

OVERCOMING SOCIOECONOMIC STRUGGLE AND ENCOUNTERING RISK: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SOUTH AFRICAN FEMALE MIGRANTS

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This article employs ethnographic methods to study the motivations and sexual behaviors of migrant women between the ages of 15 and 45 living in informal settlements near Rustenberg, South Africa. We build on the prior literature on female mobility in South Africa, which describes a history of women who, under coercion to maintain the rural homestead in order to support the formal male migrant labor system, used migration as a means to escape. Our informants were not only driven by a desire to flee their destitute rural communities, but also by a need for autonomy that would enable them to provide for their families back home. Guided by women who had made the journey before them, our informants' arrival was marked by a realization that their economic security rested solely on their ability to establish relationships with men, who served both as long-term lovers as well as shorter-term transactional pursuits. This article dissects the complex nature of these relationships, which cannot simply be reduced to prostitution. The varying power dynamics are especially evidence in the case of condom use, and suggest that while women exhibit instances of empowerment, they are highly vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV. Keywords: South Africa, female, migration, HIV, transactional sex

The literature on female mobility in South Africa describes a long history of women who struggle to leave impoverished rural homesteads and seek employment, primarily through informal means. Some literature explicitly mentions migrant women's engagement in sex work and many note the male connections these women established to secure housing and ensure survival (Barnes 2002; Buijs 1993; Elder 2003). Migrant women's involvement in such transactional relationships represents a continued reliance on men because of the structural barriers to acquiring legitimate work within formal migrant labor systems. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the dynamics of these relationships reveals that migration allowed women to reinterpret their identities in a way that blurs the line between dependence and empowerment.

This article builds on the existing literature examining the motivations, journeys, and behaviors of migrant women in South Africa as they relate to transactional sexual relationships with the male migrants they encounter. Through ethnography, we hope to illuminate the complexity behind the "risky behaviors" that are central to the association

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of migration with HIV/AIDS in this country. We decided to undertake this study within informal settlements near Rustenburg, a town within the Northwest Province that happens to be situated atop one of the largest platinum reserves in the world. Almost half of the population in this area is composed of migrants, stemming from a rich history of both male and female migration. Thirty women ranging from 15 to 45 years old were included in the study and were primarily identified by their status as migrants and their willingness to allow an observer to participate in their quotidian rituals. All of these women were originally from rural areas, and some originated from outside South Africa's borders. Their stories represent previously untold accounts of movement in this region.

MIGRATION AND AIDS IN SOUTH AFRICA: WHERE DO WOMEN FIT?

The most robust literature around migration and health in South Africa focuses on the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Numerous epidemiologic studies document mobility or changing residence as an independent risk factor for HIV/AIDS and other STDs, although these findings occur almost exclusively in the context of male migration (Pison et al. 1993; Abdool Karim et al. 1992; Lurie et al. 2003a). More than any other infectious disease, it is thought that HIV/AIDS most closely relates to migration, because migration directly induces the behaviors that facilitate disease transmission (Caldwell et al. 1997:51). To clarify the complex mechanisms connecting migration and the spread of HIV/AIDS, Coffee and colleagues (2007) provides a compelling metapopulation model to tease out the effects of migration on HIV prevalence over time. She finds that, contrary to the hypothesis that migration facilitates epidemic-sized transmission by connecting low-risk and high-risk geographies, the model illustrates that migration-associated risky sexual behavior has far greater influence in driving the epidemic.

Indeed, many have intricately documented the nature and drivers of this migration-associated risky sexual behavior. Chirwa (1997) draws a connection between migration and social construction of manhood and masculinity in Malawi, arguing that migration can be viewed as a rite of passage that confers men with the sexual maturity to take on many female partners. The income earned by being a migrant laborer only supports this behavior, implying that these relationships are transactional in nature. Hunter (2002) corroborates these ideas through his study of men residing in an informal settlement home to a migrant population in Kwazulu-Natal. He argues that the economic positioning of men (relative to women), the tying of masculinity to multiple partnerships, and the active participation of women themselves, result in the transactional sexual networks seen among mobile populations. Inherently, the prevalence of these relationships is far more explanatory of the rapid speed of HIV transmission than simple "prostitution." Further distinction of these terms will be made later on in this article.

As with much of the literature on southern African migration, most epidemiologic studies of migration and its relationship with HIV/AIDS presume that "migrant" is synonymous with "male." As key components to formal migrant labor systems developed in the late 19th century and continuing through today, male migrants are viewed as the effective "carriers" of disease from their urban work sites, namely mines, back

to their unsuspecting wives and partners in rural areas. Lurie et al. (2003b) disputes this notion, finding that both male migrants and their female partners who stay behind engage in extramarital partnerships that put them at risk for infection. Importantly, he ascribes risky sexual behavior to both men *and* women; rather than a gender-mediated phenomenon, extramarital partnerships result from the disruption of homes and communities precipitated by systems of formal migrant labor.

