is a language of love. In a paper from Tanzania the authors describe how the strongest indication of a committed partner—after willingness to visit her family—is that he offers gifts and material support.

The best way to show your love is to give presents. The bigger the presents, the more the love (Female, FGD participant, Maganja et al., 2007, p. 978).

The connection between love and money also exists in those relationships sometimes depicted as more instrumental or exploitative, such as intergenerational relationships. While some older partners were described by women as “sugar-daddies” with whom the only objective was to “eat their money,” economic and emotional support from older male partners was seen as nurturing in other relationships (Brouard and Crewe, 2012; Longfield et al., 2004; Shefer and Strebel, 2012; Zembe et al., 2013).

#### 4.3.2. *The importance of gendered provision*

Across most settings in SSA, women and men enter relationships with a set of “cultural prescriptions” that women are to provide sex if men live up to their expected role as providers (Leclerc-Madlala, 2009). Under this paradigm, TS is an extension of this set of assumptions:

In romantic relationships between men and women in much of Africa ... each partner is expected to conform to a specific gender role that is defined partially in terms of exchange. The man provides material support, and the woman offers sex and domestic services. (Mains, 2013, p. 343)

Being a provider is central to dominant constructions of masculinity—the real man is one who can provide for his loved ones, including, and perhaps especially, a girlfriend or spouse (Baba-Djara et al., 2013; Bandali, 2011; Bhana and Pattman, 2011; Hunter, 2005; Jewkes and Morrell, 2012; Morrell et al., 2012; Poulin, 2007; Stark, 2013; Swidler and Watkins, 2007). This provision has been explained within the context of broader patron-client relations (Swidler and Watkins, 2007), and is also central to expectations in young people's sexual relationships (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2005; Nobelius et al., 2010; Orubuloye et al., 1992), regardless of the woman's own earning potential or income (Cornwall, 2002; Wamoyi et al., 2011).

Economic re-structuring, however, has made it increasingly difficult for men to live up to provider role expectations (Hunter, 2007; Muparamoto, 2012; Stark, 2013). Within contexts of both

increased reliance on the market economy and rising economic uncertainty, there is an undercurrent of mutual suspicion between partners. Men express uncertainty about whether women are interested in them, or just their money (Boileau et al., 2008; Komba-Malekela and Liljestrom, 1994; McLean, 1995; Nnko and Pool, 1997); they likewise admit that they sometimes make promises they cannot keep in order to access sex (Dilger, 2003; Maganja et al., 2007; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2005). Women, in turn, are wary of men's empty promises, and sometimes do attempt to extract as much as they can, “plucking their chickens” (Selikow et al., 2002; Nyanzi et al., 2001). Women and men further acknowledge that a woman may have to seek additional partners if any one partner cannot adequately provide for her (Stark, 2013; Mojola, 2014a).

The “sex and material expressions of love” paradigm emphasizes how TS is rooted in the gendered expectation that men provide material and financial support. In addition, such provision is seen as being associated with, and/or deepening, emotional intimacy. TS is thus an extension of expected exchange in intimate relationships. While relevant to the other paradigms, this paradigm points toward the importance of addressing fundamental gendered belief systems, especially those that position women as sexually subordinate to men who provide material support.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

### 5.1. *A framework for conceptualizing transactional sex*

The “ideal-type” paradigms of TS can serve as a basis for developing a unified conceptualization of TS, which in turn carries implications for definition and intervention efforts. Any one paradigm taken alone provides an incomplete view of the practice. This is particularly important to highlight given the dominance of the vulnerable victim perspective among programs and donors (Bene and Merten, 2008; Hawkins et al., 2009; Higgins et al., 2010; Tawfik and Watkins, 2007). We offer a conceptual framework that unifies these paradigms by highlighting a common set of broad structural forces that shape each of them, and by introducing a series of continua that stretch across them (see Fig. 1). Characteristics associated with each paradigm appear in boxes, positioned from more distal to more proximate. Three continua are shown as arrows that traverse the paradigms.

The structural forces that shape TS include economic and socio-cultural processes of globalization and systems of gender inequality. Different aspects of globalization shape each of these paradigms. Structural adjustment policies led to higher rates of poverty, and often gendered poverty, structuring “sex for basic needs.” The liberalization of markets and increased exposure to and influence of Western ideals, particularly emergent youth culture and corresponding lifestyles and identities attached to consumer goods, created new symbols of success, structuring “sex for improved social status.” Finally, ongoing emphasis on male provision both within and outside of marital relationships shapes “sex and material expressions of love.”

