Multiple and Concurrent Sexual Partnerships in Malawi

A Formative Qualitative Study

Prepared for

Research to Prevention (R2P)

by

THE SUMMIT CONSULTING GROUP

Wiseman Chijere Chirwa
and
Steven Chizimbi

Dec 09
1.0 Introduction

This document is a report of a field study on multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships (MCP) in Malawi commissioned by the Research to Prevention (R2P), with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and technical assistance from the Johns Hopkins University. The study starts from the premise that multiple concurrent sexual partnerships (MCP), coupled with inconsistent use of condom, has been linked with increased risk of HIV infection. In places where HIV infection has shown significant signs of decline, such as in Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Thailand, evidence strongly suggests that partner reduction has played a crucial role in infection reduction. The diversity and strength of available evidence underscore the need for efforts that promote MCP reduction as a strategy for HIV control. To design and scale up strategies that will effectively promote partner reduction and change the social norms that facilitate MCP, there is need for a strong evidence base concerning the individual predisposing factors and the socio-cultural props of the behavior.

1.1 Study purpose and objectives

It is against this background that the R2P commissioned this qualitative formative research in order to generate data that would foster the understanding of the dynamics of multiple sexual partnerships and assist in identifying effective strategies for addressing them. The specific objectives of the research were to:

- understand the various forms of sexual relationships common in the Malawian context;
- determine community definitions and understanding of MCP;
- ascertain the various forms of MCP prevalent in the study districts;
- assess motivations and justifications for engaging in MCP;
- identify the cultural practices that foster MCP;
- explore the roles of the socialization process, gender and community institutions;
- highlight the motivations for not engaging in MCP;
- determine the cultural and socio-economic roots of MCP;
- ascertain attitudes towards MCP; and,
- identify local resources that should be harnessed in efforts to reduce MCP.

1.2 Contextual background

In May 2006, at a meeting in Maseru, Lesotho, a think tank of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) identified high levels of multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships between men and women - with inconsistent and incorrect condom use, combined with low levels of male circumcision - as the key drivers of the HIV epidemic in southern Africa.¹ Other contributing drivers fuelling the epidemic

include male attitudes and behaviors, intergenerational sex, gender based violence, stigma, lack of openness about the epidemic and untreated sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Underlying these biological and social drivers are the structural factors of high mobility and inequalities of wealth as well as cultural factors, including gender inequality, with young women rendered particularly vulnerable to HIV infection.²

Text Box 1: HIV Transmission mode in Malawi

“The principal mode of HIV transmission in Malawi is heterosexual contact. This accounts for 90 percent of HIV infections in the country. The duration between HIV infection and the onset of AIDS varies but averages 9-10 years, and death typically ensues within 1-2 years of symptom onset.”

National Statistical Office (NSO), Malawi Demographic and Health Survey, 2004, p.185

According to the National AIDS Commission (NAC), about 100,000 infections occur annually, of which at least half occur among people aged between 15 and 24 years,³ with about 90,000 deaths occurring annually.⁴ In 2005, the total number of people infected with HIV was estimated at 930,000, including about 60,000 to 80,000 children and youth younger than 15 years. At least 70 percent of Malawi's hospital beds are occupied by people with HIV/AIDS-related illnesses. The high rate of infection has resulted in an estimated 5.8 percent of the farm labor force dying of the disease, and HIV/AIDS is expected to lower the country’s GDP by at least 10% by the year 2010. The government spends over $120,000 each year on funerals for civil servants who die of the disease.⁵

Like other southern African countries, Malawi has a severe HIV and AIDS pandemic. The country has a population of almost 14 million, with a growth rate of 2.4%, according to 2008 estimates.⁶ A 2005 sentinel surveillance survey reported that the HIV prevalence rate among people aged 15 to 49 years was estimated at 14.0 percent, a decrease from 14.4 percent in 2003.⁷

---

⁷ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/malawi.cite-note_Africa 08-18
A study of MCP in Malawi done by Francine van den Borne⁸ argues that the major motivational factors for engaging in multiple sexuality in the country is “the effort to survive” in the face of poverty. Several other scholars and commentators have also emphasized the struggle against poverty, the quest for survival, and consumerism as the drivers of MCP in the country.⁹ Some earlier studies by Wiseman Chijere Chirwa¹⁰ however argue that poverty and economic survival are not the only drivers of MCP in the country. The pursuit of prestige, status and honor, on the part of men; attractiveness, peer pressure, pursuit of leisure and entertainment, are among the major drivers of MCP among women. For both men and women, the pursuit of leisure and entertainment, sexual gratification, experimentation with sexual variety, alcohol abuse, and migrancy also play crucial roles. History, culture, socialization, and religion are also major determinants of MCP in the country. Women may also engage in MCP as “punishment” for their spouses’ infidelity – as a way of getting even with their unfaithful spouses. The discussions with younger female respondents revealed that there are women who say: amuna anga amapanga chibwenzi inenso ndipanga chibwenzi (meaning my husband or boyfriend has other love affairs, so I will also have my own love affairs) [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Ngumbe, Blantyre]. Other women say: mwamuna wangayo amakazisaka inenso ndizikazisaka [my man goes ‘hunting’ so I will also go ‘hunting’) [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Liwonde, Machinga]

In this study multiple sexual relationships are those in which an individual has more than one sexual partner serially and/or concurrently. Multiple concurrent sexual partnerships are relationships whereby an individual has overlapping sexual relationships with more than one person regardless of the length of the time of the overlap. The study has therefore moved away from prescribing the length of time of the overlap in defining concurrency. In some studies, there has been an attempt to define the overlap of one or more sexual partnerships for a period of one month or longer (Mah & Halperin, 2008), in past 3 months (Colvin et al. 1998); or in the past year/12 months (Global Program on AIDS, 1996. The contention of the present study is that an overlap is an overlap whether it is for just hours or years because the actions and effects are the same. Concurrency is contrasted with sequential or serial

⁸See F. van den Borne, 2005, Trying to Survive in Times of Poverty and AIDS: Women and Multiple Partner sex in Malawi. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis
partnerships or monogamy, whereby an individual engages in a sexual relationship with only one partner, with no overlap in time with subsequent partners. But sequential or serial partnerships is also a form of multiple sexual partnerships.

1.3 Methodological approaches
The formative research was done in five districts: Blantyre and Machinga in the southern part of the country; Mchinji and Kasungu in the central part; and Mzimba in the north.

Qualitative interviews were conducted in the form of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) held in both rural and urban areas. The FGDs were conducted among men and women of reproductive age, grouped according to broad age categories and urban/rural residence. Not less than four urban and four rural FGDs were conducted in each study district. In addition, four individual direct interviews (hereinafter IDIs) were conducted in each district. Half of these were among men and women who engage in MCP while the other half were among men and women who either never engaged in MCP or who have stopped engaging in it. Two gatekeepers - key opinion leaders – were also interviewed in each district. The distribution of the FGDs and IDIs among the general population was therefore as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)</th>
<th>Individual Direct Interviews (IDIs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blantyre</td>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>30-55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinga</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mchinji</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kasungu</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mzimba</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Initially, the proposed age groups were 18 to 29 and 30 to 44 for men, and 18 to 29 and 30 to 39 for women. However, after a pre-test of the data collection tools, it was discovered that quite a few women were sexually active (and some still bearing children) up to age of 45; while a lot of men were still sexually active up to the age of 55, and in some cases even up to 58. Some men were still fathering babies at the age of 56. This means that child bearing age does not necessarily mean sexually active age. Since the focus of this study was on MCP, it meant that any sexually active person could engage in MCP. It was therefore decided to broaden the age categories to 55 years for men and 50 for women.

1.3.1 Sample size
For the purposes of distinction, those aged between 18 and 29 were categorized as the adolescents, while those aged 30 to 55 were categorized as adults. In total, 318 people participated in this study. Of these, 165 were male, and 153 were female. The youth and adolescent were 156 and the adults were 162. The urban participants were 158, while those from the rural areas totaled 160. The district distribution of the sample was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>Youth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blantyre</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kasungu</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinga</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mchinji</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mzimba</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>Male and female</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sample from which the information was collected was therefore fairly balanced in terms of age and gender, and also district distribution.

1.3.2 Data processing
All FGDs and IDIs were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field short notes were also taken during the FGD and IDI. The recordings were translated into English, back to vernacular, and then into English again. These data were then processed using the thematic analysis method, and electronically using the Nudist package. The report was then written based on the thematic analyses and the electronically processed data.

1.4 Structure of the report
The findings of the study are presented below in four main sections: the first on the conceptions of MCP; the second on the factors and attitudes fostering MCP; the third on the deterrents and potential intervention points; and the fourth on an analytical discussion of the key findings of the study. Sections 2.0 to 2.4.9 contain the various conceptions of sexual relations in general, and multiple sexual relations in particular, as reported by the informants. The common forms of sexual relations in the targeted communities; the community definitions and understandings of these; and the cultural
and socio-economic motivations and justifications for engaging in multiple sexual relations are covered in these sections. In sections 3.0 to 3.5.9 the report covers the factors and attitudes fostering MCP; the cultural practices and institutions that entrench behaviors related to MCP; the gendered socialization processes; the attitudes to MCP; and the responses of the individuals when they discover that their partners engage in MCP. Sections 4.0 to 4.4.4 contain the participants’ views on the deterrents to MCP and what they regarded as the potential intervention points. Following these is a detailed analytical discussion of the key findings of the study. This has been included to provide a context within which the findings of this study need to be located. The analytical discussion also provides an explanatory note to the key findings of the study following the study’s objectives. This section of the report is therefore the most important because it takes the findings of this study beyond just documenting and reporting, to the level of contextualizing, analyzing, explaining, and validating of the informants’ voices. Thus, in this section of the report, the informants’ views and voices are juxtaposed with views and voices from other sources, especially from popular Malawian songs. These are enforced with evidence from other similar studies done in Malawi and the eastern and southern Africa regions. An analytical discussion is included in section 5.0 and concluding remarks are in section 6.0. Some recommendations have been included in section 7.0 on the way forward.

1.4 Limitations of the study
Since this study was done in districts that have had some HIV and AIDS awareness intervention programs, its results may not be generalizable to those districts where there has been less exposure to such programs and interventions. In addition, several research projects of the nature similar to the present study have been previously conducted in the study areas and thus the participants might be more likely to give socially desirable responses, resulting in some kind of a social desirability bias. Another limitation relates to the translation of some socially coded and culture-bound concepts that do not have English equivalents. Once such terms are translated they lose the nuisances of their original meanings.
2.0 Conceptions of Sexual Relationships and Multiple Partnerships

Text Box 2: MCP in Malawi

“Men in general are more likely to have more sexual partners than women. While only 1 per cent of women had two or more sexual partners in the past year, the corresponding proportion for men is 11 per cent.

Teenagers are more likely than older women to have two or more partners (2 per cent compared with 1 per cent or less for older women. Married women are the least likely to have multiple partners (less than 1 per cent) compared with never married women (5 per cent) or formerly married women (2 per cent). Differentials across subgroups of women are not substantial.”


The results of this study show that Malawian communities, both in the rural and in the urban areas, have varied conceptions of sexual relationships and multiple partnerships – including concurrent ones. Some types of these are socially approved while others are not. Those socially approved range from traditional to formal marriages registered with the government or religious institutions. The marriages may be monogamous or polygamous. Thus, the commonly cited sexual partnership between a man and a woman was marriage, generically referred to as banja (singular) or mabanja (plural) in the Chichewa language of the central and southern districts or nthengwa (singular) and zinthengwa (plural) in the Chitumbuka and other languages of the northern districts.

In the central and southern districts marriages may also be referred to as ukwati, from the root word kukwata, literally meaning “friction”, deriving from the “friction” element in sexual acts inherent in a marital relationship. In this, chikwati is a sexual relationship of a marital nature, while mabanja or nthengwa is more of a social relationship of a marital nature. Ukwati may also refer to, or be used for, a wedding – the formal or traditional event uniting a couple in matrimony, on one hand, and the families of the couple, on the other. Banja is also coterminal with family or household. Used in this way, banja or nthengwa may refer to the various types of platonic relationships that would include nuclear family relationships in which mother, father and children care for each, as well as extended family relationships, such as those between cousins, grown-up siblings, mothers and grown-up children and also relationships where individuals help other families and neighbors. This seems to be the case in many other parts of southern and eastern Africa.11

11See Desert Soul, 2008, Multiple and Concurrent Sexual Partnerships in Namibia: A Target Audience Research Report September, 2008 and D. Rweyemamu and M. Fuglesang, Multiple and Concurrent Sexual
2.1 Common forms of sexual relations

In addition to the socially approved sexual partnerships, respondents to this study mentioned a variety of forms of sexual relationships that are either clandestine or condoned in society. Such relationships include casual sex between individuals of opposite sex that may or may not know each other; intergenerational sexual relationships of a temporary or more permanent nature; transactional sex of a temporary or more permanent nature; cohabitation; and prostitution. Sex with prostitutes often takes place between a woman selling sex and a man buying it in a transaction between people who may not know each other at all.

This study identified not less than eight types of sexual relationships in the study districts, based on their nature and the degrees of interaction between those engaged in them:

(a) **Chikwati and banja** in Chichewa and **nthengwa** in Chitumbuka is a formal or informal marriage, be it monogamous or polygamous. Marital relationships vary from those entered into following traditional procedures where lobola, bridewealth, is paid as in the northern districts, or where chinkhoswe is conducted, as is the case in the central and southern districts, to those formally registered at a religious institution or relevant government office such as the traditional court, office of the District Commissioner and Registrar General. According to the female adolescents at Kavukula in Mzimba, northern Malawi:

> An ideal type of nthengwa (marriage) is whereby a young man and a young woman meet… they like each other and they fall in love. The young man then goes to the woman’s parents asking for marriage, they agree and he pays lobola, after paying lobola they wed… this kind of marriage is known to both sides. However, some times it happens that after meeting and falling in love they just elope. This is called chisomphola or kusompholan. The formalities of marriage are done later… In this case the man may be required to pay “damages” or fine to the woman’s parents because they would say: wamubudiska mwana withu – you have made our daughter commit a wrong. [Extracts from a Group Discussion with adolescents, Kavukula, Mzimba].

The Mzimba female adolescents distinguished this type of marriage from a situation where: it happens that you meet a man [and] he says “be my friend” and you fall in love…you do not show each other to your respective parents or relatives…in the end you just meet secretly, sometimes in vivwati (literally meaning bushes, figuratively meaning secret places) or resthouses. This type of

---

Partnerships among youth in Tanzania. A Research study commissioned by Femina HIP in preparation for a Regional Youth MCP Campaign, May.

---

12 Chinkhoswe is a traditional consummation of marriage witnessed by “guardians” or “counsellors”, ankhoswe, of the marrying couple. It is like a traditional wedding. The appointed ankhoswe on the two sides act as the marriage counsellors and guardians of for the entire life span of that marriage. They settle marital and other disputes in the marriage and assist in various forms of social counseling.
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

Partnership is called chibwenzi (casual friendship) or chigololo (promiscuity or adultery). These are sexual partnerships that occur because you are not married or because you are failing to find a person to marry....

In Malawi, ideally, all marriages are both social and sexual relationships, unless there is something specific that stops such relationships to occur. In fact, it is a traditional and cultural expectation for sex to take place in a marital relationship. Sexual deprivation in a marital context is a justifiable cause for divorce, even by the laws of the country.

A married person, either male or female, may have a regular or irregular extra-marital sexual relationship with a former lover, depending on how often they see and interact with each other. The results of the study show that this is quite common among married people of both sexes. The respondents often referred to a Chichewa proverb: madzi saiwala m’khawawa – rain water does not forget the rivulets or galleys, meaning that previous experiences are hard to forget - or “they are simply unforgettable”. In Kasungu, a middle-aged man emotionally recounted his meeting with a former girlfriend after ten years of separation:

I had a girlfriend whom I was intending to marry...before I married her she was married to another man and travelled with him to South Africa.... She told me that she would be married to someone who would take her to South Africa. She asked me that though things were that way, I should not get married so I said how possible? When the girl was going, she came home to say bye.... I found another girl to marry. It took us ten years without writing or phoning each other. So I was married with one child and was doing my normal business in the grocery shop. She came after ten years and asked of me in town if am around and was given directions. Then she came to my grocery shop and bought a bottle of coca cola then in my heart I said is this not the woman, is she still around? So after drinking her drink she wanted to pay and I refused to receive her money because she is a married woman. On the second trip she came with her relatives and asked me if I could escort her to town (Kasungu). I said no you are a married woman. She told me that she came by herself and the husband is in South Africa. She told me again that she had a gift for me. She gave me a good cellphone. She went and built a house in Mchinji. So we were communicating when she is coming to Kasungu. So she would come and we would meet in town and I would escort her back. The relationship is still there because it was like somebody robbed her from me.... Meanwhile she is staying in Mchinji [while in Malawi] and South Africa. So she calls me and we talk when she is in Mchinji or South Africa. When she calls, I talk to her. My wife does not know to whom I am talking. The relationship is still on.... [Extract from an individual interview with a man who engages in MCP, Kasungu]

The madzi saiwala m’khawawa types of sexual relationships tend to be commonest with a first time lover, and, for women, particularly with a male who “broke” their virginity, amene anaswa mphanje, meaning the “one who cleared the virgin forest” or “one who prepared the virgin land”. In Mchinji, an informant who has more than one sexual partner reported that:
multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in malawi

...at the moment, now, I have only one wife, but I used to have another girlfriend in the past but this is not the woman I was supposed to marry, that one is now doing business at Kasiya [in Lilongwe]... she was my first girlfriend and sometimes we meet and still remember the past.[Do you mean you still have sex with her when you meet?]. Yes, we do. Our friendship has not completely ended though I am now married. As I said, she was my first girlfriend. [extract from an individual interview with a man who engages in MCP, Nkhwazi Village, T/A Mavwere, Mchinji]

This suggests that Malawian men and women have special emotional attachment to their “virginity”, which makes their sexual debut almost a ritual. Thus, the respondents talked of the madzi saiwa la m’khwawa type of sexual relations as if they were ritualistic in nature. These often occur between married males and females who were emotionally very involved with their former lovers before they got married to other people.

The above account suggests that having a stable banja or chikwati, marital relationship, does not necessarily guarantee non-engagement in concurrent sexual relationships. In fact, MCP may fit into a context of marriage and other stable socio-sexual relationships. The account also suggests that weaker patterns of marriage and instability of socio-sexual relationships may not necessarily underlie the greater frequency of MCP. This was confirmed by the views expressed in the focus group discussions in the three study district:

Well, everybody does it... we all do it... even these married people here. No one can deny that they have not done it at one point or another..., Just because one is married for a long time does not mean that they will not have another affair with another woman. [extract from a focus group discussion with adult males, Msanama, Machinga].

It is not only married men or married women, both married men and married women sometimes have other love affairs outside marriage...Married men go to unmarried and other married women....Unmarried men have unmarried women, married women have relationships with unmarried and married men... [extract from a focus group discussion with adult females, Chileka, Blantyre].

(b) Kutomela, is courtship or betrothal prior to marriage, which may be recognized by kin on the sides of both the male and female partners. In kutomerana or chitomelo, a young man proposes marriage to a young woman and they visit the parents or relatives on both sides ... the young man tells the parents or relatives on both sides that he wants to marry the young woman but she should continue with her education for those who are on school, or for those who are still young, that she should grow up first, and reach the age when she can marry. The two sides agree and they know that their children will one day marry each other. [extract from a focus group discussion with adult women, Machinjiri, T/A Machinjiri, Blantyre]. Chitomelo is one of those relationships that used to be acceptable in those days.... It is less common these days because young people make their own choices... Parents would agree that their children would marry each other and that would really happen the way they agreed.... The parents and the family members would guide their children and assist them to behave and conduct themselves well knowing that they were committed to each other.... [extract
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

from interview with a woman who does not engage in MCP, Mpinda Village, T/A Machinjiri, Blantyre.

Such a relationship may involve sexual interactions between the courting couple, especially if formalities of marriage are in process or are completed. Much as there are always possibilities and risks of such a relationship collapsing before the actual marriage, sexual exchanges between the parties may be condoned though rather advisedly. According to the adult female informants in Bangwe, Blantyre, the couples in courtship amakhala kuti akumana kale (will already have had sex) by the time they let their relationship known to their parents and relatives. Sometimes in chibwenzi chotomerana the girl may even sleep where the man lives for several times [Extract from a Focus Group Discussion with adult women, Bangwe, Blantyre]

(c) Kulowana or banja longolowana is cohabitation. Sometimes it is given the term banja la mseli, a side or secret marriage or banja la ling’ono, “junior” or “small” family as in co-wife in a polygamous situation. This type of sexual relationship was reported more in the urban than in the rural areas, though it does exist in the rural areas as well. It is more permanent than chibwenzi as described below. It is more of an “informal” marriage known by community members. In most cases, it is just a way of hedging the full commitment and obligations associated with a formal marriage. For some people who may be already married to another partner, banja longolowana is just “informal” polygamy. This is common in the urban settings. Many men resort to it as a way of avoiding formalized polygamous relationships. That way they can cushion themselves against legal or/religious accusations. However, in Section 22 of the Republic of Malawi Constitution, marriages by repute and marriages by permanent cohabitation, just like any customary marriage, are recognized and entitled to protection by society and the state.

Mabanja ongolowana, may be temporary, lasting for just a few months, or permanent, lasting for years, and may involve having children together. The types of values that govern such relationships vary from where one of the partners is married to the situation where both the partners are single, in the formal sense. Kulowana or Mabanja ongolowana does not guarantee monogamous relationships. In fact, most men in this type of relationships are formally married to other partners.

(d) Chibwenzi: is a more generic term for a “love affair” deriving from the term bwenzi meaning “friend”. Chibwenzi is thus a term that expresses love and affection between individuals. As a sexual relationship chibwenzi is meant to express the emotional sides of love and friendship. It is therefore common in Malawian social discourse to refer to those in this type of relationship as okondana, loving each other – deriving from the Chichewa root word konda, “to love”; or bakutemwana in Tumbuka in the northern districts – deriving from the root word temwa “to love”. Lovers may therefore refer to each other as wachikondi
wanga or wachitemwa wane, meaning sweetheart or darling. Wachikondi or wachitemwa, is the best loved and favored person.