Although the literature traditionally depicts a binary conception of male migrants and the women they leave behind, there is a third party at play: the women who represent the elusive consorts of men when they are away. Themselves migrants, these women are entrenched in a recently uncovered history that distorts the elegance of a structural explanation behind male migration in South Africa. Public health discourse polarizes these women as commercial sex workers responsible for passing disease onto the male migrants that play the protagonist role in the tale of migration and HIV in South Africa. Meanwhile, a range of revisionist historians, anthropologists, and other social scientists have developed a meaningful literature on the experience of female mobility in South Africa, its complex underpinnings, and the social legacy that the region continues to feel today. We used ethnography so that we could effectively uncover the spaces that may appear oppressive from an outsider's vantage point, but where women themselves actually perceived agency. Through ethnography, we were also able to confirm which behaviors and interactions were truly detrimental to women's social and sexual autonomy. By taking this near-experience, women's-centric view, we added texture to public health's blunt approach to migrant women, who have been peripheral players in the relationship between migration and HIV/AIDS in South Africa thus far.

WOMEN AND THE MIGRANT LABOR SYSTEM

We begin by grounding our analysis in historical perspectives on gender and migration in South Africa. The invisibility of female mobility during the precolonial, colonial, and apartheid eras represents the “androcentric nature of the [dominant] paradigm” of southern African labor migration studies, a term coined by Teresa Barnes and referenced by many others (2002:164). Cheryl Walker outlines the development of migrant labor systems beginning in the precolonial era, showing that these societies were able to export male labor through deliberate systems of homestead production in which women were the primary producers. Chiefs and men in general maintained strict control over women's movements because agricultural production was even more vital to the reproduction of the homestead than migrant labor.

When British imperialists took over and intensified capitalist efforts to mine gold and diamonds, formalizing the migrant labor system became a pivotal policy priority. Because white colonizers also recognized that “the availability of such labour depended on the continued viability of homestead production, it became politic for colonial policy-makers to intervene on the side of chiefs and homestead heads, against female migration. African women's ‘enslavement’ was to be turned to white benefit” (Walker 1990:180). After union in the early 20th century, the South African state extended colonial controls to preserve

labor flow for white industries. The 1927 Native Administration Act sanctioned tribal marriage and maintained that women married under customary law should be regarded as perpetual minors without the capacity to own property or be guardians of their children. Native Pass Laws blatantly opposed passes for women to disturb the family unit and undermine the authority of black men over their spouses.

Indeed, history tells the heavy male bias of formal migrant labor systems. But as asserted by Belinda Bozzoli (1983), the fact that the first migrant workers were male was not supported by the notion that mining was an inherently male activity. The role of women as producers and reproducers in African chiefdoms was the “product of very definite social interventions in the organisation of relationships” because of the ability of these societies to subjugate female labor (Walker 1990:179). This unfair devaluing of women’s labor not only fails to recognize how women subsidized the male migrant labor force, but also ignores the mobility of women throughout these periods.

THE IMPETUS TO MIGRATE, PAST AND PRESENT

When I’m here I can see that my child is in school, clothed, fed and the same for me, but back home I can’t do those things.

In actuality, women have been moving throughout history and not in insignificant numbers. South African census figures from the early 20th century verify that 19 percent of the population in urban centers (which housed the male migrant workforce) was women, although the exclusion of women from formal industrial jobs largely thrust them into domestic service and informal sector work (Walker 1990:188). But there are somewhat differing opinions on why and how women migrated in the past. Walker situates the motivations of female migrants in the precolonial and colonial periods in the systemic gender-based oppression that confined women to rural areas, which slowly eroded under colonial rule:

For female migrants, therefore, migration was more likely to represent a means of escape than either a means to reinvest in the rural economy or a process of dispossession. . . . This is in sharp contrast to the pattern of male migration which, especially at first, represented a societal response to new pressures and opportunities and was characterized by conformity rather than challenge to existing norms and relations of power. [1990:188–89]

Walker’s comparison to men underscores how women’s migration enacted a form of rebellion. P. L. Bonner’s study of the exodus of Basotho women to Johannesburg in the first half of the 20th century documents women finding work as beer brewers in the urban economy. He asserts the following as the context of their movement: “These women were, all too often, not brewing beer to sustain a settled family life but were, rather, refugees from marriages that had cracked under the strain of rural pauperization and the migrant labour system” (Bonner 1990:227).

The trend continues even in recent times. Gina Buijs, in her piece on women from the Transkei who moved to pursue labor on the sugar estates of Natal, argues that “for a

majority of these women, migration was necessary to stay alive” (1993:190). Walker’s original observations are even truer today: more contemporary accounts such as Bonner’s, and particularly Buijs’, reveals the extent to which rural subsistence crumbled under several decades of migrant labor. The increasing burden placed on women under circumstances of extreme scarcity surely reinforced the patriarchal circumscription of their lives. It is no wonder that moving was an “escape.”