Social dimensions of gender inequality stretch from the distal to proximate level, and apply to all paradigms, hence relevant characteristics are positioned where the paradigms overlap on Fig. 1. We emphasize that gender is a “multilevel system of difference and inequality ... [that] involves cultural beliefs and distributions of resources at the macro-level, patterns of behavior and organizational practices at the interactional level, and selves and identities at the individual level” (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004, p. 510–511). On Fig. 1, at the distal level, gender inequality structures women's economic opportunities and constraints, and social norms about male provision. Gender inequality is manifested at the more

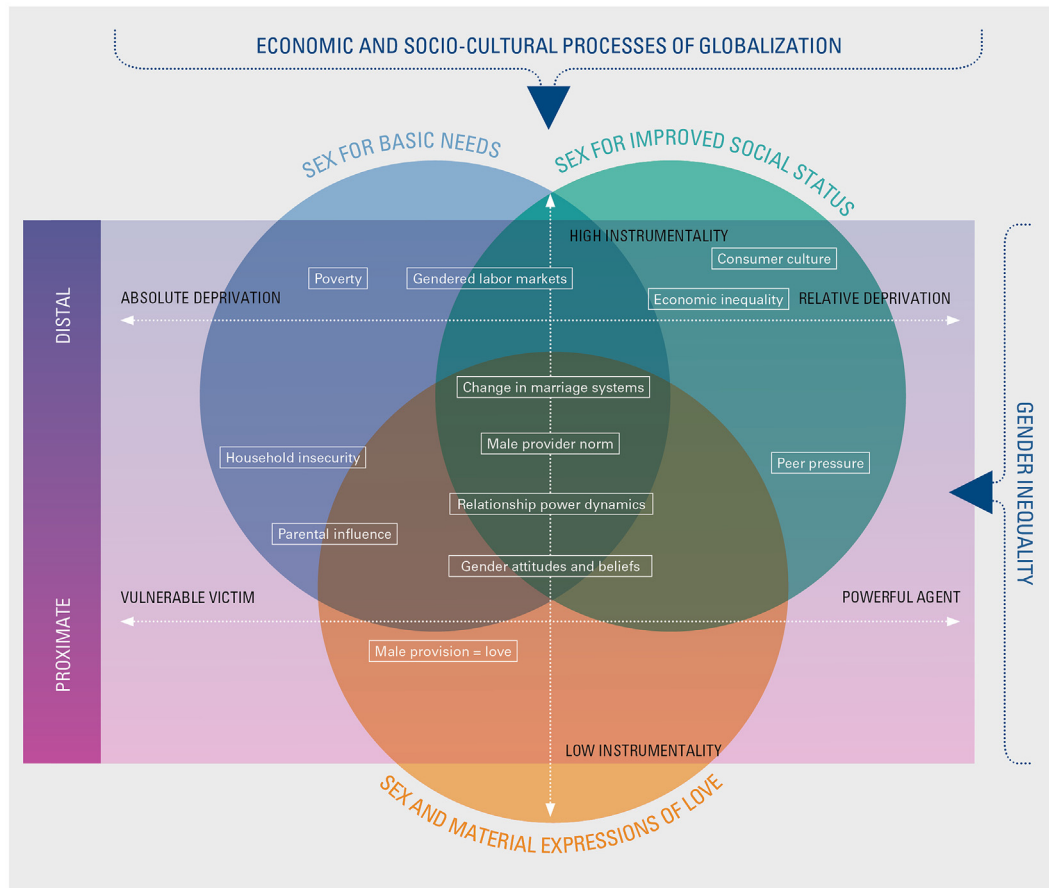


Fig. 1. Conceptualizing transactional sex in sub-Saharan Africa.

proximate level through relationship power dynamics and individual attitudes and beliefs corresponding to the expression of different forms of masculinity and femininity.

#### 5.1.1. Continua

The nuance and complexity of transactional sexual relationships and the myriad motivations for its practice may be better represented as continua—of Deprivation, Agency and Instrumentality—rather than discrete paradigms. Continua better convey the tremendous ambiguity noted in the meaning and motivation for exchange across contexts (Dilger, 2003; Luke, 2005b; Nyanzi et al., 2004; Nyanzi et al., 2001; Ranganathan, 2015).

At the distal level is a continuum of *deprivation* that describes the context within which TS takes place or the extent to which TS is structured by poverty (absolute deprivation) as compared to economic inequality (relative deprivation). Efforts to examine the relationship between socio-economic status and TS have had mixed results (Chatterji et al., 2005; Hallman, 2004; Juma et al., 2013b; Moore et al., 2007), perhaps in part because the subjective experience of deprivation may matter more than whether or not it is structured by absolute poverty. A deprivation continuum draws attention to the fact that TS takes place across a range of socio-economic statuses, while also acknowledging that the rural poor are not isolated from the modern material world and its enticements (Wamoyi et al., 2011).