(e) **Transactional sexual relationships:** where sexual favours are exchanged with material and/or non-material favours and items, but in an imbalanced power relationship that often favours the male side. Swidler and Watkins (2006) argue that transactional sex differs from other commercial and casual sexual relationships in the sense that it combined sexual relations of mutual affection with overt economic exchange.\(^{13}\) It may be in the form of long-term non- or extramarital partnerships or simply short term relationships (Hunter, 2005). Those who engage in transactional sexual relationships do not understand themselves as commercial sex workers or prostitutes. Society too does not perceive them as such.

Although transactional sex involves material exchange, the exchange is not negotiated for but expected in order not to deride the sexual partner. It is simply taken for granted as a social contract that because of one’s status in a relationship, he/she must act as expected. For instance, males are expected to provide material things such as gifts and prizes while females are expected to show love and offer sex. Each party does so in order to fulfil social expectations of interactions.\(^{14}\) In transactional sexual relationships both parties reciprocate at different time and space, and neither party puts conditions to the other before sexual intercourse takes place. In some instances the partners may have sex several times before the exchange of material items and other favors takes place. Much as there are benefits to both sides, it is the imbalance in social and economic power that holds the transactional sexual relationships together.

The findings of this study show that in Malawi transactional sexual relationships do not have specific terms, but would often be referred to as chibwenzi cha mseli, secret love affair, chiwerewere, promiscuity, or chisembwere, meaning having loose moral or sexual behavior.

(f) **Casual sex** in short time or one-off relationships where sexual intercourse is paid for by the man. These could be regular or irregular, and often do not carry any other obligations on both sides apart from the payment after the act. This is not necessarily prostitution, which has professional and entrepreneurship connotations. It is simply sexual consumerism. There are no specific terms for it, but generically referred to as uhule as discussed in the sections below. The urban youth of Bangwe humorously referred to this type of sexual relationship as

---

\(^{13}\) D. Rweyemamu and M. Fuglesang, Multiple and Concurrent Sexual Partnerships among youth in Tanzania. A Research study commissioned by Femina HIP in preparation for a Regional Youth MCP Campaign, May.

\(^{14}\) This statement is from D. Rweyemamu and M. Fuglesang, Multiple and Concurrent Sexual Partnerships among youth in Tanzania. A Research study commissioned by Femina HIP in preparation for a Regional Youth MCP Campaign, May.
A man can meet a woman and the two like each other and converse warmly and the woman invites the man to visit anytime, what is to stop them from meeting again… What will likely happen is that when this man returns to his home and reflects on how the day went when he met the charming woman, his emotions may not be at peace. So he will want to visit again to re-live the experience…[Extract from a Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Chatoloma, Kasungu].

Casual sexual relationships can occur without any payment. A man and a woman meet for the first time and agree to have sex, and that is the end of their relationship. No strings attached and no intention to continue the relationship. Often such sexual encounters are simply for emotional relief, entertainment, and pleasure, and are not uncommon:

Extract from an individual interview with an adult man who has multiple sexual partners, Ngumbe, Blantyre.

**Uhule**, strictly meaning **prostitution**: professional and entrepreneurial sexual transaction, done as a business but sometimes carrying social obligations. However, the term **hule** may apply to a person who freely and frequently changes sexual partners or one who engages in multiple sexual partnerships even if such a person is not necessarily a prostitute:

When a woman has many partners, she is called a **hule**….Sometimes she is just called a **tikwere na wo** (a “will take a ride with you”)…when you want her you just go ahead, you do not have to propose for sex to her … you just obtain it, when a **hule** passes by you just say ‘eh sister stop and … the rest is a foregone story…. [Extract from a Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Ngumbe, Blantyre].

A **hule** can also be a man… who sleeps with women anyhow, whether he is married or not. He is a male **hule**. If a person has many sexual partners whether male or female, he or she is
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

called a hule. So hule lanalume for a man and hule lanakazi for a woman....[Extract from a Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Zubayumo Makamo, Mzimba].

Any man who is not satisfied with one woman is a hule. He goes sees that one and then goes sees another one...you start wondering: will he ever ‘finish’ all the women in the world?...he is just hule wa mwamuna (male hule)....[Extract from a Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Machinjiri, Blantyre].

Uhule is therefore just any form of sexual misconduct or promiscuity which applies to both men and women. In this study, male respondents talked of female mahule just like the female respondents talked of the male mahule.

In the extreme form, or where it is done for commercial purposes, uhule is prostitution. There are varied types and degrees of this, ranging from informal to formal, part-time to full-time prostitution, which may have different terms in different localities and contexts. In a recent study of prostitution in Bangwe Township of Blantyre, one of the sites for the present study, Theana Msolomba, 2009, observed that prostitution has changed over time in place, practice, and perceptions – moving away from bars and bottle-stores to private homes, unregistered brothels and the streets; and becoming a fully-fledged commercial activity. What is more, the activities of the prostitutes have become more sophisticated, enterprising and market determined. The Bangwe prostitutes range from those that operate from behind drinking joints – bars and bottle-stores; to those that operate from along the streets at night; those from informal brothels; those that rent guestrooms in resthouses and motels; to those that rent properties from which they operate. Some pose as college students, as secretaries and other office employees, and as business women, while others retain their “normal” prostitute identity.

(h) Ritualistic sexual practices: In some cultures, there are certain ritualistic sexual practices that may result in temporary sexual relationships. Among the Yao of Machinga district in the southern part of the country, sexual practices such as kusasa fumbi, dusting off, and fisì, literally meaning hyena, though not so common and possibly dying off, are actually practiced. Kusasa fumbi, is a sexual ritual that young girls who have just gone through chinamwali, puberty rite of passage, especially the nsondo rite of passage, the first puberty rite, may be subjected to. The young girls, often between 12 (or even 10) and 15 years, who have undergone the puberty rite, may be “encouraged” to have sexual debut

---


with a male older than her, to “clear the dust” or to “dust off”. The male adolescents in Liwonde, Machinga, observed that:

Especially in chinamwali here they normally encourage girls to go and have sex to show maturity. It is known as kusasa fumbi. Yeah, it’s really spoiling the girls [Does this initiation ceremony affect only girls?]. Both…even boys. After jando [circumcision for boys] the boys are encouraged to practice their “things” on girls, even older ones because the boys are told that they are now adults…Aaah see that? [one participant points to a group of initiates and their anamkungwi, initiation guardians, passing by)...as I was saying, you see that? They are now out. This night there is ‘nkondo’ (war, meaning sexual encounters). They have already arranged sexual partners for those young ladies, some age 8, 9 up to 14. Those people keep our culture…. [Extract from a Group Discussion with male adolescents, Liwonde, Machinga]

Adult female respondents in Chileka, Blantyre rural confirmed that some initiation ceremonies encourage girls to experiment with multiple sexual partners serially or concurrently:

...there are some initiation ceremonies that encourage having more than one sexual relationship. For example, chiputu encourages girls “kukhala wotengeka” (meaning morally loose or easily taken away). There [in chiputu initiation ceremony] they [the girls] are taught how to shake their waists (kudikula ziuno) so when they come out, they try out what they were taught. [Extract from a Group Discussion with adult females, Chileka, Blantyre]

In Bangwe, Blantyre urban, an adult woman who does not engage in multiple sexual partnerships confirmed that traditionally, initiation for girls includes instructions on sexual practices, but does not include encouragement of multiple sexual partnerships:

In Chinamwali we do not encourage girls to have more than one sexual partner but we give them advice to be careful with boys so as to avoid getting pregnant. If you get pregnant before you are initiated we say ‘waphwanya lamulo waluwana amfumu’ (it is abomination to the elders). What is needed for a girl is to get initiated first before getting pregnant. After the initiation ceremony we tell them ‘kuti akachotse fumbi’ (to shake off the dust or to dust off) but we tell them that they should do that ‘ndi wochotsedwa fumbi nzawo’ (with one who is also initiated and has ‘dusted off’) and not just with any other man anyhow…It has to be one who is also initiated…[Extract from an individual direct interviews with an adult females who does not engage in MCP, Bangwe, Blantyre]

Fisi (hyena) is a secret male sexual performer who goes into the girls’ lodging places to do the ritual or one who, by arrangement or hire, goes into a home of a barren man to impregnate the wife. Such practices may result in informal or temporary sexual relationships.

However, there were some views from adult female respondents that suggest that such ritualistic practices may not necessarily be sanctioned by culture as such; or that
with time the cultural dimensions of such practices have changed. An adult woman in Machinjiri, Blantyre, denied that the Yao or Mang’anja culture in the area sanctioned such practices:

*I do not know about such practices. Our culture does not allow young girls to have sex with older men, not even boys of their ages till they are ready for marriage. In fact, our culture teaches girls to be “careful” of men.* [Extract from interview with a woman who does not engage in MCP, Mpinda Village, T/A Machinjiri, Blantyre].

A similar view was expressed by another adult woman in Liwonde, Machinga, who does not engage in multiple sexual partnerships: *I have never heard about that. During initiation ceremony it is not advised that girls or boys should have more than one sexual partner or *kusasa fumbi*. People only have misconceptions about initiation ceremonies.* [Extract from interview with a woman who does not engage in MCP, Liwonde, Machinga].

What was noticeable about the contrary views on ritualistic sexual practices is that they were expressed by adult women who also claimed that they did not engage in multiple sexual partnerships - and they were Christians. Their religious beliefs may have influenced their responses. It could also be the case that given that such practices are ritualistic they are supposed to be secret and confidential and therefore not to be revealed to those who do not subscribe to the culture in which they are practiced. The adult or elderly women, given that they are custodians of culture by virtue of their age, may want to preserve the secrecy. Such women could also be beneficiaries of such practices through their control over the girls. However, there could also be a genuine move towards change given the exposure to the anti-AIDS awareness campaigns. Dangerous sexual practices of the *kusasa fumbi* type could indeed be declining. The possibility of deliberately concealing the truth about such practices for fear of repercussions in the face of the anti-AIDS campaign could also be real. In Kasungu, a group of adult men observed that indeed some of the old cultural practices may be dying:

*A lot of practices like that of the fisu (the hyena) are no longer being practiced these days. The village headmen are the ones that have been influential in helping abolishing such practices. These days a lot of people are religious.* [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Chikunyu, Kasungu].

### 2.2 Community conceptions and understandings of sexual relations

There are some specific community definitions, conceptions and understandings of the sexual relationships and partnerships outlined above. Some of them are given descriptive terms that denote the social and behavioral categorizations of those engaged in them, while others display the communities’ cultural, religious and moralistic orientations.
2.2.1 Cultural and religious conceptions
In all the study districts, informants agreed that culture plays a part in MCP. However, there were some minor variations in this. A good example here is the way people in which mitala or chiwiri, polygamous was viewed. While there was a general agreement between cultures and across gender and age groups that mitala is a form of MCP, there were differences in the cultural conceptions of the practice. Among the Ngoni and Tumbuka of Mzimba in northern Malawi, as well as those of northern Kasungu, it was more acceptable for a man to have more than one wife than for him to have several secret sexual partners he is not married to. The reasons being that polygamous marriages are socially and culturally recognized, the children born in them are legitimate, and the co-wives are recognized and respected as married women. The polygamous marriages thus do not bring shame to those engaged in them unlike the other forms of multiple sexual partnerships:

There is a difference because in polygamy a man marries a first wife, then marries a second wife, the wives are known that they are wives of the man. Whilst these other sexual relationships are done secretly, they are known by yourselves only, that’s the difference I see. In polygamy the wives are known to people whilst the other relationships are done secretly so that people should not know and if people know about the relationship it is shameful. Polygamy is marriage, people are married, the other sexual relationship are done in secret where they plan where to meet for example in a resthouses where they can hide without people seeing them… it should be known to the two only…. Polygamy is also acceptable because it is a man’s will to marry more than one wife. [Extract from an interview with an adult male who used to have multiple sexual partners but stopped, Zubayumo Makamo, Mzimba].

There are no similarities between polygamy and other forms of sexual relationships…. If a man has a child with a secret sexual partner that child will not be ‘known’ (meaning recognized) because the relationship is done in secret while in polygamy if the man has children with his co-wives, all the people will know that those children have a father. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Mukumbwa Chikunyu, Kasungu].

Among the Chewa of Mchinji, as well as Kasungu, polygamy, though practiced, is not much of a cultural norm. They regarded it as an import from other cultures:

The issue here is that in this community, we are mixed ...with a diversity of people from different tribes and beliefs. For instance, we have the N’goni tribe, which practices polygamy; then a different tribe, the Chewa, that is against polygamy. In addition, there are different churches with different teachings on marriages - some churches embracing polygamy, whilst other not. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Kasungu rural].

Polygamy is foreign here...it came with other ‘tribes’ such as the Ngoni and Tumbuka...[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Mzangawo, T/A Nyoka, Mchinji].
If a man is practicing polygamy it means he has two wives and if those wives are staying in peace, people then say that is polygamy [What if the woman has more than one sexual relationship, what do you call that practice?]. It is still polygamy... [What are the differences between polygamy and other relationships that you have mentioned?]... There is a difference since in other relationships one man has one sexual relationship while in polygamy a man has two wives. [What are the similarities between polygamy and other relationships]... The similarity is that both of them are families so there is no big difference. [What about other sexual relationships, how do they differ with polygamy]. Indeed they differ because polygamy is a family while in the other relationships the man or the woman goes out with different sexual relationships. [Which of the relationships that you have just described do people in this community accept for a man to engage in?]. The relationship that people in this community consider acceptable for a man to engage in is that in which the man has only one sexual partner... [Extract from an individual interview with a woman who engages in MCP, Mchinji urban].

The reason is that in Chewa matrilineal culture, which is also the same as the southern Yao culture, a man lives in his wife’s village in a system called chikamwini – uxorilocal residence upon marriage. It is therefore difficult for a man to have several wives, otherwise would be commuting between the villages of his wives. However, some men do it. The same applies to the Yao, Mang’anja and Lomwe of the southern districts, much as some men enter into polygamous marriages, it is regarded as a ‘foreign’ practice:

Here mitala sitimayiona bwino chifukwa ndi khalidwe la anthu obwera nchifukwa chake tiyitcha uhule, meaning ‘we regard polygamy as a practice brought in by ‘foreigners’ that is why we call it uhule (prostitution). Here the original culture is that of the Yao we do not condone mitala...so because of foreigners who come to work here our culture ukusungunuka [is being diluted]... Some people came from Thyolo and Mulanje where they encourage ‘kungomenya’ koma osati mitala [just ‘hitting’ - meaning having multiple casual sexual partnerships but not permanent polygamous marriages]. Right now mitala is very common and ‘moopsa muja’ [and terribly so!] The commonest polygamy is that in which a man has a wife and more extra-marital sexual partners somewhere. [Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Machiniri, Blantyre]

In the Tumbuka patrilineal culture, a woman lives in his husband’s village upon marriage. Thus it is easy for men to have several wives in their villages. The implication therefore is that while polygamy is culturally acceptable among the Tumbuka and northern Ngoni, informal multiple sexual partnerships are relatively more acceptable among the central Chewa and southern Yao. This, however, does not mean that the northern Tumbuka do not practice MCP. Rather it shows that the cultural conceptions of MCP between the two cultures are different if taken from the point of view of its connections with marriage and extra-marital relations. It means that the types of MCP vary by region and culture. A combination of polygamy and extramarital affairs are common among the people of the northern ethnic-groups, while a combination of serial monogamy characterized by frequent short-lived marriages
that do not necessarily overlap and multiple extra-marital affairs are common among
the Chewa and Yao of the central and southern regions, respectively.

In some parts of the southern region, there is also a religious factor to this. For example, in the Islamic communities of Machinga and the neighboring districts, polygamy is accepted by religion – as long as the man has the material capability to support more than one wife and is in a position to love them equally. Thus, it is common for men to have several wives. At the same time MCP in the form of extra-marital relations does not carry heavy social sanctions. The combination of religion and culture therefore enforces the two forms of MCP: polygamy and multiple extra-marital affairs.

Among both the Ngoni and Tumbuka, polygamy is traditionally for the purposes of enlarging the social units – nuclear and extended families. More wives mean more children and hence a larger lineage. A larger lineage means more people, more labour and more wealth, especially in the form of cattle. It also means more children and grandchildren to support their ageing parents and grandparents.

The cultural beliefs enforce the view that it is acceptable for a man to have more than one sexual partner. In both rural and urban communities in Mchinji, Blantyre and Machinga, participants constantly used the statement mwamuna amanyenga, mkazi amanyengedwa – “the man is the sexual ‘initiator’ (also same meaning as ‘aggressor’) while the woman is the ‘consenting party’ (also same meaning as ‘recipient’), suggesting that it is acceptable for the man to have more sexual partners, but rather unacceptable for him to force sex on a woman. It also means that without the man taking the initiative, the woman will not have anything to consent to. It therefore follows that for as long as a man takes the initiative to propose sex to several women, the chances and possibilities are that he will have several of the women consenting to his proposals. After all, those women do not know where else the man has been to, and who else he has proposed sex to. The phrase mwamuna ndi onyenga, mkazi ndi onyengedwa, constantly used by the female respondents in this study, means the man takes the initiative while the woman responds to it, and was used to show the vulnerable position women fall in, in relation to the men who engage in MCP.

The men of Ngumbe, Blantyre rural, noted something wrong with the conception of men as onyenga and women as onyengedwa because, due to this:

…men become more powerful than women and should the men do something wrong it is taken as normal… as if that is the way things should be. Because of this [mis]understanding the men give themselves a lot of power… It is the old traditional [mis]understanding, the old practice of our ancestors…it just continues…because of it, men just give themselves a lot of power. The man becomes more powerful than a woman. A man can beat up a woman, have other sexual partners (kumanyenga) because he is like ‘head of state’ in the house…[Extract from a Focus Group Discussion with adult men, Ngumbe, Blantyre].
2.2.2 Social conceptions and categorizations

The field data suggests that *chikwati*, *banja* or *nthengwa* (marriage) whether formal or informal, monogamous or polygamous, is conceived and categorized as the natural and fundamental group unit of society, sanctioned by culture, tradition, law and religion. Sexual relations in this are part of the social norms and values protected by tradition, culture, law and religion. Society therefore expects that those in a relationship of *chikwati*, *banja* or *nthengwa* (marital relations) will engage in sexual activities, whether they are in love or not. Thus, in *chikwati*, *banja* or *nthengwa* sex is not necessarily just an expression of love and affection between the couple. It is a social obligation owed to society and to each other. The couple will have sex even if they do not love each other because marriage is a social relationship that is the genesis of kinship:

*An acceptable sexual relationship is the one that all people know... that is marriage... It is acceptable because it is not just a relationship between a couple, man and woman. It is the foundation of *ubale* ('kinship'). It starts with a man who finds a woman of interest to him... he then finds out the character and behaviour of the woman if he wants her. Then he goes to her parents and relatives. If they accept, the two people can then go ahead and get married.... That way, there is *ubale* ('kinship') between the man and the woman, and between the man’s folks and the woman’s folks. This kind of relationship is accepted, so the two can do whatever is accepted in marriage and nobody will question it. It is expected that they will have sex and will have children.... In fact, if the man cannot sleep with his woman or the woman cannot sleep with her man in this relationship, then they are not living up to the expectations of society... It would be abnormal... It is not acceptable... What matters in this case is that there is *ubale*, which means that other members (representatives, guardians) from either the male or female side can intervene if the couple deny each other sex and one of them complains to them...After all they are expected to bear children... In fact, this relationship is known by everybody, parents know about it, the chief also knows about it and even the community at large. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Robert Village, T/A Mphinda, Mchinji].

Such community expectations often lead to situations that pity the female members in marital relations given that they are the ones expected to conceive and bear children.

In marital relationships that start with *kutomelana* (courtship) sex before marriage may be condoned, though not necessarily allowed. The idea is to encourage intimacy and sexual familiarity in the couple, though rather advisedly. It is also condoned because there is a general realization that strict controls over a couple in a relation of *kutomelana* would be rather ineffective because of the growing freedoms in young people:

*In the past, if strict advice was followed, there was no way the two people could have sex. Only when they finally got married that’s when they started having sex. It is different nowadays...they have sex even before they get married... In fact, these days it is common for the young people to have sex before marriage...[Why is that the case?] ... It is so because “amangoti tilawe mchele m’ndiwo” – they would want to taste the salt in the ‘relish’, meaning to ‘sexually experience each other’. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Robert Village, T/A Mphinda, Mchinji].

20
However, they may still be advised not to overdo it for fear they would lose interest in each other if they get too used to each other.

Contrasted with marital sexual relationships, including those associated with courtship, are the sexual relationships associated with chibwenzi (friendship). The conceptions of chibwenzi are quite varied. Among the younger people, there are three conceptions of chibwenzi: first, as pleasure and leisure – so they can do it with anyone else as if it were a game in sports. For this reason they distinguish between chibwenzi chongoyenderana or chongochezerana, leisurely friendship or love affair from chibwenzi chotomelara, which means courtship. Chibwenzi chongoyenderana or chongochezerana is therefore more prone to multiple and concurrent sexual relationships than chibwenzi chotomelana because it is just leisure and pleasure. In this case sex is just entertainment or may be linked to, and or combined with material exchanges:

These days you may find that a woman has four or five boyfriends. She does that so that the boyfriends should be bringing things to her. There are some sexual relationships that are just seasonal relationships (mwakanyengo), for example, during initiation ceremony festivities like jando (boys’ circumcision), young women go for men who are not from either community, just for the fun because it is a festive period. So they stay in a relationship until the end of the season. Other relationships are called ‘project relationships’. For example, when a road is being constructed, women go for the men involved in the construction project and when the project ends the relationships also end. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Chileka, Blantyre].

Among the youth here there are no specific terms used to define sexual relationships that exist. The youth use the common local language word chibwenzi to refer to a relationship. They may differentiate chibwenzi chogonana (a sexual relationship) from just chibwenzi (friendship that occurs among equals or peers). These relationships exist as short term or long term relationships. The short term relationships are specifically of a sexual mature for a short period, while the long term ones [chibwenzi chotomelana] may or may not lead to marriage.