Other texts offer a different motive behind female migration. Although survival remained central, migration did not represent an outright divorce from the productive and reproductive obligations traditionally determined by their gender identities. Rather, it offered a means to fulfill such obligations to kin. Based on his observations of women’s experiences in the hostel within KwaThema township outside of Johannesburg, Glen Elder comments, “Most women migrated so as to secure the survival of their families. . . . These transgressions were not always undertaken as acts of defiance but usually for necessary and ‘mundane’ reasons like feeding and keeping their families together” (2003:96). Bozzoli’s (1991) compilation of oral histories entitled “Women of Phokeng” illustrates how the act of migration wove into a woman’s life for the sake of improving her and her family’s wellbeing. In both of these 20th century accounts, women’s decision to migrate was bolstered by their perceived responsibilities to their dependents, as opposed to denoting a break from them.

Perhaps we can reconcile these two theories. The decision to migrate may indeed enable women to take care of their families—on their own terms. In their view, moving may mean that they no longer remain under the mutually compounding brutalities of poverty and patriarchy. On the contrary, women may believe that migration offers a way for them to reinterpret both their economic and social realities, as we argue below.

This hypothesis finds support among the women we interviewed. ‘All alluded to the hope for better economic opportunity, for themselves, their families, or both. They perceived Rustenburg to have “more money” than their home communities as a result of the mining industry in the area. When we asked one woman why she liked her migration destination more than home, she simply held her hands up and made a gesture signifying money—rubbing her thumb against her fingers.

Women’s descriptions of their home communities speak to the observation that generations of male out-migration have contributed to the desolate nature of rural households. Hailing from poor rural villages both within the Northwest Province and from as far as Mozambique, many of the women we spoke with cited that it was common for people, both in their generation as well as their parents’, to leave and search for work. In other words, women were coming from traditional “sending communities.”

Buijs captures the effects of rural economic decline in the following comment: “While rural African women were able, as a result of labour migration, to assert themselves as *de facto* heads of households, they were also forced to assume more and more of the burden of an increasingly attenuated household production” (1993:16). Bringing this theme to current times forces us to consider not only the difficulty of sustaining a rural livelihood, but also the steadily rising unemployment levels. A study by Casale and Posel (2002) found that in 1999 there were approximately 1.1 million more unemployed males

than in 1995. For African households this translated to an average of 0.47 employed men per household in 1999, down from 0.65 employed men per household in 1995. Increasing unemployment rates among male members of these households further compromised resource security, generating an impetus for women to seek work and earn an income.

Mark Hunter delineates the interconnectedness of three trends relevant to our discussion: (1) rising unemployment, (2) declining marital rates, and (3) women's movement and migration. He writes,

What is significant about the present generation of young South Africans, therefore, is that they are experiencing a simultaneous collapse of agrarian and wage livelihoods. This has very important consequences for marriage, household formation, and sexuality. Marriage has always been a process and not an event and yet the task of building a household . . . is not achievable for many South Africans today in an era of chronic unemployment. [Hunter 2010:145]

Indeed, the vast majority of the women migrants we encountered were unmarried, corroborating a more recent analysis by Posel (2006) showing that in 1993, only three and a half percent of female migrants were married versus 12.5 percent of all working women. Furthermore, six unmarried women we interviewed had previously been married, but were subsequently widowed or separated from their former spouses.

In the words of a 25-year-old Xhosa woman, "You know how the marriages are nowadays. We are . . . divorced and I have 2 children. [My] husband would cheat right in front of [my] eyes and, at that time [I] had a small child." Another woman posed a story of blame associated with disease, likely one that is highly stigmatized like HIV/AIDS: "[My boyfriend and I] got married in 2000 but he got sick and his family said that I was bewitching him and they took all his belongings from me, thinking that I might take all his money."

The lack of resources in rural communities, compounded by a decreasing ability to rely on employed men and on the security of marital relationships, helps explain why greater numbers of women are leaving their households. But yet another factor is at play: dependents. Edna Bay makes an interesting point: "African women do not choose to work or to have children, they work because they have children" (1982:5). Although this statement oversimplifies the factors prompting women to find work, needing to support a child is certainly a primary motivation. In fact, two-thirds of our informants had children who resided back in their home communities. As most of these children were born to unmarried women, parents and siblings played the role of caretaker while their mothers were away. The burden of motherhood made some women reluctant to rely on pensioners for economic support:

Here it is not like home. You are poor and at times you find that you have no sugar, salt or mealie-meal and along comes this guy that says I have 100 rand, let's go and have some sex. Then I will do it and buy the things that I need. It is not like at home where we have wait for our parents' pensions and my mother takes care of me and my child on that pension fund.

The above statement reveals this woman's preference to provide for her child through her own means, rather than relying on parents at home. Later in the article, we will discuss the ways that women attempt to secure a living through men.