The most recognized continuum within the literature on TS is the degree of power or *agency* that women exhibit. This has been described at times as a dichotomy between victim and agent, but also as a “continuum of volition” (Weissman et al., 2006). Most studies suggest women’s position varies over time and between

relationships from the extremes of vulnerable victim to powerful agent. While there is often an important connection between level of deprivation and agency (Underwood et al., 2011), even in contexts of rural poverty, women may demonstrate constrained or “thin” agency in their relationships (Bell, 2012) including partner selection, the timing of first sex, or relationship termination (Wight et al., 2006). Likewise, women’s position and agency can vary within a given relationship both over time and by area of decision-making, and significantly, seems most compromised with respect to sexual decision-making (Jewkes and Morrell, 2012; Luke, 2003). Finally, girls’ cognitive development trajectories must also be considered—girls’ ability to make and act on informed choices transforms with their biological age (Lansdown, 2005).

The last continuum is *instrumentality*, or the extent to which a relationship is motivated by financial or status motivations. This continuum is orthogonal to the others: the degree to which a relationship is motivated by instrumentality can vary independently of women’s agency or the economic context in which the relationship takes place. TS occupies the middle space on a continuum of instrumentality where the relationship ranges from being minimally to mostly motivated by financial or status gains. Crucially, in TS, *instrumentality is often connected to emotional intimacy*—as male provision is tied to love. That said, equating provision with love in *all* relationships would belie the findings from many studies. As is the case with agency, it’s important to acknowledge the extent to which both instrumentality and emotionality may vary by relationship and over time.

This conceptual framework can be used to direct research. It demonstrates that TS can take place across socio-economic contexts, for a range of reasons. Rather than address whether TS is



influenced by wealth or education, it may be more important to consider how TS can lead to risk in different contexts. The framework raises the importance of addressing the social dimensions of gender inequality in TS including the dynamics of women's agency in these relationships and associated male-provision norms, and individual gendered attitudes. Continuous direct operationalization of composite measures to capture nuance in agency, motivation, and how these intersect with context. Together, these measures can capture multi-level influences on HIV risk through TS.

### 5.1.2. Fuzzy boundaries

The conceptual framework provides needed nuance, but in doing so introduces a number of questions regarding the boundaries of TS, including: "Where is sex work?" and "What about marriage?" Unlike TS, sex work does not follow from expectations of male provision in romantic relationships; rather, it is a representation of "commodity exchange" (Luke, 2005b). Sex work (SW) can be imagined outside Fig. 1 extending from the top of the instrumentality continuum. In sex work, exchange is explicit and sex immediately remunerated. In TS, provision may precede or follow sex by an undefined period of time; and is not necessarily tied directly to sex (Gilbert and Selikow, 2011). Sex workers self-identify as such, and define their partners as clients, at least initially; while in TS relationships, partners are generally described as boyfriends/girlfriends or lovers (Hunter, 2002).

The boundary between TS and SW is fuzzy, however. Some very short-term exchange relationships, such as those forged in bars, occupy that messy space between SW and TS (Lees et al., 2009; Wojcicki, 2002a). Women who practice TS motivated almost exclusively by material gain walk a fine line; if they fail to manage their identity, rely too heavily for too long on such relationships, or do not marry by an appropriate age, they may transition into SW (Cole, 2004; Fielding-Miller et al., 2016a). Such transitions are rarely discussed in the social science TS literature, however, which instead tends to emphasize the extent to which exchange embedded in relationships is constructed outside of SW.

We would not deny that TS and marriage share many similarities: the exchange relationships we describe extend from expectations tied to union formation (bride wealth payments, wives and husband's respective roles including provision); however, we do not conceptualize TS as inclusive of marriage. "Marriage," be it customary or civil, is a formally recognized social institution inclusive of expectations of life-long commitment between spouses, often involving (or serving to facilitate) childbearing and rearing. And despite shifts toward more "companionate" marriage in SSA, marriage continues to signify a union of (and corresponding commitments to) kin groups (J. Ferguson, 1999; Parikh, 2009; D.J. Smith, 2009). While in both marriage and TS there is a connection between love and money, in TS, the terms and products of exchange are more often controlled by the individual members of a couple; therefore, in TS, if expectations are not met, relationships may be more easily terminated. We would argue that the duration and nature of socially-regulated *commitment* distinguishes marriage from transactional sex; and, importantly, does not *necessitate* that these relationships differ by levels of emotionality.

Finally, and most challenging, is differentiating TS from all other non-marital, noncommercial relationships. While love and money are entwined, in most TS studies participants suggest some of their relationships are more strongly motivated by exchange than others. To suggest that TS equates to any relationship that includes exchange may cast too wide a net and render operationalization unhelpful for understanding how TS increases HIV risk. Therefore, in order to distinguish TS from all other non-marital romantic/sexual relationships, we suggest that TS relationships are those that are not just *characterized* by exchange, but *motivated* by it. Together,

these boundary-establishing criteria result in the following operational definition of TS: *noncommercial, non-marital sexual relationships motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits*. Such a definition does not, in any way, deny the importance of emotionality in transactional sex, it does, however, emphasize the presence of instrumentality.