…the youth often use ‘joking’ or ‘secret-coded’ terms to refer to casual sexual relationships. They may use terms lie ‘take away’ or a ‘stand-by’ to refer to their sexual partners….One may say: “I am going to the garage to service my car or I am going to the garage for an oil change” to mean he/she is going to have sex with a secret partner…. ‘I have bought a new car,’ means ‘I have got a new girlfriend’. It is just because the youth want to keep such relationships concealed from the eyes and ears of many people, especially the adults… since sexual relationships are secret and concealed from the public hence the use of such funny and sometimes weird terms… Sometimes even very close relatives may not be aware of the sexual activities that occur between the individuals involved. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with male adolescents, Kasungu].

…the common relationships that take place here are mostly those that involve sexual intercourse. People propose to each other and have sex and then ‘basi amamvana kukoma’ they feel good/sweet about it… kumvana bwino (having a nice feeling of each other… that is the kind of relationship that is on ‘high demand’, nanga si amamvana bwino… amapatsana
feeling ya boo!, because they give each other nice sweet feelings. [Extract from individual interview with an adolescent male who engages in multiple sexual relationships, Chileka, Blantyre].

It is therefore common among the younger people, sometimes even among the adults, to refer to chibwenzi chongoyenderana or chongochezera (casual sexual relationship) as kuyenda ndi ...(name of person), meaning “going out with so and so”, or kunyengan ndi ...(name of person), which means “fooling around with so and so”, or kucheza ndi ...(name of person) literally meaning “chatting” with someone. The word kunyengesa has a negative connotation because it denotes “fooling” or “stupefying” someone. Chibwenzi chongoyenderana or chongochezera therefore borders on fooling and stupefying each other, and denotes lack of seriousness. Often such terms are used rather loosely but carry very powerful messages and meanings.

The third conception of chibwenzi is that of a transactional relationship in which emotional and material goods and services are exchanged, including the exchange of sex. In this case, sex may be commoditized and becomes an item for exchange just like any other material item. It may also be exchanged as an expression of real and true effetion between individuals of opposite sex who are not married:

Sometimes chibwenzi is just chibwenzi chothandizana wina ndi mzake, a relationship of ‘reciprocal assistance’ between a man and a woman...who chat with each other, enjoy each other’s company, assist each other in many ways, but kwinako amapanga zolaula, literally meaning they also do ‘abominable’ things – the term is used rather lightly to refer to sexual exchanges. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Ngumbe, Blantyre].

Apart from banja, [family or marriage] there is also sexual relationship in which the man and the woman amangonyengana (have sex) then they accept the situation and finally they start loving each other ndi kumakhala malo amodzi (continue having sex)…Normally, they will first of all discuss their situation and when both of them are convinced that whatever they are doing is good for them and they will be helping each other...they assist each other in everything and they also sleep with each other…such relationships can even result in pregnancy and when people see it, they just ‘conclude’ [meaning accept] that those two people are in a sexual relationship. Even if the two are not married…. [Extract from individual interview with an adolescent female who engages in multiple sexual relationships, Mchinji].

2.2.3 Behavioral conceptions and categorizations
Transactional sexual relationships are often characterized by exchange imbalances and favor those with economic and social power. Not surprisingly, they are given numerous derogatory or humorous terms bordering on the behavior of those who engage in them. A good example of these is chidyamakanda – eater or consumer of infants, a transactional relationship between an elderly man and a younger woman, especially teenager; chidyankhalamba - eater or consumer of the elderly, a transactional relationship between an elderly woman and a younger man. The words chidyamakhanda and chidyankhalamba are combinations of chidya, ‘eater’ or ‘consumer’
from the Chichewa root word idya for eat and khanda for infant or nkhalamba, elderly person from the root word kalamba. Chidyamakanda and chidyankhalamba therefore imply taking advantage of, and swallowing up, a vulnerable person. These sexual relationships therefore have emic concepts of vulnerability, unfairness, taking advantage, and consumerism that are commonly understood by people in the local communities and society at large.

Younger respondents also had several concepts of transactional sexual relationships depending on the items or and services offered in a particular relationship. Terms like warenti, means a sexual relationship with a man who pays house rent; wamayuniti, with one who buys airtime for a cellphone, walifiti, one who provides a lift in his car; and many others. In this case, the sexual relationship is called after the services or items provided, usually by the man. The younger men would also refer to the younger females by their conduct in such relationships, the ease at which the females are found, or the places they are taken to. Nyambwalinyambali, “anything goes”, would be the younger woman who is readily available to men; lifiti for the one who likes to be given a ride, atikwere nawo, “the can we have a lift”, for those who request for lifts in men’s cars. In Mzimba, the research team came across the term manesi, “nurses”, to refer to any “loose” woman. The origin of the term is “nurses without borders” as in Medicins Sans Frontiers doctors without borders. This term implies provision of sexual services without limits. Similar to it is mthandizi, helper, a term given to both men and women who provide sexual services without limits. Shasha is ‘groovy’, may also mean ‘crook’ and refers to a man or woman who is good at enticing members of the opposite sex into sexual relationships.

2.3 Local conceptions of MCP

Similarly, the field data show varied conceptions of multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships, ranging from moralistic ones to the humorous ones.

2.3.1 Moralistic conceptions

The generic term for multiple sexual partnerships is chiwerewere, strictly means miscellaneous sexual life or sexual over-indulgence. It refers to multiple sexual relationships either of a serial or concurrent nature. In both cases engagement in multiple sexual relationships is conceived as socially repulsive and morally despicable because it is over-indulgence. This was a common understanding in all the study districts:

We do have men in the community who have two or more wives, yet they still engage in sexual relationships with other women who may also bear children for them. We call this chiwerewere. It is difficult to reason with such people. Even the village headmen and relatives may not intervene and advise the person who engages in many sexual relationships like that. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Mukumbwa Chikunyu, Kasungu].

23
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

There are other sexual relationships that involve a woman who is married and her husband does everything for her but because she is not satisfied with what she has, she leaves that person (the husband) at home and kunakapanga chisembwere kuseli – engaging in chisembwere in secret…. [Extract from individual interview with an adolescent male who engages in multiple sexual relationships, Chileka, Blantyre].

… culture does not encourage it, but because people do not get satisfied with what they have that is why they do all this. For instance a married man having more than one sexual partner and girls having more than one partner too….Sometimes it happens that a woman is married to man from a very respectable family and her husband does everything for her but still because of her behaviour she goes out with other men kuti apeze kakunsika [to ‘find this small thing at the bottom’ –refers to the male sexual organ- meaning to have sex with a man]… Zachiwerewere ndi zomwezo, that’s what chiwerewere is about [Extract from individual interview with an adult female who does not engage in multiple sexual relationships, Ntaja, Machinga].

We can say that wachisembwere is someone who likes going out with so many sexual partners, he is just used to promiscuity…or someone who is just adulterous we also call that one wachigololo…He is just used to it. He cannot just have one woman…he just likes to sleep with women… just changing them…. That is possible because he is a man who just likes sex (mwamuna okonda akazi) [also means womaniser] …and a woman who also loves money and just sleeps with men because of the money she wants to get from the men…is also wachiwerewere. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion adolescent males, Liwonde, Machinga].

Similar to chiwerewere is chisawawa, recklessness, literally meaning ‘whichever thing’ or ‘which ever way’. The term portrays MCP as social aberration or abnormality. A general term for sexual misbehavior is chigololo, used for adultery, fornication, multiple and concurrent sexual behavior, or any other socially unacceptable sexual relationship. It is an encompassing term for sexual relationships that society does not approve of.

2.3.2 Humorous terms and concepts

Various hilarious, witty and comical terms are given to those who engage in MCP. Common in this case were terms such as kudabulitsa “doubling” or “double decker”; tchazi (origin and meaning uncertain); spare wheel – implying an extra-marital relationship; radio 2, from Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) Radio 2, which is an entertainment radio station, pompo-pompo, meaning “just now, now” or “the same spot always” for a woman who likes to change men – “when one man is having sex with her, another one is waiting”. Wamchiuno, is a promiscuous man “who likes touching women’s waists” or because “he frequently wriggles his waist in sexual acts” since “sex is performed using the waist…the waist works a lot” [Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent males, Liwonde, Machinga].

.
These, and the other related terms, portray engagement in MCP as fun, witty and hilarious behavior. They show the burlesque, parody, and travesty sides of multiple and concurrent sexual relations.

We say it is kuthana-kuthana or pompo-pompo… Yes, it’s called kuthana-kuthana because it is done there and then, here and now and never again! It’s only that day, it does not happen again tomorrow. If it’s about money you pay the same day the same time and you separate. It does not continue as a relationship. You do it there and it’s done once and for all… you charge each other money for the service, the man just pays for the sex and its done, ehee! Mostly it happens between people who don’t know each other…even those who have seen each other for the first time, for example at the bar… Sometimes you do not even pay. You just agree and do it…

[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent males, Liwonde, Machinga].

This sports-kind of multiple sexual partnerships may be concurrent or serial. They are for fun, leisure and emotional relief.

The loose casual terms for multiple sexual relationships and the funny labels for those who engage in them are meant to “hide” or conceal the negative sides of such practices. It is also because such practices, with the exception of those of a marital nature, are done in secrecy. Using normal terms would therefore reveal the secrecy in the practices. On the negative side, the use of the casual terms and labels signifies a rather casual attitude towards some forms of non-marital sexual relationships, MCP and other high-risk behaviors.

2.3.3 Derogatory, abusive and demeaning labels

The data further show that some of the terms and labels attached to MCP are in fact derogatory, abusive and demeaning suggesting social disapproval of the sexual behaviors and practices associated with them. A woman with multiple sexual partners is sometimes labeled as palowa yina, literally meaning “another one will enter”, figuratively meaning “where all the penises enter”; wamoto, “hot” or “on heat” is a term given to any woman who engages in multiple sexual partnerships; a bicycle is a woman who is fast at getting men while wachisembwere and wachiwerewere is any loose woman or man. Kachiki, a “chick” is any loose young woman, especially teenager, while waselo, “one on sale” is any woman who engages in transactional sex or a prostitute, who also has a number of other descriptive behavior labels. Kathyali, crook, mpando wa minibus, minibus seat, chitsime cha aliyense, everybody’s water well, are some of the derogatory labels given to women who engage in MCP. Loose men are often referred to as wam’chiuno, “excessive fucker”. In full the term is wanjala ya m’chiuno, “one with hunger of the hips”, from the wriggling of the hips in the sexual act, nyambwalinyambwali, everything goes, dala, “old guy” or “tycoon”, are some of the derogatory terms given to men who engage in MCP.

2.3.4 Professional or occupational labels and concepts

Prostitution and prostitutes are given numerous professional or occupational terms. The commonest is balagelo, “bar girl”, a term that originates from the commonest type
of prostitutes in the country. Historically, the first form of institutionalized prostitution in Malawi emerged among female bar tenders, hence the reference to bar girls. A more general term for prostitution is *uhule*, and *hule* for prostitute. Much as this term is the same as *whore*, in the Malawi context it is more closely linked to the Afrikaans word *hoer* a common word for prostitute especially those women who followed migrant workers to the mines and estates in South Africa and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the later decades of the 19th century and the early parts of the 20th century. In Malawi, urban prostitutes were first observed and recorded in the townships of Blantyre, including Bangwe, one of the sites for this study, as early as 1907, suggesting that prostitution as a trade or profession is fairly old in the country. Thus, *waseło* and *hule* are terms that conceptualize prostitution and transactional sex as occupations or trades.

### 2.3.5 Concepts indicating fear and anxiety

Field notes show that there are certain words related to MCP that show societal anxiety and trouble in the mind. A typical one is *kwathu maliro kwamu maliro*, “death on your side death on my side”, to refer to any morally or sexually loose man or woman. The message in this term is that engaging in MCP brings death. A similar term is *mdula moyo*, “life shortener”, or an object that risks life, a label often applied to prostitutes or any woman engaging in multiple and concurrent sexual behaviors. Younger people had more humorous terms such as “*kuika moyo pa fast-forward*”, putting life in the fast forward mode or *kukwela yo banduka*, sometimes also *kukwela ya kumalembe* “riding on the fast one” or “riding on the one to the grave” – meaning social or sexual behaviors that will quickly take one to the grave. Among the Yao of Machinga there was frequent use of the term *jwachilwele* (singular) *wachilwele* (plural), diseased person(s) or the source of disease and death, referring to promiscuous women and men who go around sleeping with multiple partners. In this case, MCP is conceived as the source of disease, and possible death.

Engagement in MCP was viewed as a possible cause of death not only because of its connections with the potential for contraction of HIV, also because it was associated with the spread of other sexually transmitted diseases. The respondents cited diseases such as *chizonono* (syphilis), *chindoko* (gonorrhea), *chisunjje* (English equivalent unknown), various kinds of discharges from sexual organs, and *tsempho* or *mdulo* (equivalent of malnutrition or disease with signs of malnutrition). Culturally and historically, severe and/or frequent outbreaks of diseases such as typhoid, whooping

---


coughs, tuberculosis, even leprosy found their causal explanations in immorality in society – and often blamed on the promiscuity of women.

The multiplicity of the terms and labels attached to multiple sexual relationships and to those who engage in them demonstrate the power of language in the social discourse related to the subject. The account above suggests that the language used in the day to day social discussions on multiple sexual relationships gives rise to three conceptions: that such relationships are leisure and pleasure – just like any form of sports; that it is a risky behaviour; and that some forms of it are morally unacceptable while others are condoned.

2.4 Motivations and justifications for engaging in MCP

Regarding the motivations and justifications for engaging in MCP, the findings of this study are generally the same as those of similar studies done in eastern and southern Africa.\textsuperscript{19} For example, in Tanzania, Rweyemamu and Fuglesang\textsuperscript{20}, 2008, observed that the practices and motivations around youth indulgence in MCP shows that the factors leading to MCP vary by age (between those aged 15 to 20 and those aged 21 to 30 years); gender (male and female), social class (middle and low class), marital status (married and unmarried) and place of residence (rural and urban disparity); and can be summarized as: influence of sexual debut, mutual mistrust among sexual partners, desire for sexual gratification among unmarried and married youth, sexual lust for both men and women, cultural factors (sexual initiation, traditional dances and religious beliefs); and peer pressure. Other factors include desire for material things, sexual dissatisfaction in steady relationships and marriage aspirations among unmarried male and female youth. Other factors include partner separation for a long time, polygamy and influence of the visual media. Similarly, in Namibia\textsuperscript{21}, the major motivations and justifications for engagement in MCP include: culture, gender disparities, sexual dissatisfaction, material desires, poverty, need for financial support, physical distance between sexual partners, conceptions of manhood, alcohol abuse, peer pressure, and other auxiliary factors.

The evidence for this study show that the motivations and justifications for engaging in MCP can be grouped into three categories: those that relate to cultural and religious beliefs and practices; those related to interpersonal relationships; and those related to individual and personal preferences and choices.

\textsuperscript{19} L. Simbayi, 2009, “The challenges of MCP prevention in South Africa”, Presentation to a roundtable discussion on SEX, SOAPS and SENSATIONALISM: Multiple and Concurrent Partnerships in the Popular Media, Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS and Health (SAHA), Human Sciences Research Council, Cape Town, South Africa

\textsuperscript{20} D. Rweyemamu and M. Fuglesang, Multiple and Concurrent Sexual Partnerships among youth in Tanzania. A Research study commissioned by Femina HIP in preparation for a Regional Youth MCP Campaign, May.

2.4.1 Cultural practices and community institutions

Related to cultural practices, the informants cited polygamy as a traditional marital practice; religion –especially Islam and other Christian sects that permit polygamy; and puberty rites of passage that encourage experimentation with pre-marital sex.

(a) Polygamy as a traditional multiple partner marital practice

Polygamy, commonly known as *mitala*, meaning marrying more than one wife, is a cultural norm in most ethno-linguistic groups in Malawi, especially in the patrilineal communities of the northern districts such as among the Ngoni and Tumbuka of Mzimba, and particularly among people of the older generations who preferred. In all the study districts older informants tended to prefer *mitala* (polygamous marriages) to *zibwenzi* (casual sexual affairs) and *chisembwere* (miscellaneous sexual life) or *chiwerewere* (promiscuity):

Ordinarily, the marriage which is accepted is that of a man marrying one wife and staying with her at home. If he is not satisfied with the woman, he can marry another woman, although these days not many Tumbukas in our area are polygamist. It is not often that someone marries more than one wife but to have more than one wife is acceptable provided both wives are known to the families and the community and formalities for marriage are done for them. Polygamy is also acceptable because it is a man’s will to marry more than one wife and tradition allows it…. If a man is married and has another extra-marital sexual partner it is not acceptable, because they hide their relationship. It is only known to the two of them. Especially, and even worse, it is shameful for a married man to propose love to a school girl and to tell her not to tell any one, but only the two of them should know. If it is revealed, it is a shameful thing and usually the relationship will end there, the man is not happy because the relationship is known to people. This is not acceptable. [Extract from individual interview with an adult woman who does not engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships, Kavukula, Mzimba].

The reasons for preference for polygamous marriages to extra-marital relationships and other forms of multiple sexual partnerships were:

- In *mitala* marriage formalities are done for both or all the wives, which make such marriages recognized by custom:

  We do have polygamous marriages where a man will have two or three wives. There is another type of polygamous marriage called chokolo (wife inheritance) in which a widow is ’given’ to the brother of a deceased man for marriage. For all these there are acceptable procedures. Families know and the community knows. There are no secrets…. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult men, Kasungu rural].

- Both or all the wives in *mitala* know each/one another so there is no doubt or suspicion about who is who. This has the advantage that the wives are visited weekly, in turn, and they know where their husband is and when:
The difference is that in polygamy women know each other which is not the case in chibwenzi (extra marital sexual relationship) where everything is done in secret (amapanga za nseli], the wife does not know. In polygamy the women know that they have a husband and they stay at home .... This is a difference because the women know each other and they know that this week is for me and the other week is for my ‘friend’ [meaning co-wife]....[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Mchinji urban].

The difference is that polygamy is acceptable. All the people know. It’s possible for all the wives to be in one house but ‘odabulisa’ [extra-marital relationship] you do it in hiding. ....Mitala is publicly known and there are marriage formalities on both sides so the man goes to both homes, and everybody knows about it but ‘kudabulis’ [engaging in extra-marital relations] you do in secret....[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent males, Ngumbe, Blantyre].

Of course some men may use it as a cover and slip away to other extra-marital partners. But such a move would easily be known as the co-wives communicate with each other and exchange vital information about their families. Some times the co-wives even eat together and work together on domestic chores. Good husbands treat their wives equally. They will provide the same types and amounts of support to them. Bad ones do not. A good husband in a polygamous marriage is one who seeks the endorsement of his first wife to marry another wife, and one who promotes peace between the co-wives and encourages them to stay and work together, including supporting each other in raising their children and in other domestic chores:

So in polygamy the man asks the first wife if he can take a second wife. If the wife agrees then the man marries another wife and this is what is called polygamy. So polygamy is when a man marries two or three or more wives. If the man convinces both women to stay together and they agree, they may stay together in one compound...assist each other in domestic chores and help each other in raising their children.... assist each other in times of funerals, marriages of their children...and other functions. If he sees that there is no peace between them, he puts them in different compounds...they stay in different places, but he goes to both places. If they live in peace they stay in one house and they are given all the basic needs. If he sees that they do not live in peace is when he puts them in different places and he just visits them in turn. One week he sleeps in one place and another week in another place that is upon agreement with the wives...a good husband is one who will agree with his wives on how they will be visited and how they will be supported and he sticks to the agreements so that he does not favour one at the expense of another....[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Mchinji urban].

The above account suggests that in good mitala relationships, which may not be totally unusual, families share responsibilities in raising children, mobilizing labor for garden work and other chores, and support one another in times of crises such as funerals, and also in times of celebrations and festivities such as wedding ceremonies, which would not be the case in other types of multiple sexual relationships associated with zibwenzi and chisembwere or chiwerewere.
It is also important to note that **mitala** as a customary marital practice is legal in Malawi. Section 22 sub-sections 3, 4 and 5 recognize customary marriages, marriages by repute and those by cohabitation; and section 26 permits an individual to participate in the cultural life of his or her choice – which would include entering into a customary marriage as per the culture of the individual’s choice.

However, asked if there were any fundamental differences in the social and sexual relationships associated with **mitala** and those associated with **zibwenzi** (extra-marital relationships), **chisembwere** (promiscuity) or **chiwerewere** (miscellaneous sexual life), the older men and women, on one side, and the adolescent males and female on the other side differed in their responses. The older women and men were positive about the differences:

In **mitala** you are recognized… that is not the same as in the other types of **zibwenzi**… In **mitala** you have a claim on the man’s property and as well as his physical presence in the home, his responsibility as a father…It is an obligation that he comes home after he has stayed with his other wife(s)…. [Extract from a Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Mchinji urban].

In **mitala** you follow established rules of behavior…. You know what to do and what to expect from both your husband and your co-wife/wives….everybody knows how to conduct themselves…. It is not the same in **zibwenzi** wherein nobody is bound to respect social norms and acceptable behaviors…. [Extract from, a Focus Group Discussion with adult males Mzimba. Similar accounts from Kasungu north].

…**mitala** differs from other sexual relations in this way: when you are leaving for another wife you bid farewell to your first wife… she knows where you are going. Eee, you bid farewell to her. You say, this week I am going to do it with the other wife … and when you are going back to the first wife you also bid farewell to the younger wife saying I am going to do it to the other wife. When you have money you give it to both of them. When you leave the other wife without money because you don’t have it and it so happens that you manage to fetch some when you are at the other wife’s place, you make sure that you send some back to the wife you left behind. Yeah, that is now **mitala**. But without the senior wife’s knowledge whatever other sexual relations you have are just **zibwenzi**. [Extract from individual interview with a man who does not engage in multiple sexual relationships, Liwonde, Machinga].