For many, rejecting parental support often was not an option in the first place. The breakdown of family networks, stemming from an unimaginable amount of parental death, abandonment, and divorce, contributed to women's lack of social and financial security in their rural communities. A Tswana woman talks about why she was compelled to move:

My mother passed away when I was 12 years old and my grandmother was the one who was taking care of me . . . but things started changing as I got older and nobody was willing to help because they were complaining about who had paid for my school fees and none of them wanted to pay them for more than a year. Then my grandmother passed away and I was then on my own with my aunt who was struggling with her own child, so I started fending for myself and sleeping around for a living. . . . Since 2002, when my brother passed away, it has been worse because the very little money that I get, I send home.

Another woman from the Eastern Cape remarks on her situation at home, "[It's] not good, not good at all. My mother passed away and my father doesn't care about us. My sister, the one that we thought would actually take care of us, also passed away and she left her children." Of note, it is not only the death of parents and guardians, but also that of members of younger generations including siblings, that surface. Considering the impact of untreated HIV/AIDS in South Africa, it is plausible that the epidemic adds a layer to the social breakdown we observed. A 36-year-old woman from Northwest Province describes an unfortunate past that integrates many of the themes mentioned:

I came here in 1992 and I have 2 children. My mother passed away in 1990 and from her symptoms I think that it was from HIV. My parents got divorced when I was 10 years old and I don't know where my father is at this moment, even though I know where his family is, I don't know where he is. My mother married again to . . . a Xhosa man, and she died in his arms. I was married before and divorced and returned home until my stepfather remarried so things are not the same as before. Indeed, it is tough.

As a result of the broken conditions from which many women originated, very few had made plans to return home permanently. As one Sotho woman describes,

Going home on a full-time basis is not possible because I don't have family back home. My father passed away and my mother abandoned us. When I'm here I can see that my child is in school, clothed, fed and the same for me, but back home I can't do those things.

This woman's comment is particularly striking when compared with the historical precedent; quite distinct from an "escape," her story reminds us that the movement of women out of rural areas today does not represent a rejection of the responsibilities to be productive that are imposed on them. Instead, today's migration of women represents a search for autonomy so that they may take responsibility for themselves and their families. Women like the one quoted above continually expressed their desire to redefine

themselves not as victims of an impoverished family situation, but as change agents of this situation. In addition to the obvious economic motivation underlying women's movement, we also observed an inherent social transformation in the process of moving. To illustrate this, we turn to a comment from a young woman from Kuruman: "At home I can't do the things that I do here, I mean that here I can *phanda* [sell sex] and be able to clothe myself and eat, not like back home where I'm restricted to doing certain things." Her statement ties her newfound economic means almost exclusively to her ability to form sexual relationships with men in ways that the social norms of her home community would have precluded. Through these opportunities, she exerts a sense of ownership over supplying her basic needs, like food and clothing. Elder comments, "Women migrate (or move between places), because the gendered politics of places present competing opportunities and constraints for women" (2003:99). In other words, migration cannot be reduced to a set of dichotomous, push-pull forces (home signifies poverty, while moving signifies resources), but is instead a process that enables women to reestablish their identities and relationships with others, including male partners and families. More often than not, the migrant women we encountered renegotiated these relationships in ways that allowed them to establish more control over both domestic and income-generating tasks. The new role they embodied to their families and within sexual relationships fundamentally altered their subjective experience as women—now resilient, autonomous, and providing.

To return home, therefore, would imply reverting to a sense of disempowerment and relinquishing the responsibility they once exhibited toward themselves and their families as migrants. If migration is as much a social transformation of gendered identity as it is an economically driven pursuit, then the question of returning home suddenly becomes difficult, if not impossible. Examining female migration through this lens helps clarify that while some women exhibit patterns of circular migration, many of our informants decided that returning home permanently was not an option.

A number of intermingled, primarily disempowering factors informed our informants' experience of their rural homes, including poverty, family death, abandonment by parents and guardians, the insecurity of marital relationships, and a dearth of resources with which to care for their families and children. Yet, unlike their predecessors, who sought to make a permanent break with those bleak circumstances, the women we spoke with equated the decision to move with a decision to take on the challenge of providing for their families. In realizing this provider role, they experienced profound social shifts. Specifically, women pursued sexual relationships that truly uncovered female migration as not just an economic phenomenon, but more importantly, a social one as well.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FEMALE NETWORKS

Back home we used to see ladies that looked beautiful and they said that they were in Rustenburg and when they got home they said that they were employed. They used to talk a lot about this place—they said that this place was good. We wished to live that kind of life that they lived because those women could better their families and lives when they were back home.

Women's perceptions of life as a migrant planted seeds for the social and economic liberties they hoped to realize and emboldened them to leave their homes. Strong female networks facilitated women's conceptions of their new identities as migrants, and thus cultivated the will required to move.