### 5.2. Implications for intervention

While it is out of the scope of this paper to present a formal review of interventions that have addressed TS, it is important to consider the implications of the conceptual framework for intervention efforts concerned with HIV risk through TS for young women. To date, the framing of young women's risk of HIV has remained firmly planted in the vulnerability paradigm, and this extends to TS. An example of this is captured in the following excerpt providing programming recommendations for adolescent girls from the UNAIDS Taskforce for Southern Africa:

Create awareness campaigns on the inappropriate, abusive and often illegal character of relationships between older men and teenage girls, promoting the shaming of 'sugar daddies' while protecting the identities of the girls and reaffirming men who do not engage in such practices ... (United Nations Secretary-General's Task Force on Women, 2004, p. 28).

Interventions that shame men who have sexual relationships with younger women have been pursued in a number of contexts across southern and eastern Africa (Brouard and Crewe, 2012; Fleshman, 2004; Hope, 2007; M. Kaufman et al., 2013; M. Kaufman et al., 2016; van der Heijden and Swartz, 2014). Yet, some have suggested that strategies that stigmatize either male or female participants in TS may do more harm than good (Brouard and Crewe, 2012; van der Heijden and Swartz, 2014; Weissman et al., 2006). Our review questions whether women and men see themselves in the "characters" portrayed by these strategies (Brouard and Crewe, 2012; Longfield et al., 2004; Zembe et al., 2013). The literature highlights how young women may pursue older men, rather than the reverse, and suggests that these relationships do not always reflect a perpetrator-victim dynamic (Potgieter et al., 2012; Shefer and Strebel, 2012). While age-disparate relationships can be coercive and violent, they can also, alternatively, be nurturing and caring (Meekers and Calves, 1997; Shefer and Strebel, 2012; Zembe et al., 2013). Likewise, older partners are arguably more marriageable; better able to support the girl and any children that might result from the relationship (Luke, 2003), and the wealthiest of these partners may be more likely to use protection (Luke, 2008). Therefore, stigmatizing all such relationships may be counterproductive to efforts to improve young women's lives.

Similarly, our review suggests that by overlooking agency, aspirations, and love within the context of TS, interventions to reduce risk of HIV through TS may fall short. For young women, both perceived agency and aspirations for social mobility through the pursuit of "commodities of modernity" must be seriously acknowledged (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008). Our review suggests it may be important to recognize young women's understanding of their position in these relationships. In addition, it may be important to encourage young women to then critically assess their agency, in particular when and how it may give way to unwanted actions or outcomes (van der Heijden and Swartz, 2014).

In contexts where TS is highly aspirational, taking young women and men through a critical assessment of global marketing, consumerism, and the "costs" of using TS as a peer approval or

social mobility strategy may be valuable additions to intervention approaches. With rising aspirations increasingly benchmarked to the global-middle class, small microfinance loans (e.g., Dunbar et al., 2014) or modest cash transfer programs (e.g., Pettifor, 2015) addressing poverty alleviation may not be effective in reducing the risk of HIV through TS for women in less impoverished contexts.

Gender expectations concerning male provision were central to all of the paradigms. The reproduction and reification of these expectations stands to hurt both women, who may then be less likely to seek financial independence, and men, who increasingly struggle to meet such expectations. Interventions that aim for gender equitable relationships are an important starting point, especially those that include men (Dworkin et al., 2013; Jewkes et al., 2006; Kyegombe et al., 2014). Interventions addressing TS, specifically, should critically address, among both young women and men, gendered expectations of male provision and what it “buys” men in return. Programs that take on both gender beliefs and expectations alongside economic opportunities for women may be promising (Dunbar et al., 2014; Jewkes and Morrell, 2012), especially if appropriately tailored to the socio-economic context and participants’ level of human capital.

Finally, the linkages between provision and love may increase women’s (and men’s) risk as condom use is affected by notions of intimacy and trust (Clark et al., 2010; Luke et al., 2011; Manuel, 2005; Stoebenau et al., 2009). However, interventions may be able to draw on emotionality in TS relationships to encourage emotional support and caring (including for a partner’s health, e.g., through HIV testing) in addition to material support.

In conclusion, in this review we draw attention to the multiple, overlapping contexts and motivations for TS and argue that these not be oversimplified into a unidimensional portrayal. Women should not be reduced to helpless victims, nor to immoral social climbers. Understanding the range of influences that shape TS within overarching systems of gendered social and economic inequalities can ensure that research toward understanding when and how TS imparts risk, and efforts to intervene on that pathway, will conceptualize TS accurately and with adequate complexity.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.09.023>.

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