The younger female and male respondents saw little or no difference at all:

The two are basically the same. What the man does in **mitala** is what he would also do in **chibwenzi**. He comes to you for a short period and then goes to another one. Some times he just leaves you not fully satisfied… His stay is short….It is as if he is not yours…. After all you are sharing a man just like in any other situation of **zibwenzi** (many sexual partners)…. As for the material support, men provide even much better support to **zibwenzi** (girlfriends) than they do to their wives in **mitala**…. [Extract from a Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Mchinji urban].
Polygamy and other forms of extra-marital sexual relationships are similar because whatever happens is the same... if they sleep on a bed in polygamy they also sleep on a bed in the other extra-marital affairs. If you sleep on the floor in polygamy you will also sleep on the floor in other sexual affairs is it any different? It is still sleeping with more than one person... same thing... whatever happens between man and woman in polygamy the same happens in other sexual relationships... if a man is a polygamist, he has two or more wives, just the same as having an extra sexual partner... it is just like going to another sexual partner. Polygamy is liked by men, but it is a practice that violates our rights. [Extract from a Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Kavukula, Mzimba].

There were also some differences between the younger and the older men. The former saw polygamy as expensive, inconveniencing, and inappropriate for the modern age while the latter saw it as a custom of the fore-fathers. To the older men polygamy ensures that the man has access to a woman at all times:

When you have problems with the first or second wife, you go to the other one. That way it also puts checks on the bad behaviors of wives... They become afraid that if they behave badly, they lose out... [Extract from a Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Zubayumo Makamo, Mzimba].

There may be similarities between mitala and the other multiple sexual relations and extra marital affairs. For example, you are married and you get another wife or you are married and you have an extra marital sexual partner outside marriage, what is the difference? The only difference is in the openness when running the affairs. In mitala you are open while in the other zibwenzi you hide it. In both scenarios you have ‘2 in 1’ where the 1 is yourself and the 2 are the women... [Extract from individual interview with a man who does not engage in multiple sexual relationships, Liwonde, Machinga].

(b) Religion and rites of passage as enforcing factors
Among the Muslims of Machinga, polygamy is enforced by religious beliefs in the sense that Islam permits men to marry more than one wife, provided they have enough material resources with which to support the wives, and can love them equally. It is important to note that Islam does not allow inequality in material support and amount of love given by the man to his wives in a polygamous relationship. Whether that is possible in real life is a different debate.

Puberty rites also foster multiple sexual partnerships in the cultures where they are practiced such as among the Yao of Machinga and parts of Blantyre. There are various types of zinamwali za atsikana (plural) or chinamwali cha atsikana (singular), meaning puberty rites for girls. The commonest is nsondo, for girls normally between 9 to 14 years of age; and samba or ndakula (which means ‘I have grown up’), and chiputu for teenage and adolescent girls, especially those that have experienced menstruation.

Adolescent puberty rites of samba or ndakula and chiputu carry messages that would be rated as “adult material” because the girls are taught what happens in marriages,
including issues related to sex, sexual satisfaction, pregnancy, delivery and child birth. When the adolescent girls go out of these rites they feel empowered to experiment with sex, including having it with several men concurrently. Informants in Machinga maintained that it is common for older members of society to encourage the girls who have gone through puberty rites of passage to experiment with sex:

"After initiation the girls are told that they are now grown up. They can do what adults do. That encourages them to experiment with sex, even to start contemplating about marriage…. Sometimes the girls are even encouraged to challenge men… There is also the practice of fisi, a man who goes around to give the girls their ‘first’ sexual experience after the initiation process… Kusasa fumbi is the sex the initiated girls as part of the rite, at the end of the initiation process…[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with female adolescents, Ntaja, Machinga]."

While nsondo and ndakula are for girls, jando, circumcision, is for boys. Respondents maintained that both the girls’ and the boys’ puberty rites of passage provide the initiates with life skills, including sexual ones. The reason they are given the sexual skills is to enable them satisfy their sexual partners and therefore reduce the chances for a partner engaging in multiple sexual partnerships in search for fulfilment of sexual pleasure. Of late, due to the anti-HIV and AIDS campaigns, there have been some changes in some practices related to jando. Some boys are circumcised at health facilities, such as hospitals, in order to have clean cuts and reduce the risks of HIV infections that would come with multiple uses of the cutting instruments. Anti-HIV and AIDS campaigners and the government are making interventions to decrease the harmful cultural practices including traditional initiation festivals and rituals, including shortening the period of the initiation process and advocating for it to take place during school holidays so that it does not negatively affect the children’s school attendance.

### 2.4.2 Interpersonal factors

Among the cited interpersonal factors influencing engagement in multiple sexual partnerships were those related to socialization, gender and peer pressure. Family background, marriage counseling (known as mwambo wa m’banja), peer pressure, initiation rites, and information acquired through the public media play vital roles in socialization. So too do conceptions of gender and gender roles. These inculcate values, norms and practices, including those related to sex, in the minds of people. The participants maintained that if a person comes from a family in which either the father or mother, or both, engaged in multiple sexual partnerships, the chances are that such a person will also do the same. This is because:

"It is about chibadwa (upbringing)... the way a person was born and brought up (basi kungoti kubadwa kubadwa) ... just upbringing and nothing else…[The phrase also means the

This argument is common in the cultures that practice puberty initiation rites. See D. Rweyemamu and M. Fuglesang, Multiple and Concurrent Sexual Partnerships among youth in Tanzania. A Research study commissioned by Femina HIP in preparation for a Regional Youth MCP Campaign, May.
way one is socialized]... It is because of the behaviour that you were born with. [Extract from individual interview with a woman who does not engage in multiple sexual relationships, Liwonde, Machinga].

We all learn from our parents. What our parents do is also what we will do. So, if, for example, the father or mother is wachiwerewere or wachisembwere (one who lives a life of sexual promiscuity), the children will also do the same. They will copy the behaviour of one or both parents.... Also, some parents do not properly counsel and control their children, so the children’s morals become loose....[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with female adolescents, Kasungu].

For some people it is just a culture or a way of life. It depends on their past and their upbringing...They are just used to that behavior. If a person right from the beginning was used to zachisawawa [recklessness] the person will remain reckless.... will continue with the same zachisawawa....If it is a woman, no matter what her husband does for her... even if he gave her a lot of money she will leave her husband and go out. The same with men who are used to such life... it comes from their past...[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Nkhumbe, Blantyre].

Malawians have a proverb that says: make mbuu, mwana mbuu, literally meaning “mother grey, child grey”, or “mother dirty, child dirty” – figuratively meaning behaviour is copied from the parent. What is learnt from parents is entrenched by culture, religion, and rites of passage.

From peers and from traditions and culture men and women construct conceptions of manhood and womanhood. For men, manhood is closely associated with sexual prowess and may include size of sexual organ. Participants maintained that sexual prowess is something that has to be tried, exercised, proved, and celebrated because it defines manhood itself. Engaging in multiple sexual partnerships is therefore a way of trying, exercising, proving and celebrating manhood:

You know, sometimes it is just because you want to try and be sure if you are performing....May be a woman is barren so you want to try it somewhere, ‘umati kodi ndikayika chipoloplo mu mufti iyi nditha kuomba’? – meaning: ‘if I put a bullet in this gun, will I be able to fire?’ So you try it to verify if you are able to fire.... [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Ngumbe, Blantyre].

In Malawian cultures, women are expected to be wives to men. For an adult woman, being single is rather degrading and gives the woman low status in society. Every grown up woman therefore wishes to marry at one point or another though frustration arising from failed or problem-filled marriages can force some women into multiple sexual partnerships:

...when I was married to my husband, he never married anyone else apart from me till we had children. In the course of bearing children my husband just knew marriage in bed, but he failed to support or take care of me up to date, then I started thinking that I should go away from this man and do what some other women do but my conscious did not
allow it. So I found myself going out with somebody’s husband who was kind and helped me with whatever I wanted in time of need…. The reason I had an extra marital sexual relationship on top of my husband was because my husband was not thinking about me from the time we married, he was moving here and there without thinking that I have a wife at home or may be buying soap or salt or clothes. I was looking for clothes to put. When I confronted him he would ask me if I want to go home or get married to somebody else but I could not leave… I failed to leave because I thought how many times am I going to get married? That is why I had an extra marital sexual partner, who was helping me. I stayed with this relationship for 3 to 4 years. He was supporting quite well, I was dressing well. [Extract from individual interview with a woman who used to have concurrent multiple sexual relationships, Zubayumo Makamo, Mzimba].

Peer pressure is also socially and culturally constructed. An unmarried man or woman is regarded as mwana wamung’ono, child or not grown up, by his or her peers. The same label is given to a young man or young woman who does not have a sexual partner. In some cases such individuals are excluded from some social conversations, especially those in which marital or sexual matters are discussed, on the understanding that such matters “are for adults”. Such practices put pressure on the young adults and the unmarried men and women to find sexual partners, be they one or many.

The field data also indicate that for young people, be they male or female, material competition, sense of beauty and pride, and the show-off associated with these can drive them into engaging in multiple sexual partnerships. For the young unmarried women, they are supposed to be smart, beautiful and attractive. These looks require that the young women dress up, are trendy in fashion, and are physically presentable. For the many who cannot afford such a lifestyle on their own solicit the support of men. As women proudly discuss among themselves about the types of material things they get from their sexual partners, increased desire and competition for such a lifestyle emerge among those who see themselves as being left out; and those who live such a lifestyle encourage those who do not. The belief that having several sexual partners guarantees material comfort and trendy lifestyles is thus socially constructed and entrenched. In some instances women feel proud and elevated when they are in sexual relationships with people regarded as celebrities, wealthy, powerful, and of higher status and honour in the community.

The above social construction of the value of engaging in multiple sexual partnerships applies to men as well. The young men in Bangwe Township in Blantyre observed that:

Well, those who date beautiful girls go around showing off. They say: can you see the ‘chick’ I have brought with me today? They praise the beauty and the dressing of the girl. They make you look as if you are the odd one out… as if you cannot go out with beautiful women….Next time you feel like showing off too and competing with everybody else…..[Extract from a Focus Group Discussion with adolescent males, Blantyre].
The young men who do not have many partners are thus viewed as \textit{achimidzi}, having a village culture, or backward, conservative and less civilized.

The participants’ views suggest that there are gendered constructions of the value of multiple sexual partnerships. These differ according to age – between younger men and older men, and younger women and older women. Studies done elsewhere in the southern and eastern Africa regions show the same.\textsuperscript{23} This is probably because the cultures of the region are similar, so too are the material conditions. The following gendered constructions of the value of multiple sexual partnerships were reported in this study as in the other studies done in the eastern and southern Africa region:

- \textit{Men}: having multiple sexual partners affirms self-worthiness, is a source of pride, validates manhood, asserts and establishes power and authority.

  \begin{quote}
  It is because some men want to be popular...they want to be famous say, Mr Banda that one has five wives...so and so has 6. It is about influence.....having more women makes men feel being famous....Yeah, because they feel ‘big’. They call themselves ‘big man’ because they moved up from one woman, to two, then three up to four. They feel proud and admired... Because people talk about him, that oh has three, he feels great. \[\text{Extract from individual interview with a man who does not engage in multiple sexual relationships, Liwonde, Machinga.}\]
  \end{quote}

  Sometimes it is because when you are married some women just want to put you to test. They bump in you, make suggestive jokes. Now, because a man is like dry wood that does not take long to catch fire, you get charged...you just light up. Sometimes these women just want to try you, they ask: ‘kodi alimo?’ [meaning ‘is there manhood in that one?’]. What they are saying is: are you able to mount? Do you erect? You know these women tell each other ‘amuna anga satchaja!’ [my man does not charge] so they want to try you ... To avoid embarrassment you go ahead to prove it....\[\text{Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Ngumbe, Blantyre.}\]

The other problem is beer brewing. A lot of women here brew \textit{chikokeyani} [type of traditional beer] and, \textit{kachasu} [local gin]. When a man buys from them, they do not give back change. When you remind them about the change they will say ‘kodi ize umakumbutsa ngongole ya change bwanji? Sutota, eti? – why are you reminding me of your change? Don’t you erect? As a result, you say ‘ok, let me show you if I do not get erect!’ ..\[\text{Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Ngumbe, Blantyre.}\]

• **Women**: reported that having multiple sexual partners is a behaviour often copied from friends and helps build social networks. It affirms social value (that the woman is positively and highly valued, sought after by many men), and provides material gains. The need to have children in a situation where a husband is impotent may also push a woman to look for extra-marital sexual partners:

Most women are influenced by their fellow women who say: you, you will ‘foil’ [meaning miss chances] and not here. We go for the ‘hot’ things, why not you? Why do you just waste yourself sitting idle here? Let’s go on the faster lane and experience life... you are good looking and there are many men who would be interested in you? What’s wrong with you? There are men out there who would go for you...[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, T/A Mpima, Mchinji].

For instance, my friend comes with new clothes and she tells me that she has another sexual partner who has also given her some money for shopping. By then you do not have anything in your pocket. The next day that friend of yours comes again with new clothes then you ask her if it is her husband who bought the clothes for her and she tells you that ‘my friend, you are wasting your time, you are just delaying yourself’ ... there is nothing like ‘one piece of clothe in life’ [meaning there is nothing like only one man] ...try it and see for yourself...you are tempted to try because you feel that that is the way everybody lives. [Extract from individual interview with a woman who does not engage in multiple sexual relationships, Bangwe, Blantyre].

If a man is impotent a woman decides to go out just to fall pregnant, she wont stop this behavior, but she will still maintain her marriage because to have a husband is important but at the same time she wants to have children. Sometimes a woman would engage in multiple sexual relationships because her man does not give her basic needs, she also may be influenced by her friends who may have multiple partners who care for the so she also want to have someone to care for her, to buy her zitenje (wrappers), buy her things like fertilizer when her husband has failed. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Zubayumo Makamo, Mzimba].

• **Adolescent men**: need for variety, fun, leisure, entertainment, and pressure to prove normality and masculinity were cited as the main drivers of multiple sexual partnerships. Concurrency is also viewed as ‘strategic’ as it ensures constant availability of a woman. The young men also referred to the influence of bear and what goes on in the drinking places:

...you see, some people say ‘mkazi mmodzimodzi amakwana.. amatopetsa’ [having just one woman is boring...it’s tiring]....I have three girlfriends, I like all of them. One because she is beautiful, the second because she is well mannered...she is not demanding...the third because she is sexually good...she is entertaining... I like all of them because amanditsangalatsa [they please me well in different ways]. [Extract from individual interview with a man who engages in multiple sexual relationships, Ngumbe, Blantyre].
Sometimes it is about the people you chat with. If they love to have sex with many women and they tell you about it, it encourages you. You also want to be like them because otherwise you will start asking if you are normal. You want to be like other men, you also do what they do. You are motivated by what they tell you...

[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent males, Nsanama, Machinga].

The sexual relations that take place here are mostly those that take place in the bars. Because of beer you may be taken up until you hook a whore. Yeah, you are taken up until you fuck her... Yeah, most of the sexual relationships take place at the bars. They [young men] just grab prostitutes because these prostitutes need money then they do sex and they are done. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent males, Bangwe, Blantyre].

Promiscuous behavior is common especially among the youth because they lack some thing to do. They end up going to drink beer and hook bar girls, especially when they are drunk...Young men go to bars and beer halls to get drunk and propose sex to bar girls because they fail to do the same when they are sober. [Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Ngumbe, Blantyre].

• Older men: reported need for variety, desire for sexual fulfillment and rejuvenation, pressure to demonstrate manhood, social worth and readily availability of sexual services:

‘One water well will just kill you with thirst’ [meaning if you have one woman you risk sexual deprivation]... an old wife is always nasty and rusty...you see, if you have many, you get to one, ‘finish off with her’, go to another one, ‘finish off with her’ [the vernacular expression carries more weight and is more sexually graphic – it has connotations of sexual fulfillment and rejuvenation: [umati ukathana ndi uyu, umakathananso ndi winayo osati chitsime chimodzimodzi ufa ndi ludzu]... not just one old well, it will kill you with thirst.... [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Machinjiri, Blantyre].

You see, this thing is sweet... [what thing?] Sex. Sex is sweet. So, some men do it with more women because it is sweet to do so... they get the sweet from more women [Extract from individual interview with a man who does not engage in multiple sexual relationships, Liwonde, Machinga].

• Older women: reported desperation, “punishment” for spouse’s infidelity, economic survival, lack of support from spouses, and sexual dissatisfaction with spouses:

These days men have become women because there are women who are desperate for men...they deliberately lure men, asking them: “are you not going to propose love to us?” Such things were not happening in the past. These days women ask men: “simukutinyenga bwanjji?” [why are you not after us?] ... Kodi akazi anu aja zomwe alinazo mmensa ifenso tilinazo” [what is it that your wives have that we don’t have?]...with that kind of behavior even the quietest man cannot endure... that’s why even the quiet men catch diseases. [Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Ngumbe, Blantyre].
What happens is that when the man has another sexual partner he changes his behavior. He loves that person more than his wife and he even gives that person more money. When his wife asks for money he says he does not have. That influences women also to have other sexual partners so that they too should be given more money by other men to help themselves. They say: “let me also go and fend for myself”....For others it is just because they are used to doing that…they were doing it before they got into marriage. For instance sleeping with more than one man per day and if they sleep with only one man they do not get satisfied. [Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Ngumbe, Blantyre].

The reason for women leaving the house to engage in multiple affairs is poverty. Poverty chases women from their spouses. If food, glossaries and other necessities are lacking in the home to sustain the family, a woman will seek aid from another man. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Kasungu rura].

• Adolescent women: Prospects and possibility of finding love, affection, or marriage; economic hardships, employment prospects; while some are active agents who engage in multiple sexual partners to take advantage of both arising opportunities and men (‘milking the cow’); seeking fun and adventure; and for contacts with ‘sponsors’, ‘investors’ and influential people for present or future social upward mobility.

Sometimes you try one relationship with a man, hoping that it will work, but it doesn’t may be because you do not know that ‘your friend’ already has another relationship elsewhere… or just because he is not serious…so you go and try another one in the hope that it will work… it may also not work, but sometimes it works…[Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Ntaja, Machinga].

In most cases women are not to blame because amakhala kuti nawonso akufuna banja, they are searching for marriages. In the process they may try one or two suitors. …[Extract from individual interview with a women who used to have multiple sexual relationships, Chileka, Blantyre].

Sometimes kumangokhala kuzisaka [just being enterprising]... You find that a young woman has a stable relationship with a man who loves and gives her everything, but she still goes out looking for more…just to have more……[Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Liwonde, Machinga].

To be frank, we, women too have a lot of problems of our own. We are not satisfied most of the times. Here, I see a lot of things. For example, I see married women who come here with other men who are not their husbands, but when I recall these men might have been here with other women as well. In some instances a woman may tell her husband that she is going to a funeral while she is coming here to a bottle store or somewhere else with chibwenzi extra marital partner]. Some of these are my friends. They make sure that these boyfriends of theirs do not know that they are married. [Extract from individual interview with a women who used to have multiple sexual relationships, Chileka, Blantyre].
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

Ee, here, young girls of say 13 years will have sex with older men who are working because most young ladies here at this age just want to make money...they go for money and to have fun. The working men take them out...they have fun. Some of these young ladies are married by ‘foreigners’ who come here to work, they are not from here.... The young ladies go for the money and the good things these men give them...While the young ladies take advantage of these men, most of the men also just use the young ladies...because of the companies that employ people here...many workers there will be in relationships with these ladies...some of the ladies do it to find jobs...[Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Machinjiri, Blantyre].

There are also teachers who propose love to school girls. They promise the girls that they will assist them to pass exams. They girls then agree on the promise that they will be assisted to pass the exams...so they sleep with the teachers....[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent males, Nsanama, Machinga].

2.4.3 Personal motivations
At the individual level, the motivations and justifications for engaging in multiple sexual partnerships relate psycho-social needs, material interests, physical distance between partners, advancement in medical technology, and other auxiliary factors.

2.4.3.1 Sexual satisfaction and dissatisfaction
The commonly cited psycho-social motivation for engaging in multiple sexual relations for both men and women was need for sexual satisfaction, often following disappointment with the sexual performance or non-performance of the partners. Respondents of all ages in all the districts mentioned this. They expressed varied notions of what constitutes sexual satisfaction ranging from how the sex is done, the physical shape or/and size of the sexual organs to the frequency of sexual contacts between partners:

In most cases what drives a partner out of the home to look for others is sexual dissatisfaction. If a man is not satisfied with the sexual performance of his wife in bed he will go and look for other women.... A man will not be satisfied with his wife, for example, if she does not bring out the emotions. A man wants to be shown that the woman is feeling it and she appreciates it.... A man wants to hear from the woman if “it is sweet”.... The woman expresses her emotions by sobbing, hissing, even crying.... That’s what a man wants to hear....The woman should be able to wriggle and gyrate. No man wants a woman who just lies there like a log.[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Mchinji]

Sometimes it is the husband’s actions that influence the woman to do that. He marries quite well, but he can’t have sex with his wife...he fails. So the wife says: “I share the same blanket with my husband but he just fondles me. Is this how we are supposed to live as a family”? The following day the husband buys you a lot of things that make you forget your problems. Even the expensive chitenje (wrapper) he buys for you so that you forget all your worries. At night you just sleep as if you are sleeping with your brother. Then the wife starts think that “kudya ndi kudya koma ah ah apapa pakudwalira apa” [I eat quite well, but there is something lacking here...this other ‘part’ is wanting – same word meaning ‘is sick’
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

or ‘suffering’]. Yes, I eat everything at home but still am not satisfied and that makes the woman to have another sexual partner who gives her money or not but what she wants is his body. [Extract from individual interview with a woman who does not engage in multiple sexual relationships, Bangwe, Blantyre].

It happens that you have had your supper and you are going to bed, there you try to romantically fondle your partner, with affection and invitingly, but you find that there is nothing he is doing. He doesn’t erect… Then after sometime you try another person…and when you go to that one, eeh, you find that he is a real man! [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Mchinji].

Preference for certain physical characteristics of the sexual organs was also cited by both the female and male respondents alike. For the women, it was the size of the male organ while for the men it was whether the female partner had elongated labia minora or not:

If the man’s penis is small and just pricks like a needle, a woman will go out and look for another man behind the husband’s back. She will look for satisfaction…but you do not leave your husband because of that. He is still your husband… you may also love him even if he does not satisfy you in bed.... [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Chileka, Blantyre].