Many women reported that they found out about Rustenberg through their "home-girls," or women from their hometowns who had made the move before them. The experience of women who preceded them is a strong influence in women's subsequent understanding of the female migrant existence. The above quote came out of a conversation with a 20-year-old woman from Lesotho. The words this young woman uses to describe her home-girls—"beautiful," "employed," "could better their families"—conveys an image of sophistication and self-reliance. Many women were drawn to Rustenberg by these ideas, as depicted by the glimpses of women who returned home. With the guidance of sisters, aunts, and female friends, the women we encountered made their way toward this new life, only to find that it entailed much more than originally met the eye. As one woman put it, "Most of the ladies are here because they have been misled by other people into false promises of jobs being available here while there is no such thing." She continues resentfully, "The only job I see is living with a man and depending on a man." Another Sotho woman comments about living in Freedom Park, a squatter settlement, "I didn't know that people had to actually live in these conditions. [When I arrived] I asked my sister if people actually live in these shacks. I was even scared that I had to live in this kind of place." Indeed, we observed a discrepancy between the expectations women migrants-to-be projected onto their future lives away from home and the day-to-day realities that these women would face.

The reasons for this discrepancy are intimately related to the negotiation of identity that women undergo through the process of movement. On one hand, migrant women played a role in inflating the expectations of their successors. We noticed that many felt pressure to return home with wealth to show, as opposed to being the same or worse off than when they left. A woman from Nelspruit living in Freedom Park explains the reception she gets when she goes home: "They think we [live in a nice area] because when we go home we are able to buy groceries and are well-dressed and have clothes for the child and send money back home monthly." Her statement connotes a sort of charade she maintains with her family and community at home about her current standards of living, which, according to many women, are worse than they could have imagined. It may be that having something to show for their departure validates this move and insubstantiates any norms they may have violated by leaving. Although migrating enabled them to maintain their families at home, perhaps they felt ashamed about the one or multiple sexual relationships that came hand in hand with the move.

We also saw that women quickly adjusted their expectations as they transformed from "outsiders" to "insiders," adapting to the behaviors necessary to yield money and provisions in this new environment. They moved from envisioning themselves as formally employed and self-sufficient to learning to trade their domestic skills—tending to a household, cooking, social, and sexual companionship—for economic security. This process of adjustment required women to overcome the disappointment and fear of

accepting these unexpected conditions. Furthermore, it included a component of socialization by the network of home-girls who helped them move. One woman remarks, “It is true what they say ‘When you can’t beat them, join them.’ When I came here I was a very quiet person that didn’t want anything to do with men, but Freedom Park made me love men and money.” Another discusses the process of getting settled:

People from . . . my home, can just come in Freedom Park not knowing where to go. They can come to my shack and say, ‘Can you give me a place to rest for three days until I get a boyfriend?’ Within two or three days, she’ll be having a shack, with blankets, with beds, with everything. And within a month, she’ll be having three, four boyfriends and good ones with salary.

These quotes suggest that pursuing a relationship with a man is the first step to economic security. In fact, it is the only step, as economic options on arrival are slim. Only two of the thirty women we met had formal jobs—one as a home-based caregiver and another as an adult education teacher. A few others earned money through informal activities, such as selling traditional beer and vegetables, hairdressing, and gambling. The majority had no source of income outside of their relationships with men, both inside and outside the context of sex work. Unfortunately, this fits with recent economic trends in South Africa: the growth of female employment has not been enough to absorb the disproportionate feminization of the labor force (Casale and Posel 2002:169). These trends promote female unemployment and entrance into, at best, insecure, informal sector work.

THE ECONOMICS OF WOMANHOOD AND SEX

When you cook for him and do all the things that a man wants, then you will get the money.

Although a network of women facilitated the act of migration itself and frequently acted as a safety net on arrival, continued survival depended on her finding her way into a network of men. To call this prostitution is simplistic; instead, we shall explore the various forms of sexual relations employed by women, how these relationships were managed, and the expectations met by each.

All of the unmarried migrant women we spoke with had developed relationships with men they met on their arrival, some as soon as one day after arriving. Establishing a relationship and moving in with a man signified a sort of social rite. One woman describes her journey:

We caught this bus and it was late, so we asked this lady if she could give us accommodation. . . . The following day we moved out and found a shack that we could rent. Later I got my boyfriend and we moved in together. He said that we should live together because he doesn’t want to live apart from me as it would be better to live together to lessen the expenses and to satisfy my needs more.

A relationship guaranteed long-term food and shelter, and moreover signaled a woman’s presence and independence to those around her. Social pressure prevented

a woman from depending on her female networks for too long, and thrust her into searching for a decent man of her own to settle down with. One woman describes the pressure she felt: “When I came here. . . . I couldn’t ask that lady over there to give me pap, sugar, and all that. She would end up asking me, is she supposed to lie down [sell sex] for me?” This “sink or swim” imperative to find a partner connotes a kind of marketplace approach to securing resources through men. The most enterprising women found relationships quickly, and through them, gained independence from their female support network. They also ensured housing, food, and remittance income and garnered additional resources that improved their status within in the community, a point that will be further discussed below.