Sometimes women are not satisfied because ‘katundu wakuba mdoko’ [meaning the man’s penis is small some] or because katundu wakuwuka cha [meaning the penis does not erect]. In such cases a woman may feel that her secret lover has a big penis that satisfies her while her husband just scratches me…leaving her longing all the times. Sometimes it is difficult for a woman to say that her husband is impotent, instead she just goes out and bear children with other men, the husband may know about it, but he cannot do anything because he knows it is his fault. But when it becomes a habit the husband may intervene, then it will be the time that the woman reveals how the husband is....[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Kavukula, Mzimba].

God created a woman with some parts that men do not have. So men like to differentiate women…they go somewhere they see something else and say: ah this woman is good…she has them....For example, if the man sees a woman who has zinyini [plural] nyini [singular], labia minora, and another one does not have, the man differentiates this and finally he loves the one who has zokoka, elongated labia minora, more than the one who does not have. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Mchinji].

Men like zokoka, elongated labia minora... Men like to play with those things. If a woman does not have them, a man will go for another one. Which man would want a woman who looks like the way she was born from her mother… like a baby?…If a woman’s produces a lot of fluids, the man will not like it....[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Ntaja, Machinga].

There are certain ‘lessons’ [meaning practices] a girl is supposed to do as she grows. She is taught to do something every evening [meaning practice sexual acts and positions, and pull her labia minora to elongate them]... then you reach a stage whereby you finish what is
taught to you and get married….When you are married a man knows that there are things he is supposed to play around with… when she is on heat, by just touching her, he will know that she is a woman, so if a woman did not undergo these ‘lessons’ the man may go to look for other women…. Some women leave all the work for a man in bed, which makes the man tired, so he will go out to try another woman. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Zubayumo Makamo, Mzimba].

Frequency of sexual contact between partners may also determine the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. To quench the sexual desire some men or women need more frequent sexual contacts than others:

The kind of satisfaction we are talking about is that may be a woman wants to have four or five rounds when having sex but you find that a man is just doing one round or even not doing it at all. So a woman ends up finding other men who can have four or five rounds….It is true, since we are different people. Other people want more rounds when having sex so if a man is not doing it you go find other men. Sometimes it is because when you were young in marriage you used to do it may be twice a night. But as you grow old, you find that your man is just sleeping without doing it then you go out find other men who want it more frequently. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Chileka, Blantyre].

Lack of foreplay and sexual games before the act, may also lead to sexual dissatisfaction. A woman may increase her partner’s sexual desire for her by exposing her body to him, wearing waist beads, sleeping without clothes on, not switching off the light before sex with the partner. The women of Mzangawo village in rural Mchinji emphasized what they called fulashing’i, as in “flashing” – physical exposure of the body and sex games prior to the sexual act as being the key to a successful sexual relationship with a man, while the men of Kasungu reported that:

If a woman is not sexually free with her husband, this could be a problem. For example, some wives will prefer to undress in the dark and have sex with their husbands with the lights switched off. A man will seek a sexual partner who can feel free, undress and have sex with him with lights on. How does one eat in the dark without seeing the food in front of him?

[Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Mkumbwa-Chikunyu, Kasungu]

The field data therefore indicate that what constitutes sexual satisfaction is the full involvement and commitment of the partner, the techniques of the sexual act, the physical elements of the sexual organs, and the manners and behaviors related to the sexual act. Where these are not guaranteed or are inadequate, both male and female partners may resort to multiple sexual partnerships.

Related to sexual satisfaction is sexual competence. The desire and search for this was reported to be a driver for engaging in multiple sexual partnerships. Sexual competence is the ability to use diverse sexual styles, skills and acts in order to satisfy both the partner and oneself. The urban younger informants particularly mentioned
the use of different sexual positions as demonstration of sexual competence. They indicated that a partner who uses just the missionary position all the times becomes rather “boring” and less exciting in bed. Changing sexual positions is emotionally fulfilling, exciting, and rejuvenating. Failure to demonstrate sexual competence can lead to searching for other partners:

Using the same sex position always is boring…Some people cannot use other sex positions and skills… All they know is just the missionary position. Doing chakumbuyo, backslide (penetration from behind, may also mean anal sex), from the sides, squatting, oral sex, kunyambita (licking or cunnilingus) and many others, make sex exciting and worth doing…If a partner cannot do , then you feel like trying someone else.... [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent males Mchinji urban]

On the opposite side of sexual satisfaction is sexual deprivation. Both male and female participants maintained that sexual deprivation by one partner can force the other partner into engaging in multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships. This is more common in situations of wives denying their husbands sexual favors, which would normally be provided as a marital obligation, and where men deprive their wives of sexual services either because they come home drunk or spend a lot of time at work or business. For women, it is also common in situations where the husband is sexually inactive – biologically or physically. Also in situations of drunken husbands who come home from their drinking sprees only to sleep without fulfilling their sexual obligations to their wives – a situation the men, themselves, were able to cite:

The fact is that it is not only the women who disappoint the men, men too disappoint women. In most communities, women are the people who stay at home while the men are the ones who move about a lot, hence they are the ones who are exposed to temptation and they leave their wives deprived in the process... Yes, it is true that a woman could involve herself with another man if her husband is not being supportive. But there are also cases where a man could be supportive, yet his spouse engages with other men. This could be a result of the woman being not sexually satisfied with her husband because he spends much of his sexual efforts elsewhere. Men who do not have sex with their wives provoke the women to seek sexual services elsewhere. This includes men who drink a lot, coming home drunk and going to sleep without touching their wives. [Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Mkumbwa-Chikunyu, Kasungu]

Some men don’t perform their duty in the house. They cannot do ntchito ya minyumba (literally means house work, meaning the man does not know how to do sex) as a husband which makes a woman to go out and seek other men. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Kavukula, Mzimba]

But there are also some women will refuse their husbands to have sex with them by excusing themselves for being tired due to the day’s hard work. [Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Mkumbwa-Chikunyu, Kasungu]

The statements on the desire for sexual satisfaction and the need to improving sexual performance suggest that some, if not most, men and women regard themselves as sex
performance machines rather than sexual beings. They concentrate on specific techniques and sexual behaviors for improving performance rather than improving relations with their sexual partners. This upholds indulgence in multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships. More dangerous is the tendency of most sexual partners not to communicate their sexual desires and preferred sex styles to their partners, rest they dissolve their relationships by being labelled loose and promiscuous or thought of engaging in extra-marital affairs:

You cannot tell your wife what sex style you like. She will ask you where you learnt it from. She will say is that what you do with your other women? Why don’t you just go back to them? So why are you wasting your time with me? So you just keep quiet or secretly go and have the satisfaction elsewhere. [Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Mpima, Mchinji]

Some men just do the same style over and over. If you ask them to change they will think you are a prostitute. They may start thinking that that is what you do with other men. You just leave them to finish off the way they want it, even if it does not fully satisfy you. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Chileka, Blantyre]

2.4.3.2 Material motivations
In both rural and urban areas, women of all ages cited the need for material support by men as motivation for engaging in multiple and concurrent relationships. In the urban areas, the multiple male partners are needed for expenses such as house rent, school fees, furniture, food and other domestic items; but may also include the maintenance of parents and other relations. The desire for material items of leisure such as cellphones, airtime, cosmetics, entertainment, and others, was also cited by both younger male and female respondents, suggesting connections between MCP and consumerism in the urban context.

In the rural areas, the emphasis was on the provision of support in the form of money, clothing, items of hygiene such as soap and lotions, and food. Failure on the part of a man to provide material comfort in the home or to his partner outside marriage may be a reason for the partner to engage in multiple and concurrent sexual relationships:

These days, it is different from the past. These days, girls can have several boyfriends, five or even six… One man gives them K500 they go and buy a jeans skirt, another one gives them K200 and they go and buy “fair” (Fair and Lovely lotion)… Not in the past, the main reason is that they want to raise some money to buy what they want….[Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Liwonde, Machinga]

It is important to note that in the discussions with the rural participants there was less emphasis on support related to items of leisure. More emphasis was on the basics of life. This difference between the urban and rural areas suggests connections between engaging in MCP and the particular economic environment and situation the individual is in.
2.4.3.3 Poverty as a driver

Poverty was also commonly cited by both male and female participants as a driver for engaging in MCP. However, this applies more to poor women than anyone else. It is unlikely that a poor man can engage in MCP because he is poor. MCP relationships need to be maintained with the use of material items and a poor man who cannot afford these is therefore unlikely to engage in MCP. Thus, for men, it is affluence and privileged circumstances that drive them into MCP. It therefore follows that both poverty and prosperity are drivers of MCP. Circumstances of material comfort would drive both men and women into MCP. This was mentioned to be the case particularly with men and women who engage in itinerant trading activities and all forms of vending in various merchandize in towns and across national borders. Women traders were said to be doubling in sex trade and other forms of trade:

...they have boyfriends in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Zambia ...all over they go. Their boyfriends pay for the women's accommodation and bus tickets, and they help in customs clearing, and offer all kinds of supporting services. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Mchinji]

Much as it is not every trading woman who does such deals, the practice seems to be common among the itinerant female vendors – and these are not poor women. On the other side of this observation, there are men who are in circumstances of material comfort who use their privileged position to engage in MCP. The urban men in Mchinji observed that:

It is common for these “business men” to sleep with their friends' wives and girlfriends. They wait until their friends are away on business and they go and “deceive” (kunyenga) their friends' wives and girlfriends. They tell them lies, entice them with money, expensive clothes and beauty items, and sleep with them. These men's wealth drives them.... [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Mchinji]

It is all about money... Money forces men to have many women. Without money they cannot afford many women... with money they can afford transport to take women, expensive hotels where to sleep with women... the expensive things to buy for women...[Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Liwonde, Machinga]

The participants referred to several positions of material affluence as the sources of attraction leading to multiple sexual partnerships. These included: having money, a nice job, having a vehicle – and especially a modern trendy one, possessing large number of livestock, and others of that nature.

2.4.3.4 Behavioural influences

The behaviour of a spouse in a marriage or a partner in a non-marital sexual relationship can make a difference between engaging in MCP and not. Male participants maintained that having a talkative wife or girlfriend, a bully, or a rude one would drive them out of the home or a relationship to look for a peaceful atmosphere where they can enjoy a chat, food, and sex. Similarly, having a wife who
does not know how to cook can drive a man out of the home to look for one who cooks well. On their part, the female participants maintained that having an abusive and a bully of a husband is a force that would drive them into engaging in MCP:

What do you do when there is abusive language in the home? Some women leave the home for other men because they are abused…they are called bad names….Men also leave the home for other women if the wife is talkative, rude, or not respecting the husband…. It is about what happens in the home…. Disagreements, quarrels, bad language, all these will send the husband or the wife out of the home…. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Liwonde, Machinga]

Sometimes it is because of chikhalidwe cha amayi mnyumbamo [woman’s behavior in the family]. If the man says something, the woman ignores or even refuses… sometimes the woman will belittle and look down upon her husband…. That will surely make the man to go out and look for other women…. Mostly these problems start when the man and the woman have failed to agree on one thing, for example on which church to join as a family, or how to spend their money, or how to raise their children. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Ngumbe Market, Blantyre]

It could also be because of the ‘challenging’ statements men make. If you ask them about something they answer rudely and violently: do you want your marriage or not? Or do you want to marry another man? You can go to your home…. Such statements disempower a woman. She gets frustrated and may think about finding comfort elsewhere… including in the hands of another man. [Extract from individual direct interview with a man who used to engage in multiple sexual relationships, Kavukula, Mzimba].

Physical violence, the use of bad language and names against a spouse, non-constructive criticisms that do not offer solutions, failure to provide comfort when needed, were cited by the female participants as constituting bad behaviours on the part of men. Also cited along the same lines was excessive use of alcohol while personal hygiene and general cleanliness of the home were cited by both male and female participants. Engaging in MCP is therefore an expression of anger and frustration with the partner’s behaviour as well as a punishment against misbehavior – as if the culprit feels it. This conception would make sense only if the culprit knows, and not when the multiple sexual partnerships are done in secrecy because the culprit will not feel it.

2.4.3.5 Peer pressure

All the four categories of participants referred to peer pressure as a factor influencing engagement in MCP. Admiration of what “your friends” do, what they wear and eat, where they go for relaxation, and who they go out with, drives many people into seeking multiple partners at the same time. For the rural women of Mzangawo village in Mchinji, Zubayumo village in Mzimba, and those of Liwonde Township in Machinga, having more partners is because they want to be supported by different men so that they can look nice like their friends:
When you see your friends looking nice, wearing nice clothes, then you are tempted to find someone wokasamalira (care taker) to support you because the one you have is not supporting you enough. You become embarrassed to see your friends dressed well, having things, domestic items and so on.... Or you see your friends going to the lake or places for fun you start questioning: ‘why not me?’ So you also try it.... Sometimes you are encouraged by your friend(s) who tell you that you do not have a good husband or boyfriend because he does not support you well, or because he is abusive. So you listen to them. You look for someone to give you the comfort because your friend(s) advised you.... [Extract from FGD with women, 30-50 years age group, Liwonde, Machinga. Similar accounts from Mchinji and Kasungu]

2.4.3.6 Mobility and physical distance between partners
Both male and female informants of all ages maintained that physical distance between partners might affect relationships. When one of the partners lives far away, is away from home for long periods or too frequently, it is easy for the other partner to find a substitute. Thus, people in professions or occupations that involve frequent travelling are prone to marital breakdowns and to engaging in MCP while away. Malawians have a popular saying: wokaona nyanga anakaona ndi mvuu yomwe – if you go to see the lake you see hippos as well, meaning that if one travels, ones sees and does more things than the actual purpose or motive for the trip. This saying is a slogan on the packet of chimango, meaning shield, one of the common condom brands in the country. A popular saying to this one is wayenda wapenga, if you travel you get crazy, meaning you do or encounter all kinds of things. The understanding is therefore that men or women who travel are susceptible to engaging in multiple sexual encounters. Their spouses are also likely to engage in extra-marital or multiple sexual relationships when they stay behind. The field data indicate that, for this reason, multiple sexual relationships are common in Malawian communities with a migrant labour tradition such as Zubayufoo Makamo in Mzimba district, along the shores of Lake Malawi, and the Shire Highlands districts in the southern parts of the country; as well as among the individual who engage in internal and external itinerant trading activities.

However, the effects of physical distance on relationships may be less severe with the improvements in communication. With the emergence of mobile phones, which are now available in rural Malawi, it is easy to communicate with a partner and to arrange meetings. Love messages and words of comfort and encouragement that would help sustain a relationship are easily and cheaply sent as text via the short message service (SMS) or by actually phoning. In fact, ease of communication due to the coming of cellphones, was cited by the Mzimba women as one of the factors that aid infidelity and the maintenance of multiple sexual relationships:

it’s like men have woken up from a dream with the coming of cellphones. Things have gone bad, it happens that you are with your husband having happy moments, the bar girl [meaning extra-marital partner] just phones him at ease… Men, whether working or not, are involved in extra-marital affairs with ease these days because they easily communicate with their partners. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Kavukula, Mzimba]
In addition to mobility and physical distance between partners, separation for some period of time due to professional, social and economic commitments, can lead to weakening of affection between partners and subsequently result in seeking other partners. Commonly cited cases of separation were those related to cultural reasons such as postpartum abstinence, imprisonment, travel to work destinations, and itinerant trading activities.

**Text Box 3: Migrant labour and MCP**

Without a proper understanding of the social, behavioural and psychological consequences of migration, it will not be possible to understand the consequences of migration for the spread of HIV and the particular vulnerability to infection of mobile populations... we need to understand the particular vulnerabilities of migrants (and those with whom they interact) and hence the economic, social, sexual and gender regimes associated with migrancy in its many different manifestations.... Our basic premise is that none of the above objectives can be adequately reached without attention to the microgeographies of mobility, social connectivity and sexual behaviour. By reviewing the findings of research in three disparate settings, the complexity of the connections between migration and HIV/AIDS begin to emerge.


**2.4.3.7 Auxiliary factors**

The field data show that there are a few auxiliary factors that encourage engagement in multiple sexual partnerships. Commonly cited, especially by women of all ages, were the advancements in reproductive health technologies. The use of family planning technologies such as condoms, birth control pills, norplant, and others have demystified sex. So too have abortions. All along, women were most afraid of extramarital, unwanted, and teenage pregnancies. With these technologies, women are almost certain that they will not become pregnant, or should they become pregnant they can choose to safely abort. Thus, they engage in multiple sexual relationships without fears of unwanted pregnancies. For men, the use of condoms has reduced the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, which in the past were the source of fear to engage in reckless sexual activities. With that risk greatly reduced, men have become more liberal in their sexual behavior.

Those temporarily separated from their sexual partners often engage in temporary multiple sexual partnerships while waiting for their partners to return or for them to return to their partners.

Closely related to physical separation was what the informants referred to as the “decline of love” or what would properly be referred to as emotional disconnect. They maintained that it so happens that for some reasons such as staying together for too long, not having sex with each other regularly, not frequently talking to each other, can cause some kind of an emotional disconnect between partners. Eventually they find that they are no longer attracted to each other. That would influence them to seek emotional satisfaction, including sex, elsewhere.
Another commonly cited auxiliary factor was the locations in which men drink, rather than the consumption of alcohol per se. Male participants in Mchinji held the view that:

> It is not beer drinking that makes people have multiple sexual partners. Rather it is where they drink. When you go to a bar you know who is there for beer and who is there for women, or for both. Those that go for beer concentrate on their drinking...Those that go there for women will focus less on beer and you can tell what they are up to... You can tell from how they look around, who they talk to and where they sit or stand.... [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Mchinji].

This view was different from that of the female participants in Mzimba and Machinga who felt that men who drink tend to be careless in their sexual behavior. A few men in both Mzimba and Blantyre also felt that when one is drunk, one loses sense of control and can do almost anything. They used statements that show the contradictions and paradoxes in the behavior of a drunken person. If literally translated the statements would sound like: *when you are lit up there is darkness in your eyes and everything becomes bright and beautiful* (ukayaka, m’maso mumapanga mdima. Chiri chonse chimakongola). It means a drunk person would sleep with even the ugliest member of the opposite sex.

It must be noted that this view contradicts the other finding of the study which holds that drunken husbands or boyfriends become sexually less active and therefore drive their partners into engaging in sexual activities outside the relationship. In fact, a drunken person is less likely to be sexually active. The view by the Mchinji men could therefore be closer to reality. It suggests that beer could be used more as a cover than an actual driver in the sense that not all those who visit drinking places go there for beer. Such places are ‘shopping’ places for sexual services.

Young males and females who participated in this study also mentioned physical attraction as an important factor influencing people to seek sexual relations. Men and women who take good care of their bodies, dress smartly, and are beautiful, are often sought after by members of the opposite sex. A person’s personality may also add to his/her attractiveness. The field data is full of such terms as *wokongola* - beautiful, *wamaonekedwe abwino* - having good looks, *obvala bwino* - dresses well, *wotchena* – flashy; and *wakhalidwe labwino* or simply *wakhalidwe* – having good behaviour or good manners, as attractions that create pressure on individuals that may eventually lead to engaging in multiple sexual relationships.

Lack of trust, *kukaikilana* [literally meaning doubting or mistrusting each other] in the home was reported by adult male and female respondents as a factor that creates an environment in which decisions to seek alternative partners are made. Mistrust may result in restrictions on movement, especially imposed by men, unnecessary monitoring of movements, and doubts on the partner’s fidelity:
There are men who set up rules at home and they always want their wives to abide by those rules. If the wives fail to do so the men say it is better to go and try another woman. If the alternative woman is good at abiding by those restrictive rules the men think of leaving you and go and stay with that other woman. There are rules on movement, for example men tell their wives not to go out at such and such times. Because women do not want to listen to them they go out at those times and when the men realize that, it is the end of marriage, or they just go and look for other women who they think will be more abiding. Sometimes when the man wants to sleep with his wife and for some reason she refuses it gives him the picture that his wife sleeps around with other men, which may not be the case. It could be just out of mistrust or jealousy....[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Ngumbe, Blantyre].

Sometimes you just want to go out with friends, or you are just late from where you went, they start asking you questions: where were you? You were with your girlfriends...you were seeing your lover...so you were with your mahule (prostitutes)? It is very infuriating because most of the times they attack you from nowhere even when you have done nothing wrong...you have not seen any other woman....They just mistrust you. It is just because these women do not have any confidence in themselves....You married them because you loved them, and you chose them in preference to all the other women you saw in life. I do not understand why they can’t see that.... [Extract from individual direct interview with a man who does not engage in multiple sexual relationships, Kasungu].

To some women, men are just “dogs”, never satisfied with one partner and need not be trusted:

... mwanalume ni uchebe, a man is just a dog. You can’t trust him. Some women may say my husband doesn’t engage himself in extra marital relationships. They don’t know that a man keeps secrets that a woman can’t even believe. You can’t even know. He knocks off at 5 pm quite well, you can’t even know the time he meets his sexual partner. We can’t say there are men in the area who don’t engage themselves in multiple sexual partnerships. Eee, pala vikutonda bakupempha, meaning even the most pious people have failed in this because they can’t resist. [Extract from individual direct interview with a woman who has multiple sexual relationships, Kavukula, Mzimba]

2.4.3.8 Occupational factors

Certain occupations and trades can place a person in a situation of exposure to potential multiple sexual partners, which would increase the possibilities of engaging in MCP. Occupations such as tailors, drivers, butcher men, teachers, barmen, shopkeepers, and all those that make men frequently interact with women expose such men to the temptations of sleeping with multiple women. Similarly, women who work in such positions as bar tenders, secretaries, shop attendants, bus attendants, etc, which make them frequently interact with men, are vulnerable to falling prey to men in materially advantageous positions with whom they frequently interact. Men who are in trades, businesses and occupations that enable them to bring in money on a daily basis, or frequently, are more prone to having more than one sexual partner than those men who make money only at the end of the month:
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

Here money is not a problem. People do all kinds of businesses so they make money on a daily basis. It is therefore not a problem for them to lure women and sleep with them, unlike those who do not have money on a regular basis.... [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Machinjiri, Blantyre].

Those anyamata a mpunga (the rice boys) [referring to the young men who work in rice mills] sleep with a lot of women because they have daily cash. They can afford to but things for the women they sleep with...they have a lot of girlfriends because they have money everyday unlike the people working in offices. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Liwonde, Machinga].

The above account indicates that indulgence in sexual activities with multiple sexual partners is common and institutionalized. However, it is a behavior that is subject to social norms that guide the practice. In some cases having multiple sexual partners is condoned while it is disapproved in other social circumstances. Overindulgence in multiple sexual partnerships is generally socially and morally disapproved but individuals, male and female, married and unmarried, urban and rural and middle and low class, are equally active in the practice. In most cases it is done rather clandestinely. It is condoned among some individuals such as unmarried youth, also among believers of certain religions such as Islam. At the same time, it is disapproved among married couples though their indulgence in such behaviour is not an exception. MCP is always clandestine for one’s partner while it is a public secret for the majority of the people around the two or more partners.

Having multiple sexual partners has both positive and negative benefits to those who engage in the practice. The positive benefits include fulfilment of basic needs, sexual gratification, emotional connection, material rewards, monetary gains and identification of potential partners for future marriage. On the negative side, it creates a bad public image, generates conflicts and disorder; may result in payment of compensation, separation, divorce and lack of peace of mind as one tries to manoeuvre to keep the multiple sexual partners apart; and, at worst, the potential and possibility of contracting HIV and AIDS.

The foregoing account also shows that although poverty and indulgence in MCP are mutually exclusive, wealth for both men and women may be associated with the ability in terms of time, money and other resources to maintain multiple sexual partnerships. The implication is that poverty and wealth may have the same effect on involvement in MCP but these two are not the only factors. Thus, the perception that

24 For a similar observation see D. Rweyemamu and M. Fuglesang, Multiple and Concurrent Sexual Partnerships among youth in Tanzania. A Research study commissioned by Femina HIP in preparation for a Regional Youth MCP Campaign, May.

25 This account comes from D. Rweyemamu and M. Fuglesang, Multiple and Concurrent Sexual Partnerships among youth in Tanzania. A Research study commissioned by Femina HIP in preparation for a Regional Youth MCP Campaign, May.
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

people are driven to multiple partnerships by either economic desperation or wealth tells just part of the story behind MCP.26

26 Ibid.
Factors and Attitudes Fostering MCP

This study enquired into the factors and attitudes that foster multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships. The focus was on cultural practices, the process of socialization, gender norms and attitudes, socio-economic roots of MCP, and the attitudes towards the practice.

Attitudes towards MCP

The field data suggest that attitudes towards multiple and concurrent sexual partnership vary according to gender, age, material position, culture, religion, and actual individual experience. In both rural and urban groups the general view was that MCP, in all its forms, was bad. The generic terms used to refer to it such as chiwerewere, chisembwere, uhule, chimasomaso, carry negative connotations. The derogatory and humorous labels given to those who engage in MCP provide further evidence that there is a general disapproval for it.

However, when it came to chibwenzi (singular) or zibwenzi (plural), love affairs, the respondents were rather hesitant to express outright disapproval for the MCP associated with this. Where engaging in MCP arose out of the expectation for marriage, there was less disapproval for it. Similarly, where the MCP was a result of desperation for material support, or for sexual satisfaction due to sexual deprivation by one of the partners or because for some reasons the partner cannot sexually perform, MCP was mutely condoned.

The socio-economic status of individuals also makes a difference in terms of society’s attitudes towards their sexual behaviours and practices. Among the Ngoni and Tumbuka of Mzimba and northern Kasungu, and the Yao of Machinga and Blantyre, it is generally acceptable for chiefs, people with wealth (which includes possession of large numbers of livestock), to have either more than one wife or one wife plus some side sexual partners. This probably comes from the old traditional practice of chiefs and wealthy people marrying more than one wife – including having concubines.

It was also observed that where religion or culture permits some types of multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships, there was a general tendency on the part of the participants to adopt a rather accommodating attitudes towards it. This was particularly the case where engaging in MCP was part of rites of passage and where there were strong religious and cultural convictions related to it.

A good example of the type of MCP that is condoned due to a strong culture related to it is polygamy. However, where Christian values are strong polygamy is unacceptable.
God was not a fool to create one hole down there. It was on one purpose. It was meant to have only one stick going into it. So, why push in so many rods there? That is going against God’s creation...and why have one rod dipping into two many holes? [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Nsanama, Machinga].

To those holding such strong views, the only acceptable sexual relationships are courtship, kutomelana, monogamous marriages registered with a relevant government office, those registered or officiated in church or mosque, or traditional marriages where chinkhoswe is conducted or where lobola is paid.

The younger informants were less apprehensive about casual multiple sexual partnerships. To them these are just like any other forms of entertainment.

3.2 Responses to partner’s MCP behavior
The participants’ views indicate that there is no single way of reacting when one discovers that one’s partner has another or other partners. The field data reveal the following views on the possible reactions to the news that one’s partner has another or other sexual partner(s):

3.2.1 Frustration and disappointment
For most women who discover that their partners go out with another partner, the first commonest reaction is to develop a feeling of frustration and disappointment. They may even feel as if they are inferior to the other woman. They go further to question if the other woman is better than them:

It is disappointing. It is painful. It feels really bad. You feel like going into the toilet or a secret room, put a mirror between your legs down there and check yourself if you have everything a normal woman is supposed to have....You look at them and say ‘my mother gave me all these and I am ok. So why does he leave me for other women? What is it that these other women have that I don’t have? Do they have golden ones? [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Liwonde, Machinga].

There is an unusual feeling of ‘this can't happen to me’, especially if they really love the cheating partner.

3.5.2 Feeling of fear
Frustration and disappointment is often accompanied by a feeling of fear and a sense of being lost – not sure what is going to happen next:

You are not sure what is going to happen next, or what you should do. You are also not sure if he will continue being there for you or not. Worse still, these days with AIDS you are not sure what kind of other women he goes out with and whether you are safe. These days it is not safe for married people to be having extra-marital relationships. You end up passing on AIDS to each other. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Liwonde, Machinga].
The feeling of fear is even greater in a situation where the woman depends on the man for material support.

3.5.3 Helplessness
Frustration and fear may eventually result in a situation of helplessness. This is particularly the case with older married women regardless of whether they are in the rural or urban areas. In all the districts the older women said there wasn’t much they could do if realised that their partners were seeing other women. Helplessness was due to three reasons. First, there is a general feeling among these women that they could not control or police their men. In fact, trying to police them would not yield any positive results. Second, given the economic and power imbalances between men and women in society, the men will always find ways of engaging in multiple sexual relationships. The third reason is that, except for polygamy, multiple sexual partnerships are done in secrecy. Fighting an “unknown enemy” would be like chasing one’s own shadow. It was therefore not worth even trying.

Helplessness sometimes ends in despair and defeat. Married women reported that when they discover that their husbands have other women, they despair and feel defeated. They used such phrases as:

…”what do you do, you just leave him in the hope that one day he will come back….
He is a man, he can do whatever he likes, you cannot stop him…After all he is the one who proposed love to you….[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Mchinji].

As a woman you cannot go out there and sell yourself off to men just because the one you have goes out with other women. It is men who propose love to women, so it is their ‘power’….[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Mzangawa, Mchinji].

However, there was also an indication of a very strong feeling within some women that they would rather respect their own individual dignity than fight their cheating spouses. This is not necessarily out of helplessness, despair and defeat, but because of their own personal pride and self-valuation. Just because their spouses were cheating on them was not justification for doing the same or for feeling dejected, helpless, and defeated. If anything, the spouse’s cheating behaviour gave such women a greater sense of pride and the need to show difference between themselves and their cheating husbands:

I am better than him and therefore I would rather preserve myself and show difference…Let the world be the best judge!…I would rather be proud of myself. [Extract from individual direct interview with a woman who does not engage in multiple sexual partnerships, Bangwe, Blantyre]
3.5.4 Jealousy, aggression and confrontation
While jealousy was common to both male and female informants, most female participants said that if they cannot contain the frustrations, the despair and the jealousy, they choose confrontation. They may challenge their male partners and those they go out with. The confrontation could be verbal – friendly dialogue, insult, counselling, etc. or physical – fighting, damage to property, attack on ‘enemy’s relatives, etc. If verbal or physical aggregation does not work, they adopt passive resistance and non-cooperation with their partners. This involves keeping silent, pretending not to have heard instructions or advice, not assisting the spouse or partner with domestic chores, not cooking or cooking poorly, not assisting or attending to partner’s relatives, denial of sex, and through many other nooks and crannies of everyday life in the relationship. Men also reported denial of material assistance to the partner and/or her relations as punishment for infidelity.

3.5.5 Tit-for-tat
There were also those who felt that they would rather revenge. They used such phrases as “aliyense azyi yendera yake”, meaning everyone to himself/herself:

There are women who say that if their husbands have extra marital affairs they will also be doing the same…. Then you have those women who say [iye amanyenga, inenso ndizinyengetsa!], he goes out fucking, I will also go out get fucked! …..And for others, sometimes it happens just out of desperation so they say let me just do this so that I earn a little money for some vegetables. [Extracts from individual direct interview with a woman who does not engage in multiple sexual partnerships, Bangwe, Blantyre; Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Chileka, Blantyre; Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Mpima, Mchinji].

The women who resort to multiple concurrent sexual partnerships because of their husband’s infidelity do so as to get even with their spouses. Such an attitude was reported in both married and unmarried women in both rural and urban areas of the study. Retaliation of this nature may also be a way of attracting a counter-reaction from a spouse – to see how the partner will respond after “feeling it”. The counter-reaction could be positive, leading to change in behaviour, or negative, resulting in a strained or broken relationship.

3.5.6 Violence and break up
Retaliation is usually accompanied by violence against the partner or against the third member in the relationship. A woman may become violent against her spouse or against the spouse’s other partner. The same applies to men – they may become violent against their spouses or against their spouses’ other partners. Violence is a show of force, a test of each other’s strength or/and commitment, and even a prelude to breaking up. Sometimes the relationship can be terminated without any show of force or animosity, while one of the partners – or both – harbour frustrations, ill-feelings and hatred for each other:
Sometimes if the woman does hold her patience, she follows her husband to wherever he is. If she finds him she does not do anything but just looks at him and off she goes back home and pack her belongings and goes back to her parents and that is the end of the marriage. It means the woman does not like violence. She just gets angry and leave.

[Extract from individual interview with a woman who does not engage in multiple sexual relationship, Bangwe, Blantyre]

The extreme cases of violence reported were suicide, murder and maiming of partner’s private parts, hands, or face. These mark the highest stages of jealousy, frustration and anger. Younger women, especially in the urban areas, reported they might maim their partners’ other partner’s while men both in the rural and urban areas reported that they would consider physically eliminating both their partners and those whom they were cheating with, in the extreme case. Some older women, especially, those in established marital relationships, reported the possibility of killing one-self by taking temeki (rat poison), if they discovered infidelity on the part of their spouses.

Breaking up and quitting the relationship was a reaction that the younger males and females preferred, especially in the urban areas. They cited the fear of the possibility of contracting HIV and the love for themselves as the reasons for considering breaking up. The enlightened younger males and females in the urban areas maintained that they loved themselves and their bodies so much that they could not allow to be abused in multiple concurrent relationships. It was also a way of avoiding getting into situations of confrontations and embarrassments that would possibly attract public attention.

The major reason cited for breaking up was the pride of men and their intolerance:

Men will never accept seeing or hearing that their partners have other sexual affairs with other men. They will just terminate the relationship or the marriage....[Extract from individual interview with a woman who does not engage in multiple sexual relationship, Bangwe, Blantyre]

When a man finds out that his wife goes out with another man he will just send her off to her home. That is the end of the marriage. But when a woman finds out that her husband has other love affairs, she may just grieve inside. Sometimes out of fear that if she confronts the husband he might send her away, or even beat her up. It is painful. But when she has had too much, she might confront the other woman instead of her husband....[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Kavukula, Mzimba]

3.5.7 Counselling
Some married males and females said they would refer their spouses’ infidelity to their ankhoswe, marriage counsellors or their parents in-law for counselling. In traditional marriages the ankhoswe are mandated to deal with such matters. This strategy would work only if the couple feels that they are still in love despite the
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

...mishap and are willing to tolerate it. The counselling may take one or more sessions, the possibility of a period of monitoring by the *ankhoswe*. In most cases counselling works in cases where the culprit admits wrong doing and is willing to change; and, above all, where the couple is still in love.

### 3.5.8 Litigation and compensation

In cultures where marriage involves the payment of *lobola*, bride wealth, litigation and compensation claims for infidelity are not uncommon. This is particularly the case where a married woman commits *chigololo*, adultery. The husband has the traditional right to sue both the wife and her sexual companion for compensation. The reason being that in such cultures husbands have exclusive sexual rights to their wives. Any man caught with another man’s wife is required to pay compensation to the woman’s husband. However, given that such cultures allow polygamy, it is almost impossible for a woman to demand compensation for her husband’s infidelity – unless she proves beyond any doubt that the man did not have any intentions to marry the other woman. Even if he did not have such intentions, such cultures permit men to have more than one sexual partner. Litigation and compensation therefore victimizes the married women and their extra-marital partners, while married men who engage in infidelity may simply suffer the wrath of the *ankhoswe* through condemnation and counselling.

### 3.5.9 Precautionary measures

Enlightened informants, both male and female, said that if they knew that their partners were having other sexual partners outside their relationships or in cases where they were suspicious of what was happening, they would make sure that they used condoms in all sexual encounters. This would be done as a precautionary measure against possibilities of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. This was particularly the case in casual sex associated with *zibwenzi zongochezerana*, casual sexual relationships that are unlikely to result in marriage. However, there were still quite a few younger respondents who reported that they did not use condoms even in the cases of casual sex because:

*Switi sadyera mpepala*, candy is not eaten inside its paper wrapper or packet, meaning one cannot get a good feel of sex with an obstructive object put on.  

[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent males, Chileka, Blantyre; same expression used in Bangwe, Blantyre, and Liwonde, Machinga]

The above account indicates that both at the societal and the individual levels there are ways of handling the negative outcomes of infidelity and other forms of multiple sexual relationships. Many people who learn about their partners’ infidelity react to the situation and in some instances their reactions only subject them to further...
sexual risks. At the same time, the social mechanisms for handling partner infidelity available in the communities encourage partners to stay together even when there are no indications of partner discontinuation from engaging in multiple and concurrent sexual relationships, which further increases the potential of the risk of contraction of HIV.

See D. Rweyemamu and M. Fuglesang, Multiple and Concurrent Sexual Partnerships among youth in Tanzania. A Research study commissioned by Femina HIP in preparation for a Regional Youth MCP Campaign, May.
4.0 Deterrents and potential intervention points

This study enquired into factors that would deter some people from engaging in multiple and concurrent sexual relationships, as well as the potential intervention points. The account below presents some findings on these factors.

4.1 Motivations for not engaging in MCP

Motivations for not engaging in MCP vary from culture and tradition to material consideration and the fear of contracting HIV and AIDS.

4.1.1 Culture and tradition

Culture and tradition do not allow certain types of MCP. These include chigololo, adultery, chiwerewere and chisembwere, immorality, promiscuity and loose sexual behaviour. Those who engage in these are given ridiculous labels and derogatory terms. However, culture and tradition permit some types of MCP such as mitala, polygamy, and multiple sexual partnerships associated with rites of passage.

*There is also another form of marriage in which a man marries more than one wife, this is called mitala (polygamy)...in the villages it is regarded as marriage, but generally our culture or tradition does not allow people to engage in extra marital affairs and other multiple partner sexual relationships....Those people who do that do it out of their own will.* [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Zubayumo Makamo, Mzimba].

*Our [Yao] culture does not allow marrying more than one wife but encourages just having other relations, but because of the mixing of people from various cultures in this area now, everyone does it according to where they come from...*[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Machinjiri, Bantyre].

Some rites of passage such as litiwo among the Yao of Machinga, which is the first rite of motherhood, performed after a woman has given birth to her first child, discourages married women who are first time mothers from indulging in multiple sexual partnerships to avoid mdulo or tsempho, some kind of child disease traditionally believed to be passed on to a child by the mother who engages in sex before weaning the child.

Culture and tradition also require women to be submissive to their husbands and to show their husbands love. The informants in all the study areas reported that when the husbands want sex their female partners are supposed to accept and provide, to satisfy their husbands’ sexual needs and to prevent them from going out to other

---

28 Initiation rites and those related to motherhood are graded. They come in series. The first rite is performed after the birth of the first child.
women. Submissiveness is therefore not just because men demand it, but also because it is a strategy to prevent the men from engaging in multiple sexual partnerships.

4.1.2 Religious beliefs
Some religious beliefs do not condone any form of MCP. This is typically the case with most Christian denominations and sects. Those with strong religious convictions from such Christian doctrines as “one man, one wife” would stay away from engaging in MCP. However, some Malawian christian sects such as Chipangano cha Abraham, literally meaning Abraham’s Covenant and the Last Church of God, permit polygamy. So does the Church cha Makolo, meaning traditional church. It is therefore not every Christian church in Malawi that condemns polygamy. The Islamic faith also permits it. Of late, there has been a sudden rise in Pentecostalism in Malawi. This group of believers does not condone any form of sexual promiscuity. Belief in Pentecostalism can therefore act as a strong deterrence to engagement in MCP.

From the church we are advised to have one sexual partner and this means we will get married to that person. This is because as Christians we believe that one man should have one woman. As for the Muslims they can have as many wives as they can. Some even have four or five. But that cannot happen with Christians because they would be excommunicated.

[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Mpima, Mchinji].

Though polygamy is practiced in the villages, if we take it from the point of view of the Bible it is adultery. It is just like prostitution...

[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Zubayumo Makamo, Mzimba].

4.1.3 Sexual taboos
In the rural areas there are sexual taboos related to pregnancy and birth that might deter some people from engaging in multiple sexual partnerships. For example, a pregnant woman is not supposed to have any sexual contacts with her husband or any other man during the last six months of her pregnancy, equally, the husband of a pregnant woman is not supposed to have sex with other women, to avoid tsempho, believed to be a disease with signs and symptoms that resemble those of malnutrition. After delivery, the woman is supposed to continue abstaining from sex till the baby is about to be weaned. However, during that period the man may secretly be encouraged to have “sexual relief” with other women. Should he do so, he is not supposed to hold his baby in his hands for fear of tsempho. This restriction may deter the man from having sexual relations with other women. Abstinence related to pregnancy and delivery is known, among the Yao of Machinga as ukhristu (behaving like a christian) or kuthundira, meaning restraint or abstention. It is also common among the Ngoni and Tumbuka of Mzimba. Its value is that it restrains both men and women from having sexual relationships, at least for a certain given period.
A 2008 study on safe motherhood done in Mzimba, Nkhotakota and Machinga\textsuperscript{29}, noted that sexual abstention is a dominant social behaviour in the three districts. It may involve not just the couple having a baby, but their parents and other members of the extended family as well. The participants reported that when a baby is born:

- Husband and wife sleep on a separate mat, away from each other for not less than three months to avoid having sex. The couple’s parents, if they are still sexually active, also do the same.

- After three months, they perform the ritual of \textit{kuika ku malo} or \textit{kuika ku mphasa}, bringing the baby to the bedside of the parents, meaning the baby begins to share the same sleeping place with the parents, sleeps on one side of the bed or mat. It denotes the couple’s resumption of sexual activity.

In this ritual the couple prepares traditional medicines that are given to the baby in porridge form. Sometimes, the medicines are put on fire and the baby is passed to each other over the fire. When this is done, some of the medicines are tied in two small bunches with a one kwacha coin in the middle of each bunch. The bunches are dropped at the couple’s parents’ doorsteps at dawn which is an indication that the parents can resume their sexual activities.

The ritual was also reported in Machinga though with some variations to do with the use of medicines. In some Machinga communities it was reported that no medicines are prepared, but the man uses a cloth used during sexual activity to give the baby a massage all over the body to prevent \textit{tsempho}.

The 2008 study however observed that much as these beliefs, behaviours and practices are culturally practiced in all the three regions of Malawi, albeit with some local variations, the general trend is that they are on the decrease due to the new knowledge being communicated to people through safe motherhood campaigns. The new messages demystify the taboos. The informants also reported that much as there is a belief that some kind of calamity may occur if the beliefs are violated, in reality, nothing really happens. The belief systems are therefore purely for their cultural value.

In this study, both men and women in Mzimba mentioned these taboos and belief systems:

\begin{quote}
As a way of family planning, especially just after child birth, a woman should avoid sex with the husband, \textit{wabindikilenge kumwanalume wake} (meaning sexual exclusion)... this practice is from our parents [meaning tradition]. The danger is that this sexual exclusion can have negative effects sometimes because it may forces the man to go out of the house... to other
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{29} W.C. Chirwa and S. Chizimbi, 2008: \textit{A Formative Research on An Integrated Community-based Maternal and Newborn Care Learning Programme in Malawi: Rumphi, Nkhotakota and Machinga Districts}, for \textbf{ACCESS Malawi}.  

61
In the past, as a tradition, when a child is born in the family, the husband and the wife would abstain from sexual activity for two years… but these days due to the new knowledge from hospitals, they may abstain only for a few months. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Zubayumo Makamo, Mzimba].

Related to the present study, the real value of these taboos and belief systems is that they restrain people from engaging in multiple sexual partnerships during certain times or cycles of their sexual life.

4.1.4 Material costs
Fear of material costs also deter some people from engaging in multiple sexual partnerships. This is particularly the case with the younger urban men who reported that having more than one partner is expensive. Sexual partnerships are materially maintained through financial and other forms of support.

Girlfriends need to be taken out (some times in expensive cars and to expensive places), they need to dress up and show off, and need to “eat well”. Engaging in multiple sexual partnerships is therefore not a cheap life. It is not meant for the poor – at least in the urban context. Young females may also find it less attractive to engage in multiple sexual partnerships with males who cannot afford it, hence the popular saying: 3Cs of love: cash, car and cellphone.

4.1.5 Fear of HIV, AIDS and STIs
The field data indicate that the fear of contracting HIV, AIDS and other STIs is a real one and deters a lot of people from engaging in multiple sexual partnerships:

These days with this new disease, men have zipped up their trousers. They do not just flash out their ‘members’… Women too have locked up between their thighs… It is dangerous to do it anyhow like in the past….[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Nsanama, Machinga].