Certainly, survival played a role in motivating this sort of relationship, as without it, migrant women could rarely count on any sort of economic security. But it would be erroneous to reduce these relationships to prostitution. As delineated by Wojcicki’s (2002) ethnography of sex-for-money exchanges among women outside of Johannesburg, transactional sex takes on a wide range of meanings with more than just money and sex as the bartering tools. The above story implies that these partnerships contained a substantive aspect, compelling this woman’s partner to make overtures in order to “satisfy [her] needs.” Women referred to these men as their “boyfriends,” and regarded their relationships as committed and loving. The language they used to describe their boyfriends conveyed these elements: “I love Thomas very much. I can go home and say that I am not coming back, but in two days time I miss Thomas very much and find myself back here with him.” Another woman says fondly, “For me it [life] is very good because whatever I need, my boyfriend gets for me. He even took my brother to a computer school. He is very good to me.” Going on to describe the basis of the relationship, she says, “When you cook for him and do all the things that a man wants, then you will get the money.” These relationships grossly depict traditional gender roles, in which women were responsible for maintaining the home including fulfilling men’s sexual needs while men were expected to provide financially. Hunter notes,

When considering this materiality of sex it is important to distinguish everyday intimate relations that involve sex/money exchanges from ‘prostitution’ . . . Most intimate relations, while widening women’s ability to make claims on resources, are not simply instrumental: some partners can co-habit, gifts are often enacted in terms of men’s ‘provider’ role, claims can be made through evoking ‘love’, and participants frequently discuss sexual pleasure and physical attraction. It is common to hear stories of women having relationships linked to material gifts but also common to hear about love letters and signs of affection.” [2010:148–149]

Thus, the transactional nature of these partnerships does not preclude a sense of intimacy and affection between the men and women involved. Nevertheless, this materiality offers a foundation for the expectations and motivations of the migrant women who entered them. In documenting the migration of Basotho women to the Rand in the early 20th century, Bonner finds that women were “enticed by money”; when a man no longer brought it home, she would often move onto another (1990:247). The migrant women

we met were quite forthcoming about the flow of cash in the relationship, often eager to share and compare how much their boyfriends regularly afforded them.

Interviewer: Do your boyfriends give you money?

Woman 1: Yes he does, 500 rand to buy what I need and to send home. When I need something he will buy it for me or give me the money.

Woman 2: Yes, he gives me money but he is stingy. I have to talk to him first to make sure that I get the money.

Woman 3: He only gives me for rent and 150 rand for food sometimes. I haven't seen any money because he only got paid once since we've been together.

Woman 4: My boyfriend used to not give me money. He would give about 10 rand or 20 rand until [my friend] Pretty talked to him and he gave me 600 rand to buy clothes.

The findings from this study show a broad range of expectations that women have for what their boyfriends should provide: money to remit to her family, money to fulfill basic needs, money beyond simply what is needed for subsistence, money to fund material purchases like fashionable clothing. Hunter (2002) distinguishes “sex linked to subsistence” from “sex linked to consumption” as two subtypes of transactional sex, and emphasizes that the two can coexist.

Indeed, the results suggest that being on the brink of survival is not what ultimately persuaded women to pursue relationships. Many women defined having “enough money” as being able to purchase clothes, alcohol, cell phones, and salon visits. Discretionary income was not only important, but expected as part of the duties of a boyfriend. An 18-year-old woman from Eastern Cape declared, “[because] my boyfriend found a job, I might be happier. These clothes are the clothes that I came with from home and nothing new.” By stating that she is still wearing the “clothes that [she] came with from home,” she conveys dissatisfaction that her boyfriend has not purchased for her the new clothing that she believes is essential to the terms of the relationship.

When their primary boyfriends did not provide the level of subsistence, or more likely, consumption, that women required, women often took on what they called “roll-on” (additional hidden) boyfriends as a means of supplementing their incomes from their “main” boyfriends. A 25-year-old Sotho woman speaks about the thought process behind these secondary relationships:

It is not good because we depend on men. At the end of the month he gives you some money and sometimes you find that he just leaves for home without even saying goodbye or leaving some money behind for you. Then you become stressed and temptation takes a hold of you, and you might end up doing things that you never thought of doing.

Three-quarters of the migrant women we encountered had roll-on boyfriends in addition to their primary boyfriends. In contrast to the main boyfriend, with whom a woman proclaimed a devoted, outwardly committed relationship, the roll-on was a man with whom a woman met periodically, in which the relationship was purely sex for money. Although the relationship with the main boyfriend was a public one, the relationships

with roll-ons were discreet and taboo. Women often spoke of these relationships with a shameful tone, anxious to keep them private. In response to whether she had roll-ons, a 36-year-old Setswana woman answers, “Yes, it was messed up. There would be more than one [man] and they never knew about each other because it was not permitted. Where were you going to get money if they found out about each other?” Although both women and men consciously knew that numerous informal sexual encounters were occurring between them, social norms frowned on women with many partners. As a result, it was up to women to conceal their roll-on boyfriends from their main boyfriend, as well as from each other. If they did not, they risked not only inviting social stigma, but also compromising the flow of resources from the men in their lives. This scenario is well-described by Hunter (2002), who contextualizes it within the social construction of masculinity and the resulting evolution of material exchange within sexual relationships. On the basis of research in an informal settlement within an industrial park in Kwazulu-Natal, he notes a historically based term used to celebrate men who were successful with women, and yet maintained a plan to marry. Today, this term is used to describe men who accrue numerous sexual conquests without the intention of marriage, with material gifts replacing the tradition of (increasingly unattainable) bridewealth. Women, in this situation, are seen as “choosing” a lover who will fulfill their material wishes, a testament to the agency they exert in these partnerships. However, while men are extolled for having multiple partnerships, women with multiple boyfriends can be subject to punishment from a man. This, Hunter observes, sometimes comes in the form of violence, and certainly has implications for the use of contraception and condoms, which we discuss below.

The migrant women in our study expressed the importance of keeping their roll-ons discreet to ensure continued financial support from their many partners, and primarily their main partner. We must recognize the finesse it takes to manage these relationships within such a desperate, disordered environment. One woman described the challenge she faced in maintaining multiple relationships: “When [my roll-on] gave me money my boyfriend would take it and I’d have to explain where I got the money from.” What also made these relationships delicate to manipulate is the fact that women, like the men Hunter describes, did not expect an end-result of marriage. They were not attempting to win the commitment of the main boyfriends in their lives, which begs the question of how women could ensure the viability of a relationship to secure a constant transfer of resources for herself and her family. One answer to this question is that almost half of our informants’ male partners were already married with families elsewhere. Migrant women played a particular role in these men’s lives while they were away, providing them with someone to care for their home and feed their notions of masculinity as it related to having female partners.

Women also gained from having a primary male partner without the restrictions of marriage. Buijs articulates it well, based on the women migrants she studied:

The absence of a husband meant that these women could take lovers who were often able to contribute something towards the support of the women or their children, yet they were

under no obligation to these men and were able to make their own decisions as to how to spend their wages and where to board their children. The independence that being single conferred on a woman was highly valued by many. Only one or two demeaning would have preferred to be married instead. [1993:192–3]

The sexual networks that we saw migrant women form seemed to fit the explanation Buijs offers for why women viewed marriage as a stifling institution. Yet another reason that women did not want to marry could have been their prior experience and impression of marriage. For several of these women, previous marital relationships had failed, placing them in their current positions to fend for themselves and their families. It is somewhat ironic that marriage (and subsequently, divorce) perpetrated the deterioration of rural households, while the rejection of marriage permitted women to strengthen these households through the flow of remittances.

As mentioned earlier, the complexity of intention and emotion for both the men and women calls into question the label of “prostitution.” Most women did not self-identify as sex workers; we met only five women who did. Another four were thought to be sex workers, as we learned through triangulation. The women who self-identified as sex workers made no attempt to construct their male partners as anything more than clients. There were no displays of emotional attachment or substance behind the purely transactional relationships that these men represented. As evidence of this, many offered anecdotes of the tactics they used with clients:

There was one time that I found this guy that had a lot of money so I took my baby to go sleep next door so that I could have a good time with that guy. I seduced him for a while and then we got to the real reason he had come to my place. We bought beer next door and drank together on my bed and then we had sex and he slept at my place. Then I snuck into his wallet and stole my fee of 250 rand and hid it in my anus. In the morning when he woke up, I demanded my share. He said that he didn't have enough money, so I locked the door and said that he wasn't going anywhere until I got my money.

Another woman followed up,

If I see that a man has a lot of money in his wallet and he is not sharing it, I will try by all means to spike his drink at the shebeen and pretend that I'm dozing off until he finally passes out. Then I take his whole wallet for myself find a box somewhere to hide the money away. When he wakes up, I will be next to him pretending to sleep, and if he asks where his wallet is, I act surprised.

Based on our research, it is not entirely clear what drove the choice to identify oneself as a sex worker, even though only a fine line separated the function of a roll-on boyfriend from that of a client. Although their language did not convey pride or approval about their behavior, it also did not intimate the sense of shame that we saw with women with roll-on boyfriends. As a Tswana woman commented, “This job that we are doing is not easy but we are gonna die working it. There are some men that don't even want to pay for the sex. I don't like it but I have to sell my body for money.”

A key aspect of this quote was typical among sex workers: they did in fact refer to these sexual interactions as their job. It is the most explicit connection between a woman's experience as a migrant, her ambitions for economic livelihood, and her sexual relationships with men. Reflecting Elder's idea that "Migration is a spatial process informed by heterosexual meaning, not only an economic decision that has spatial consequences" (2003:98), we begin to understand that migrant women's relationships with men, both before, during, and after the process of migration, is a primary lens through which we approach her own understanding of what it means to be a migrant.

CONDOMS AS A PROXY FOR POWER

When you stay with a man and you live together for some time, you learn to trust that guy and believe that you trust that guy, . . . so you don't use a condom. But with the other ones you then use it.