The fear of contracting HIV and AIDS was mentioned by all age categories and by both men and women in rural and urban areas alike:

there are many problems one would face with this habit of sleeping with many women or men, most especially diseases, and particularly contracting HIV… [and] its not only HIV there are many other sexually transmitted diseases like chizonono [syphilis], mabomu [boils], chindoko [gonorrhea]. …[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Machinjiri, Bantyre].

You can contract diseases like HIV/AIDS, mabomu [boils], mauka (fungal infections). This happens because some people just do it puleni (plain, without using condom). [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Mpima, Mchinji].
However, when asked about the use of condoms as protection against HIV and other STIs transmissions, there were mixed views about the desirability of the technology. While most informants had confidence in condoms, some doubted them. Those who doubted argued that condoms facilitated the spread of HIV and AIDS because they were not one hundred percent effective. In some respondents the belief was that condoms have holes through which the HIV can pass:

Some people say that it [the condom] helps, but others says it does not help because yimakhala yobowola, it is perforated, so that it should spread diseases. Others say that when a man is sleeping with the woman the condom can slip off and get stuck in the woman and it would need an operation to remove it from the woman. Given also that the man will ejaculate in the condom, and should it be stuck in the woman it will be just like ejaculating directly into the woman. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Mpima, Mchinji].

Personally I do not believe in condoms. I do not trust them. I do not believe that condoms prevent the spread of HIV, but they do prevent pregnancy. The reason is that before sex you do foreplay with the man. You do not know what fluids you touch and pick up… the man touches everything and in the process you are not sure what he passes on to you, so even if he puts on a condom the virus may have already been passed on to you…that’s why I say I do not trust them as far has the prevention of HIV transmission is concerned. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Kavukula, Mzimba].

Also because use of condoms gave the false hope that whenever one is having sex with a condom on one is always protected. As a result some people were using condoms rather wrongly, including putting them on hours ahead of the sexual act. Some informants further reported that condoms have mafuta (oils) that can cause other diseases.

4.1.6 Negative public image
Over-indulgence in multiple sexual partnerships earns a person bad names and labels such as shirt chaser (for a man), trouser or shorts chaser (for a woman), chidyamakanda- a man or woman who does it with women or men much younger than himself/herself or chidyankhalamba one who does it with older men or women; palowa ina (woman who lets in different men), pelemende, a hardened or extremely resilient person – usually applied to those who have survived repeated contractions of STIs; saonera ndi maso, one who just cannot stop at seeing (but would go another step to act), a label given to those with reckless sexual behavior. Such names and labels are offensive and deter some people from over-indulgence in multiple sexual partnerships. They also portray a negative public image of those who engage in MCP or, for that matter, any other morally deplorable sexual behaviors. For women, the negative public image is even more depressing and discouraging because:

Chigololo cha munthu wamkazi [literally meaning a woman’s adultery or promiscuity] is publicly exposed and is given a lot of bad publicity while men can get away
with it. In fact, **chigololo cha munthu wa mwamuna** [literally meaning a man’s adultery or promiscuity] is not taken seriously by the public…that is the unfair part of it. [Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Chileka, Blantyre].

Due to the “unfair part of it” some women may just succumb to accepting the power imbalance:

**Timangololera kuti basi ndi amuna athu anatibelekera ana** – we just accept that well they are our husbands who gave us our children. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Mpima, Mchinji].

### 4.1.7 Fear of quarrels, conflicts, litigation and compensation

Some respondents reported the fear of perpetual conflicts and quarrels in the family as well as with other people outside the family; and the fear of being taken to court for compensation, among the reasons for avoiding engaging in multiple sexual partnerships – especially with those who already have other relatively permanent relationships or those married. Quarrels, conflicts and litigation can attract the attention of other members of society because they become public hence taking the sexual partnerships, which often are supposed to be public, away from the private sphere:

If the husband suspects that his wife is having an extra-marital relationship he may create a story. He may stay there is a funeral at my home and I would like to go and attend while in actual fact he just goes somewhere to wait until in the evening or at night and he comes back to catch his wife with her lover. He takes her to the chief’s court. The chief will hear the case and call in witnesses. People from the families and the community will attend the case. It becomes embarrassing….Both the wife and her lover may be asked to pay **chindapusa**, a fine or compensation [literally the word means ‘I have been a fool’ or ‘I have acted like a fool’ because of being caught]. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Mzangawo, Mchinji].

…the ‘owner’ of the husband [meaning legitimate wife] will fight and may even kill the woman going out with her husband. As for a man, he may just stop helping his wife if he discovers that she has extra-marital relationships…there will be misunderstandings and quarrels in the home and the husband may beat up his wife….]. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Zubayumo Makamo, Mzimba].

For a woman her marriage is going to break if she is caught with another man, or if her husband finds out that she goes out with another man. He might also just chase her and let her go to her home. Men will fight or even kill each other if one of them finds out that the other one is going out with his wife. Husbands will not accept to see their wives having extra-marital affairs with other men… [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Zubayumo Makamo, Mzimba].

### 4.2 Risk perceptions

This study inquired into whether the informants have an understanding of the notion or concept of risk, how deep and well grounded that understanding is; and who has a
better understanding of it in the communities studied. Some of the statements in the preceding account show that there are concepts of risk in the communities studied. These can be summarized as follows:

- A person who engages in multiple sexual partnerships has a higher risk of contracting HIV and AIDS and other STIs than one who does not. This view was expressed by most participants regardless of age, gender and location.

- Those who engage in multiple sexual partnerships are prone to picking up conflicts and quarrels with their contenders and competitors. Fighting and quarrelling create a bad name for the individuals who engage in them, and a negative image about the individuals in the community. The risk of violence may result in bodily harm such as maiming and mutilation of sexual organs. Younger women and men in both rural and urban areas were particularly sensitive to the issues of violence. This probably because for the last three years there have been a number of media reports of men and women mutilating their partners’ sexual organs, maiming faces, or amputating hands on discovery of infidelity.

- Worrying about a partner who engages in multiple sexual partnerships may cause frustration, anger, and despair. A person in a state of these may develop psychological trauma, *amaonda*, meaning gets thin, and sometimes *amadwala kwirikawiri chifukwa cha maganizo*, frequently becomes sick due to worries.

- Those who cannot contain the psychological trauma may commit suicide, or may kill the partner, or the one who takes away their partner from them. Suicide may be by hanging one-self, or by taking rat position popularly known as *temeki*.

- Indulgence in multiple sexual partnerships results in negligence of the home and domestic responsibilities. In turn, these result in the family suffering, especially the wife and children. Suffering of the family becomes accurate when one of the partners, especially the man, dies of diseases such as AIDS contracted through engagement in multiple sexual partnerships. Married women in both rural and urban areas were able to make these connections between engagement in multiple sexual partnerships and neglect of the home.

- Death of parents due to AIDS, which is often contracted through engagement in multiple sexual partnerships, creates orphanhood. The orphaned children are left alone or with other relatives, including old grandparents who cannot fully care for them. Women of the older ages, especially in the rural areas, were very emphatic in expressing this opinion.

- There is no peace of mind in the person who engages in multiple sexual partnerships. The person is always cautious of being caught, lies a lot, and avoids free interaction with some people. Such a person is therefore not free, *amakhala*.
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

... womangika, is a prisoner of his/her own. Some respondents referred to such a person as kapolo wa khalidwe lake, slave of his/her own behavior. A person who engaged in multiple sexual partnerships therefore risks losing personal social freedom. More women than men expressed this view.

- People who engage in multiple sexual relationships risk becoming poor because amaononga ndalama zawo zambiri...amamwaza chuma chawo, spend a lot of money and are reckless with their wealth or property. This view was common among the older informants, especially females.

The above discussion suggests that when an individual’s MCP behaviour is known to one’s sexual partner, there are institutional mechanisms of handling such misconduct. However, the general principle is that these mechanisms should strive to the best to ensure that MCP does not lead into separation, divorce or physical violence. Though good for social order, this principle may be dangerous because it does not empower individuals to quit relationships in which the partners engage in risky behaviors thus putting the ‘victims’ at greater risk.

4.3 Local resources for reducing MCP

Enlightened informants mentioned a number of locally available resources available for reducing MCP. However, for the rural areas, the range of options is rather narrow.

4.3.1 Anti-AIDS campaign programs

The commonly cited resource was the anti-AIDS campaign messages and programs run by civil society organizations (CSOs) such as national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In both rural and urban areas there are several CSOs and NGOs running anti-AIDS campaign programs. Informants reported that the anti-AIDS campaign messages include discouragement of multiple sexual partnerships. However, they were quick to observe disparities in accessibility of information between rural and urban areas. In the Ngumbe area just outside Blantyre, the informants observed that anti-AIDS campaign NGOs concentrate on delivering their messages in townships and trading centres, leaving out rural areas even if such areas were so close to the townships. Similar views were expressed by informants in Liwonde and Nsanama in Machinga who observed that there were no anti-AIDS NGOs in their areas. In most cases, people in these areas relied on messages from radio stations and other sources.

The government also has several anti-AIDS programs running on the radio and some implemented through government health facilities. Programs such as prevention of mother to child transmission (PMCT) offer counselling to couples and partners. In this, people get messages on the dangers of engaging in multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships.

4.3.2 Community-based organizations (CBOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs)
Community-based organizations such as home-based care (HBC) groups, Village AIDS Committees (VACs), youth groups, and all those dealing with the issues related to AIDS prevention offer advice on the dangers of engaging in multiple sexual partnerships. Similar advice is given by faith-based organizations, not only from the point of view of AIDS prevention, but also from Christian morality point of view.

The existence of a multiplicity of locally based CBOs and FBOs is one of the major available resources for campaigns aimed at reducing MCP, if these could be properly utilized.

4.3.3 Culture, tradition and taboos
As noted elsewhere above, some elements of culture, tradition and taboos can reduce the practice of engaging in multiple sexual partnerships. Community reactions to people who engage in MCP show the extent to which a given community discourages or condones MCP behaviour. The labels and names given to those who engage in MCP, the varied reactions to infidelity and unfaithfulness, the possibilities of litigation and compensation all show mechanisms for handling MCP behavior. Most of these mechanisms differ by marital status. The evidence presented above suggests that in most cases, it is the MCP behavior of married than unmarried people that is not condoned in society, and communities have mechanisms of handling this. The mechanisms include counselling, litigation and compensation. However, compensation may not end MCP relationships. If anything, it may just cement and perpetuate it. The person paying compensation may not wish to lose twice: the woman and the material things paid as compensation. He may therefore want to continue with the relationship after paying the compensation.

4.3.4 Increased economic opportunities and economic empowerment
Informants of various ages, male and female and from both rural and urban areas, and especially those from the townships and trading centres, maintained that increased economic opportunities and economic empowerment would reduce MCP:

There should be opportunities for business for women because what pushes them into immorality is poverty. If women are empowered economically they will not be going for men.... The men take advantage of these poor women....[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Liwonde, Machinga. Similar accounts from Kasungu and Mchinji].

With money in the homes families will be stable. There will be no problems so no one will want to go out and look for other men....[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Liwonde, Machinga].

This view conflicts with the earlier finding that affluence can also drive both men and women into MCP because they can afford the material costs associated with it. Economic empowerment will therefore only assist to raise a stable income but not necessarily totally reduce their vulnerability to engaging in MCP. To have a
comfortable material life does not necessarily deter anyone from engaging in MCP. It may even worsen the situation.

There are numerous NGOs and CSOs offering small-scale soft loans for business in Malawi. Some of these, such as the National Association for Business Women (NABW) and FINCA exclusively offer economic empowerment support to women. Others such as the Malawi Rural Development Fund (MALDEF), the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF), are government programs financed by international aid. MALDEF and MASAF provide funding for social support projects, including micro-financing, to village-based groups. The Malawi Rural Finance Company (MRFC) provides loans for small businesses, especially those agro-based, to individuals. Some international NGOs, such as World Vision, Action AID, Concern Universal, Concern World Wide, also provide economic empowerment interventions through their livelihoods support programs.

4.4 Potential intervention points

The preceding account shows that there are several potential intervention points for the reduction of MCP. These range from the traditional cultural institutions to the modern media-based programs.

4.4.1 Traditional cultural institutions

The findings of this study suggest that much as most cultural and traditional beliefs may be dying, there are still a few that play a crucial role in shaping the individuals’ sexual behaviors. Key ones are those related to rites of passage; those related to marriage systems and practices; and those related to sexual taboos. Some of these may not have meaningful scientific value. However, they provide some useful concepts about sexual life that might inform scientific interventions. For example, the rites of passage shape young people’s sexual lifestyles and preferences. Some marital systems, such as polygamy, condone multiple sexual partnerships. Traditional sexual taboos promote abstinence and indicate the communities’ awareness that certain types of sexual conduct may cause illness. This opens an opportunity for positive awareness building, by turning around the negative messages rooted in the cultural beliefs. As they stand, most of the taboos relating to sexual abstinence are negative in the sense that they may compromise the sexual bond between partners. However, the traditional concept and knowledge that there is a possible connection between sex and disease could work as a foundation on which to build positive knowledge, practices and behaviors. Thus, the cultural and traditional institutions, such as those responsible for rites of passage, and the individuals acting as guardians of sexual taboos, could be useful intervention points for reducing behaviors and practices associated with MCP. Informants in the rural areas in all the three study districts made similar observations:

The elderly people, including the anankungwi, guardians of puberty rites of passage, are important in this because they are the ones who can easily transfer their cultural practices and traditions to the younger ones. Once one receives such knowledge, it stays
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

in the head. One lives with it forever. [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent males, Nsanama, Machinga].

These days, culture is no longer effective… traditions are dying because of democracy (meaning rights). People, and especially the young ones, feel that they can do anything. They say ndi ufulu wanga, meaning it is my right… So they do not protect themselves enough because there is nothing to restrain them… Cultural taboos and traditional beliefs are important because they restrain you. If you do not know them, you have nothing to restrain you…[Extracts from adolescent females, Ngumbe, Blantyre].

4.4.2 Religious institutions
The field data indicate that religious institutions are very powerful in shaping people’s sexual behaviors. This applies to both rural and urban communities. Constant reference was made to the role of the church as a key player in this. Christian marriages based on the biblical notion of one man, one wife were said to be the ideal marriages. All other sexual behaviors and practices falling outside the Christian marriages were regarded as abnormal and sinful acts. On the other side of the argument, Islamic beliefs are equally important in shaping their believers’ sexual behaviors. Much as Islam condones polygamy, it does not condone immorality. In fact, even in the polygamous marriages, sex is supposed to be confined within the circle of the polygamous marriage itself. Doing it outside this is immorality and is not allowed. It therefore follows that religious institutions, be they Christian or Islamic are important potential intervention points.

4.4.3 Already existing intervention programs
In addition to the religious institutions, there are also a variety of existing programs run by the government, the National AIDS Commission, local and international NGOs and local CBOs. These provide potential intervention points for almost any type of anti-AIDS campaigns. The informants listed a number of possible institutions and bodies with which links can be made:

- NAC programs run on the radio – usually in partnerships with NGOs, CBOs and media institutions. They send out messages on AIDS prevention that include the dangers of engaging in MCP.
- CSO programs – there are many civil society organizations with HIV and AIDS intervention programs. These include youth programs such as Youth Alert, which airs on MBC Radio1; the Adventist Relief Agency (ADRA) with their Tikuferanji radio and television program, and several others.
- Government and CHAM (Christian Hospitals Association of Malawi) run HIV and AIDS prevention programs such as PMCT and Prevention Is Better Than Cure (PIBTAC). The latter mostly targets the youth and involves popular performances such as drama, netball, football, bawo (a popular Malawian game), among others.
• Media for communication – the effectiveness of any intervention will depend on the extent to which it is able to utilize print, electronic, and popular media. The mushrooming private and community radio stations offer alternatives to the state controlled broadcasters such as MBC and Television Malawi (TVM). Blantyre, Mchinji, and Mzimba have community radio stations that can air programs tailor-made for the local communities, while all the study districts are covered by more than one private radio station. All radio stations in Malawi have anti-AIDS awareness programs that touch on the dangers of engaging in multiple partner sexual relationships.

4.4.4 Local gatekeepers
When asked about gatekeepers, the informants mentioned a number of these with varying degrees of confidence attached to them and their work. Commonly cited were church leaders such as priests of various ranks and denominations. The informants displayed very high confidence in these in religious leaders on matters related to marriage, family relationships and sexual morality. Mentioned as being equally important were church elders and other clerics.

Traditional leaders, including chiefs, were also mentioned as important gatekeepers, especially in the rural areas. However, the informants, both in the rural and urban areas, displayed reservations and limited confidence in chiefs as gatekeepers on matters related to sexual behaviors and practices. Three reasons were cited for the reservations:

• The chiefs, themselves, are key players in multiple sexual relationships. In most rural areas, most chiefs tend to have more than one wife or sexual partners. It is thus difficult for them to condemn a practice in which they themselves engage.

• In the urban areas chiefs are just ceremonial. They are just ‘block leaders’ appointed or elected on the basis of individual popularity and enterprise, not because they come from chiefly families according to tradition. As such, they do not necessarily carry the traditional mandate to police the behaviors and practices of people under them.

• With the coming in of democracy and the opening up of society, the creation of new and parallel institutions to which people can refer their problems, and the numerous interventions coming into society through the efforts of CSOs, NGOs, and other stakeholders, the power and influence of the chiefs are on the decline, though not completely dead. The chiefs may therefore be less influential in some social matters such as the debate on MCP. Urban informants bluntly felt that:

*Here the chiefs are not that important…they are not respected so people do not really listen to them…. They are also the ones who go out with so many women…*[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent males, Bangwe, Blantyre].
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

Politicians, such as members of parliament, were also cited as potential gatekeepers because of their advantage in reaching out to a lot of people through public rallies, and connections with government institutions and other stakeholders. However, they, like chiefs, were said to command limited confidence on matters related to MCP. The reason being that:

they are the ones who start this whole issue of having too many women… They have zibwenzi, love affairs, all over. Most of them do not live exemplary lifestyles. are therefore not role models on such matters. Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Mpima, Machinga.

Best placed were said to be parents, guardians, and the elderly people in local communities since they are the ones who can easily transfer their cultural practices and traditions to the younger ones. There is a popular proverb that says: mau a akulu amakoma akagonera, meaning the wisdom of the elderly matures with time. However, it was difficult in this study to establish the extent to which younger people are likely to follow or abide by the wisdom of the elderly.

A special category of the elders that play key gate keeping roles are the custodians and guardians of initiation rites and rites of passage, anankungwi, and marriage guardians, ankhoswe. Being custodians of rites, anankungwi, play pivotal roles in gate keeping beliefs, norms and values related to sexuality and sexual relationships. On their part, the ankhoswe play vital roles in counseling on marital and sexual relationships.
5.0 Further Observations

The account below provides further observations on the findings of this study. It starts with a discussion of the contradictions in some of the key findings, followed by a presentation of the wider environment in which multiple sexual relationships occur in Malawi. Special attention is paid to the changing economic environment both at the regional and the national levels so as to put the findings of this study in a wider perspective.

5.1 Contradictions in drivers, determinants and justifications

The data presented here show some contradictions in the drivers and justifications for engaging in multiple sexual relationships, especially in relation to the influence of culture and material needs.

5.1.1 Contradictions in cultural drivers and justifications

The findings of this study show that certain cultural beliefs and practices promote multiple sexual relationships while others do not. Within culture are also found traditional institutions with inherent mechanisms for controlling MCP. For example, the taboos that govern sexual abstinence under certain conditions suggest the existence of the concept of illness or disease prevention. The prescriptions in the sexual taboos may be of doubtful scientific validity but nonetheless demonstrate that the communities have an inherent sense of the need for prevention of illness and bad health associated with sexual behaviors and practices. Such knowledge, rudimentary and less scientific as it might be, provides a good starting point for scientifically valid and effective interventions. The fear for negative public image, derogatory labels and names given to those who engage in multiple sexual partnerships suggests that communities have mechanisms for censuring individuals who deviate from what is locally regarded as “normal behaviour”. Cultural or traditional beliefs in diseases associated with sexual behaviors, such as tsempho or mdulo, provide mechanisms that would deter people from engaging in multiple and concurrent sexual relationships. Marriage counselling practices, miyambo ya m’banja, and community institutions of socialization and initiation provide some messages that discourage lifestyles associated with sexual promiscuity.

From the above observations, it can be argued that Malawian cultures are not just sexually permissive through and through. They contain inbuilt mechanisms that control the sexual behaviors of people and provide avenues for containing
engagement in multiple sexual partnerships. There is therefore need “to harmonize interventions with local cultures.”

5.1.2 Contradictions in material drivers and determinants
Earlier studies have shown that poverty is a major MCP driver in Malawi. The findings of this study show that much as this could be true, it would equally be true that affluence is a key driver. Poverty as an MCP driver applies more to economically disadvantaged women than it does to men because a poor man cannot sustain multiple sexual relationships.

The reason being that it requires material resources for one to sustain a lifestyle of engaging in multiple sexual relationships:

*If a man earns more money, he thinks that he has a licence to have several sexual partners. If a man does not have enough money he cannot have many partners.* [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult women, Kavukula, Mzimba]

When a man has money it is very difficult to control him. For example, if a man does not have enough money he may buy beer and put it in the fridge at home, drink and chat with his wife like my husband used to do. But if he has money he will stop doing that. I do not know why. *May be ndalama zija zimamtuma* [the money sends him out – meaning influences him]. This because such men think they can buy anything at that time. It is as if they are mad or something…. But there are also good ones who have money but they are just okay since they do not have many partners. So up to now I do not really get it why some men do that. [Extract from Individual interview with adult woman who used to have]

---

Affluent women and those economically empowered also have the capacity to use their resources to sustain a lifestyle that encourages multiple sexual relationships. Good examples of these are the women who engage in cross-border itinerant trade. Some of these engage in multiple sexual partnerships, partly as a strategy to further their economic gains, and partly also as a social lifestyle. The statements about trading women and their sexual lifestyles cited in the text box above provide evidence for this argument. It therefore follows that both poverty and affluence are drivers of MCP. While poverty applies more to economically disadvantaged women, affluence applies more to men and to the few economically empowered women.

5.2 Challenges in measuring concurrency

The various forms of sexual relationships and sexual behaviors and practices outlined in this study indicate some challenges in making strict distinctions between “multiple” and “concurrent” partnerships. For example, *zibwenzi*, multiple sexual relations, can be serial or concurrent; *chisembwere* and *chiwerere*, promiscuous sexual behaviours, can occur in serial or concurrent forms. *Chigololo*, can be adultery, fornication or simply having extra marital affairs. It can also happen serially or concurrently. *Mitala* are concurrent sexual relationships of a marital nature, which may also be combined with extra marital affairs. The factor that distinguishes concurrency is therefore the overlap in the sexual relationships. With the exception of serial monogamy and serial *zibwenzi*, the other sexual relationships discussed in this study have elements of, or at least the potential for, concurrency.

The results of this study suggest that the commonest form of non-marital sexual relationships in Malawi is *chibwenzi* or *zibwenzi*. These could be single, occurring at intervals in a serial manner, or multiple and concurrent. This raises the difficult question of conceptualizing and measuring concurrency. An individual can have multiple partners over a certain period of time, but they do not necessarily need to be concurrent. Similarly, an individual can have multiple concurrent sexual partners over a short period of time, break them up, enter into single serial relationships, and possibly back into multiple and concurrent ones. The number(s) of partners and the length of the time of the relationship(s) provide the dimensions of both the multiplicity and the concurrency of the sexual relationships. There is also the challenge of measuring the extent or level of concurrency in the wider society among both men and women: how many men with how many women; how spread out and over what/which geographical area; across which social categories and over which period of time. Such analysis would assist to unravel concurrency within the context of social networks, geographical variables, and periods of time.
The information gathered for this study suggest that the multiple serial and concurrent sexual relationships of the zibwenzi are common in Malawi because they are often of short durations, and are easy to enter into and to get out of. In such a situation it is possible to have high rates of HIV transmissions associated with multiple sexual relations of both serial and concurrent nature.

What is difficult to establish is the common pattern of the concurrent partnerships that take place in the Malawian communities; when or at what age the process starts; and the time periods for the concurrency. It is possible for some concurrent relationships to be of much shorter durations than others. Longer types of concurrent relationships easily graduate into mabanja ongolowana, cohabitation, and ‘informal’ mitula or polygamous relationships.

5.3 Moral panic and conceptions of risk and deterrence

The AIDS pandemic has created a moral panic within which the conceptions of risk and deterrence are located. Informants of all ages cited the fear of contracting HIV and AIDS as the major reasons they would not engage in casual sex, multiple and concurrent sexual relationships:

*These days, AIDS is common in people like us (the youth) because girls like us are busy chasing zidyamakanda while at the same time having relationships with boys of our own ages. In the end we infect the boys with HIV after having contracted it from zidyamakanda. Since the girls do not have just one relationship by the time they marry they will have infected many people. That is how the virus is spreading.*  
[[Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent females, Liwonde, Machinga].]

5.4 Spaces of multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships

A key, but not so clearly articulated, context of MCP in Malawi as in southern Africa in general is human mobility. Three forms of human mobility in Malawi are particularly linked to the environment in which multiple sexual relations take place. These are: the cross-border oscillating migrant labour system; cross-border and internal itinerant trade; and rural to urban migration.

5.4.1 “Bad seed” of labour migration

---

Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

Studies on labour migration in Malawi have shown that there is a close relationship between migration and high risk sexual behaviors in the process of migration, at the workplaces of the migrant workers, and in their rural homes on return from work.32

The informants in Chileka, a rural area just outside City of Blantyre boundaries, which had a migrant labour processing camp referred to labour migration as a “bad seed” planted in their area. They maintained the migrant labourers passing through the area in the 1970s and 1980s, left a lot of children who could not properly fit in the local communities. They could not be properly socialized because they lacked proper care and control. These offsprings of the migrants often live a reckless sexual life in their adult age. The migrants also left a culture of prostitution that has over time been entrenched and enforced by new developments such as new roads on which truck drivers ply their trade and in the process interact with local women; and mushrooming entertainment business in bars and lodges. Combinations of all these factors now result in a situation of sexual laxities:

*Here, people don’t care. A young man of 14 will ‘finish off’ a woman of 40. A woman of 50 will ‘hit on’ a young man of 18. They just do it. A girl at 13 years is already doing it. No qualms about it.* [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Chileka, Blantyre]

*No intervention can work here…Whatever you do, you just have to know that there is this bad seed…People just exchange partners….One goes out with this woman to day, tomorrow goes out with another one….A woman goes out with this man to day, next time goes out with one who went out with her friend the other day…. It is just a lifestyle.* [Extract from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Chileka, Blantyre]

The factors discussed above have a wider southern Africa regional context. In a region where labour migration and across-border migration for trading purposes are dominant features of the regional economy,

We have found that migration is a risk factor not simply because men return home to infect their rural partners, but also because their rural female partners – both those who are partners of migrants and those who are partners of non-migrants – are likely to become infected in the rural areas from outside their primary relationships. One might hypothesize that with their partners absent, these women are more likely to have additional sexual partners, and as a result to increase their risk of becoming infected. Additional partners may, of course, also be migrants….The specific circumstances in which rural women take on additional relationships needs further investigation, as well as the ways in which these relationships increase risk of HIV infection. Research is needed to better understand the complex social and sexual lives

---

Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

of women living in rural areas, especially in relation to the migration status of their partners.\textsuperscript{33}

Several other factors have created the favourable environment of the “bad seed” of human mobility in the region, which in turn facilitate the entrenchment of a culture of engagement in both casual and multiple partner sexual relationships. The following come into mind:

- The end of civil wars in the region from the early 1990s has improved the security situation while the construction of new highways and the improvements in transport and communication in general have opened up the political borders making it easy for people and goods to move both within and outside national boundaries.
- There are also several important migration changes that coincided with the advent of HIV and AIDS that need to be mentioned. They include:\textsuperscript{34}
  - The collapse of apartheid that brought new opportunities and reasons for migration across borders within the region. Migrants from neighbouring countries and further afield see South Africa as a new place to trade, shop, seek essential services, work and seek asylum.
  - South Africa’s formal trade with the rest of the continent has exploded, goods carried in the main by long-distance truckers.
  - Informal sector cross-border trading has also expanded dramatically since the end of apartheid.
  - The new gendering of migrancy. Women are becoming considerably more mobile, migrating for formal and informal work in ever-growing numbers and travelling more frequently for a variety of social and other reasons.
  - The mining industry persists with its regional single-sex contract labour system but there are much higher levels of social contact between migrant miners and people living near the mines, as well as those in the countryside.

These factors facilitate cross-border mobility of various types ranging from labour migration, to itinerant trade or hawking, as well as trade in sex with multiple partners. The vulnerabilities to HIV of people (migrant and non-migrant, mobile and relatively immobile) associated with this changing regime of migrancy are poorly understood. The evidence seems to suggest that migrants and migrant households in town and


\textsuperscript{34}\textit{This list comes from Brian Williams, Eleanor Gouws, Mark Lurie, Jonathan Crush, Spaces of Vulnerability: Migration and HIV/AIDS in South Africa. The Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) Migration Policy Series no. 24, at http://www.queensu.ca/samp/sampresources/samppublications/policyseries/policy31.htm}
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi
countryside are particularly at risk. So too are the residents of non-migrant communities with whom migrants interact on a daily basis throughout the region.\footnote{This argument is taken from Brian Williams, Eleanor Gouws, Mark Lurie, Jonathan Crush, Spaces of Vulnerability: Migration and HIV/AIDS in South Africa. The Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) Migration Policy Series no. 24, at http://www.queensu.ca/samp/samppresources/samppublications/policyseries/policy31.htm}

5.4.2 Geni yotentha – ‘hot business’
Mobility for itinerant trade has similar social impacts on the Malawian local communities. Urban informants in Mchinji, Machinga (Liwonde) and Blantyre frequently referred to geni (gain), hawking across district or national boundaries, or within a specific locality and community setup as contexts within which multiple sexual partnerships occur. Men in Mchinji had this to say:

*Some men will wait until you go away to get goods or trade at some place, and behind you they go and convince your wife to start chibwenzi with them… Some times they do that even to the wives of their friends… You know, women are not very strong in front of money and luxuries… These men move around with money and luxuries that attract women…. [Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult males, Mpima, Mchinji]*

*Women here follow you closely, to see what you are doing. Once they see their friend going out with another man, they immediately report to her husband with the intention of disturbing the marriage so they can get the man for themselves…. A family that comes here is never secure. The wife may start thinking that she has a happy family. That is not the case here. If you are a foreigner or stranger coming here from elsewhere, say for trade or work, they will admire your husband and want to take him away from you… A lot of people come here to do geni with their husbands, they end up being single. Their husbands are snatched away from them…. Either they go back to where they came from without a husband, or stay here single. A lot of the women you see here doing geni came with their husbands, now they are single. The women here challenge you. They say what have you got that we do not have? The man you have is not for you alone. For how long do you think you will have him to yourself alone? [Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adult females, Liwonde, Machinga]*

5.4.3 Anyamata a patauni- “the town boys” (rural-urban migration)
Improved security, increased mobility of people and goods across political boundaries and within national boundaries, availability of trade goods, the expansion of the informal sector due to cross-border trade, and the gendering of migranty, have resulted in increased population shifts from rural to urban centres. Young people, both male and female, pushed by the declining returns from the peasant economy, and attracted by new opportunities in towns, are increasing entering the urban informal sector. The Malawian urban youth and adolescents thus often refer to themselves as anyamata a patauni- “the town boys”, a loaded term that means more than the physical locations in which these people are found.
It denotes the wit, creativity, ingenuity, inventiveness and entrepreneurship that characterize the lives of these people in the urban centres. It is about the “fast side of life” that includes the economic activities these people engage in, and the social relations they create. The urban young males and females who participated in this study thus constantly referred to the engagement in casual and multiple sexual relationships as part of moyo wa patauni, town life.

In this there is a connotation of the risks and dangers of such a life. Living moyo wa patauni is not necessarily a pleasant thing. It is portrayed as being risky and dangerous. One always has to be crafty to survive while always carrying the risk.

5.5 Society in a state of cultural shock

It has been noted that the younger participants in this study frequently referred to physical beauty, dressing and maintenance of the body as sexual motivators, and as factors influencing engagement in multiple sexual relationships. However, the same people were also quick to observe the risks associated with this conception:

_Sometimes people are taken up by the physical looks of a man or woman without questioning his or her status. So they will go out with anyone who looks beautiful and show off to their friends. They come into a place like a bar and show off that they have come with a beautiful woman or a handsome guy who is nicely dressed. Their friends also feel encouraged and they think of competing… That’s how they end up changing partners…. [Extracts from Focus Group Discussion with adolescent males, Bangwe, Blantyre]_

Flashy dressing has come a part of the political liberalization Malawi has experienced since the early 1990s. Prior to that there were legal restrictions on dressing. For example, it was illegal for women to wear short or long pants (trousers) and mini-skirts; and for men to have long hair beyond their shoulders, to have dreadlocks, or to wear earrings. These restrictions were lifted with the coming of the new political dispensation that allowed for freedom of dress.
Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships in Malawi

6.0 Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships do not occur in a cultural, material and spatial vacuum. Culture, tradition, and religion impose on individuals rules, values, norms and ideas about who they are, who to engage in sexual relationships with, how, and when. From culture, tradition and religion, individuals also take their cues that guide them in sexual matters and provide justifications for sexual relationships. Thus, if communities were to be engaged to reflect on their dominant cultural, traditional and religious values, the community members might take responsibility for their sexual behaviors and practices. Out of such a process may emerge a sense of moral authority the community members might be compelled to abide by. The findings of this study indicate that there are no simplistic patterns in terms of where community members take their cues from on sexual matters. Culture, tradition, and religion, much as they are powerful forces in shaping or moulding people’s sexual behaviors, they also contain internal contradictions that influence some community members, especially the younger ones, to begin to develop their own sense of personal values, moralities, leadership and responsibility – including those related to casual, serial, monogamous and multiple sexual practices and behaviors.

The motivations, drivers and justifications for such behaviors may arise out of individual choices or out of collective pressures bearing on the individuals. The individuals, whether in rural or urban contexts, constantly find themselves in social and material situations in which they have to make choices and bargain their positions. The decision to engage or not to engage in multiple sexual relations is therefore a product of human agency, based on consideration of both individual and collective social and material conditions prevailing in the local and the wider locations in which the individuals find themselves.

The individuals are aware that engaging in multiple sexual relationships whether of a serial or concurrent nature puts them at risk of contracting HIV. They will arrive at the choice to do or not to do it depending on their evaluation of the social and material conditions in which they find themselves at a particular time and within the specific locations. Gender, age, poverty, mobility, and other social and material inequalities define the structural positions in which the individual and the collective bargains are made. In these, some individuals have social and material advantages while others do not. Those with advantages do not necessarily have a reduced risk of contracting HIV and AIDS through casual and multiple sexual relationships. If anything, the risk is equally shared. The reason is that those in positions of social and material advantage prey on the disadvantaged one, which balances the risk between the two groups. If an affluent person engages in multiple sexual partnerships, with poor or with other affluent partners, that person is just as at risk as a poor person engaging in the same behaviour.
Related to the possible entry points for the design of interventions, the findings of this study show the existence of several options ranging from government programmes, projects of NGOs, CBOs, and FBOs, to those linked to traditional leadership structures. However, there are two challenges worth considering. First, given that the factors that lead to engagement in MCP originate from individual choices as well as collective communal behaviours, the challenge is how to design interventions that target individuals and those that target communities at the same time. Focusing on just either of the two alone will not bring out the intended results. Individuals and communities need to be targeted simultaneously. The second challenge is to address the factors that foster MCP without conflicting with the socio-cultural norms and values that govern sexual relations, especially those of a marital nature and those founded on love and affection. For example, how can polygamy be targeted without creating conflicts with deep-rooted cultural norms of the communities that allow such a marital practice? Similarly, how can sexual relations related to cohabitation, courtship or betrothal be targeted without creating conflicts with the processes or procedures that in fact lead to monogamous marriages. Love affairs between unmarried people may in fact be the basis of stable monogamous or even polygamous marriages. How can pre-marital zibwenzi, love affairs, therefore be targeted without compromising the processes of dating and courting that would potentially end in stable monogamous marriages.

On the whole, the findings of this study point to the need for a multi-faceted approach to interventions aimed at reducing MCP in different communities. Such an approach should take into consideration the specific social and material conditions prevailing in a local community.
7.0 Way Forward

Based on the key findings of this study and the further observations above, a few suggestions on the way forward can be made.

7.1 Conceptions of sexual relationships
The study findings have shown that local communities have multiple conceptions of sexual relationships ranging from casual to permanent ones. Different terms and labels are attached to various relationships and the individuals who engage in them. It is therefore suggested that when designing communication strategies, these labels should be used in the message so as to make effective impact. Use of the concepts, terms and labels commonly used in the communities and among the members of the specific age groups will, among others, facilitate easy understanding of the messages as the targeted audience will have less problems relating to the messages.

7.2 Common forms of multiple and concurrent sexual relationships
The data presented in this study show that the common forms of multiple and concurrent sexual relationships in Malawi are zibwenzi, casual love affairs, and mitala, polygamous marriages. Terms for concurrent sexual relationship include chiwerewere, promiscuity, chisembwere, sexual recklessness, and chigololo, adultery, fornication or indulgence in extra-marital affairs. While mitala and chigololo apply more to married people the others are more general – applicable to both married and unmarried people. Chiwerewere and chisembwere are more of behavioural conceptions of multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships. They define the moral character of the individuals who engage in such relationships. This raises the possibility of designing interventions aimed at character formation through socialization institutions and agents. Such interventions should target the members of the younger generations through the education system and other character formation institutions such as churches and religious and cultural institutions.

7.3 Drivers of and justification for engaging in MCP

(a) Cultural and religious drivers
The findings of this study indicate that in Malawi having multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships is socially and culturally institutionalized. Polygamy is also condoned in almost all Malawian cultures. Some religions also permit it. In some communities, culture promotes engagement in multiple sexual partnerships through sexual socialization in the puberty rites of passage for both boys and girls. Given the
early stage at which puberty occurs, the implication is that the adolescent members of the community are exposed to the risk of contracting HIV at an early age and that risk grows as the adolescents also grow. This study therefore suggests that HIV and AIDS intervention programs aimed at proving sexual guidance to the youth be provided to them before they attain puberty. The institutions of rites of passage be the primary targets in these. It is further suggested that the cultural and religious institutions that permit polygamy be targeted, but not in a condemnatory manner, as polygamy may be useful in limiting the sexual network if extra-marital sexual relationships are not brought in. The resilience of the cultural institutions and belief systems that promote MCP points to the need to harmonize interventions with local cultures.

(b) Material justifications
The field data analyzed in this report indicate that much as there is a strong claim, and in some cases justifiably so, that most women engage in multiple sexual partnerships due to poverty, there is enough evidence showing that poverty and indulgence in multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships are mutually exclusive. Poor and rich women and poor and rich men engage in multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships. Wealth for both men and women may be associated with the ability to maintain multiple and concurrent sexual relationships. That ability is in terms of money, time, and other resources that they can invest in the maintenance of such relationships. Interventions should therefore not simplistically target (or prioritize) the poor only as doing so would be dealing with just part of the problem.

(c) Interpersonal factors
Peer pressure, mistrust between partners, physical and non-physical violence, the use of bad language and names against a spouse, non-constructive criticisms that do not offer solutions, failure to provide comfort when needed, were cited as factors that create an environment in which the decision to have multiple sexual partnerships are taken. It is therefore recommended that intervention programs should aim at encouraging healthy relationships based on mutual trust, respect, and dignity. Implementation of moral education programs in schools and religious organizations would assist in this.

It is further noted that interpersonal factors give rise to multiplicity and variability in the drivers and motivations for engaging in MCP. The implication of this is that different groups or categories of individuals will require different intervention strategies that fit their specific problems. Providing blanket strategies to all will hardly bring about the required impact.

(d) Personal motives
The quest for honour; the need for pressure, leisure, and entertainment; competition among members of the same age groups; and consumerism and material comfort are powerful drivers of MCP at the individual level. Physical distance between partners
may also affect relationships. Where one of the partners lives far away, is away from home for long periods, or too frequently, it is easy for the other partner to find a substitute. These motives suggest that intervention programs should go beyond the medical approach to HIV prevention. Programs in social activities that provide alternative forms of entertainment, leisure and pleasure, different conceptions of honour need to be given consideration – especially for the adolescents. AIDS education programs aimed at promoting faithfulness to one equally faithful partner would assist those physically separated from each other by distance not to engage in risky sexual relationships while away from their partners.

(e) Sexual pleasure and displeasure
Deserving special mention are the concepts or notions of sexual pleasure and displeasure. In this study, there was so much emphasis on lack of sexual satisfaction, and sexual displeasure, as being among the key drivers of MCP. The search for sexual satisfaction, expertise, competence and sexual pleasure that is assumed or understood to be not readily available in steady relationships drives many people to try it with other partners. The contention of this study is that with improved sex communication between partners most, if not all, sexual pleasures can be fulfilled in a steady relationship without necessarily indulging in multiple and concurrent partnerships. It is therefore suggested that interventions should take sex communication between/among partners and education on sexuality as priority areas.

7.4 MCP deterrents
Strong religious beliefs in monogamy; fear of violence, negative public image and litigation; psychological trauma accompanying revelation of infidelity, and the fear of material costs related to maintenance of multiple sexual relationships, are among the major deterrents of MCP this study came across. To deal with these, empowerment interventions aimed at helping the victims of MCP make informed decisions on whether to continue with, or to terminate, a relationship with a sexual partner who has other partners need to be put in place. Should the decision be to continue with the relationship, then the victims need to be aware of mechanisms to put in place and the protection strategies to follow. For those experiencing violence and psychological trauma, victim support units need to be established in local institutions where they can be easily accessible. Such units could be established in government departments at the district level, religious institutions and non-governmental bodies. Cultural taboos that promote sexual abstinence under certain conditions may be worth promoting as they assist in reducing the desire to engage in multiple sexual partnerships.

7.5 Locally available resources
Enlightened informants mentioned a number of locally available resources for reducing MCP. These include the anti-AIDS awareness programs run by governmental and non-governmental organizations, programs run by religious
organizations and community based groups; and media houses – including community radio stations. However, for the rural areas, the range of options is rather narrow. It is therefore recommended that intervention programs should not reinvent the wheel. Instead, they should utilize the already existing institutions and structures on the ground as some of these have already established a reputation. This should include the design and implementation of new creative strategies that with synergy with the already existing ones, and utilizing already established institutional structures.

7.6 Future research directions
This study has raised three research challenges. First is the challenge of measuring concurrency in time and space: what is the extent or level of concurrency in the wider society among both men and women - how many men with how many women; how spread out and over what/which geographical area; across which social categories and over which period of time. Such analysis would assist to unravel concurrency within the context of social networks, geographical variables, and periods of time. Related to geographical variables are the issues of mobility. Further research is required to capture detailed information on the connections between migrancy and concurrency both on the part of the individuals who move and their spouses left behind. Second is the challenge of establishing where the people experiencing sexual problems such as sexual dissatisfaction and dysfunction seek assistance. Mention was made of medicinal herbs from traditional healers, but no mention of hospitals and counselling. Would the available (or currently non-available) sources of assistance reduce or exacerbating the risks of engaging in MCP? What kind of assistance would be required, where and why? Studies on these questions need to be given consideration. There is also need for both medical and social research to explore sexual problems in detail. The third challenge relates to the resilience of the traditional institutions – cultural, religious and magico-religious – and belief systems some of which promote while others discourage MCP. Notable in these are the inherent contradictions in the values and the moralities that they promote or discourage. Further detailed studies of these institutions and their belief systems are needed so as to remove the danger of simplistically condemning or encouraging them.
REFERENCES

Chaima, M, 1994, Knowledge, Attitudes, Beliefs and Behaviours Regarding the sexual activities of girls in T/A Kalolo, Lilongwe District, Malawi. Lilongwe: AIDS Secretariat


Rweyemamu, D and M. Fuglesang, Multiple and Concurrent Sexual Partnerships among youth in Tanzania. A Research study commissioned by Femina HIP in preparation for a Regional Youth MCP Campaign, May.