Although both men and women benefited from being involved in relationships with one another, the balance of power was not equal. Because men wielded economic security over women and their families, our informants spoke of being at the whim of men's incomes. In a group interview, one woman revealed her disdain: "I don't think [life here] is good because we have to live with the help of men. There are no jobs for women. I mean, for example, she [pointing to her friend] wants to fend for her family but because of the lack of jobs she has to depend on a man." The issue of power is nuanced; women's relationships with their main boyfriends differed from their relationships with roll-ons or clients. Although women described more open, loving relationships with main boyfriends, the stakes in these relationships were also higher. They often cohabited with these men and relied on them as the primary source of income. As a result, it seemed that women were more willing to concede to the wishes of their partners, both in the name of "love" as well as in a calculated attempt to maintain their access to resources. On the other hand, women reported that their roll-on boyfriends or clients simply could not demand this same degree of compromise. A few explanations emerge. First, for many women, it seemed that roll-on and client relationships did not hold the same level of financial influence over their day-to-day survival. Second, social norms deemed these relationships illegitimate, and therefore placed lesser expectations on a woman's role within them. Because these partnerships were covert, women did not feel the pressure to please their partners to the same extent they would someone they called a lover. As a result, women felt a greater ability to negotiate their needs within the context of their roll-on and client relationships.

Regardless of the agency with which women generally approached their sexual relationships, it is crucial to recognize that economic dependence crudely diminished a woman's ability to negotiate her sexual autonomy. Yes, women saw relationships as opportunities for both companionship and financial gain. But by becoming further entrenched in these relationships, they embarked on a lifestyle maintained only through deeper engagement,

creating a vicious cycle. As described earlier, returning home was not an option, both from economic and social perspectives.

The materiality of sex translates to an imbalance of sexual decision-making power, as a study of women ages 16–24 in Tanzania found (Maganja et al. 2007). In this study, both casual and committed relationships contained elements of transaction that granted men more say in determining sexual behavior, particularly condom use. We too found that condom use vibrantly illustrated the discrepancies in power dictated by the materiality of sexual partnerships. Of note, most women we spoke with were both aware of and conscientious about condom use, believing that condoms were a necessary measure in protecting them from disease. This belief did not always translate into action, but does demonstrate the changing values and acceptability surrounding condoms, especially for women. In fact, many of our informants felt that they were the ones demanding condom use as opposed to their male partners. One woman rationalizes this by stating they have more responsibility and therefore are more aware of the importance of condoms:

We women are poor . . . there are diseases out there and you find that a man doesn't want to use it [a condom] and then you get sick and leave your child behind. So I think there is a lot that a woman has to think about. . . . I mean, a man has no use in the house whatsoever. He can abandon the children.

Nevertheless, reported condom use among women in this study was low to nonexistent among primary partners such as husbands and main boyfriends. Women said that their partners would convince them not to use a condom, as in the case of a 24-year-old Tswana woman: “I wanted him to use the condom [and] I told him that I'm not going to risk my life but . . . he said that he loved me and will not use a condom with me.”

Similarly, a sex worker describes how the need for money requires her to forego condom use: “Some of the time you get men that don't want to use a condom and there is nothing you can do but just have sex without a condom because you need the money. That is what makes it tougher to be a woman. We are in serious trouble and danger.” Other women said that while condoms were used initially in these relationships, condom use was discontinued in time because of the sense of trust that built between the two partners. This is reflected by the quote at the beginning of this section, where this woman describes the trust that develops as “you stay with a man and stay together for some time.” This trust then translates to a foregoing of condom use, while “with the other ones”—the roll-on boyfriends—the use of condoms corresponds to an absence of trust. Indeed, reported condom use among roll-on and client partners was a predominant theme. One sex worker was adamant about condom use with her clients, asserting “Don't you see that box [of condoms] over there? Even when I'm out I knock here and tell [my friend] Kedi that she must she pass me some. I don't want any mistakes . . . I don't want to risk with my life.”

Although the love and commitment that underlay relationships with main boyfriends at times precluded condom use, women knew that they were not the only ones with outside partners. After all, if women pursued casual partners outside of their primary relationship, then obviously their boyfriends served as roll-ons for others. Women

acknowledged the implications of the vast number of casual sexual encounters that occurred within their migrant community. In response to whether she asks her main boyfriend to use a condom, a 26-year-old woman from Lesotho replied, “I’ve tried but he says no because he loves and trusts me. At times I even cry for the condom because I don’t know what he does outside and if he uses condoms with those girls.” Another woman describes a similar set of fears:

Well I have to trust him on that because he said that he uses them. He always has condoms in his pockets. I do want to go test [for HIV] because I’m not with him all the time and I’m taking a risk by sleeping with him. I don’t know what he does when I’m not there because it’s a big risk that I’m taking, which means that if he has any sickness, so do I.

The power dynamics surrounding condom use hold important implication for migrant women’s sexual health, specifically with regard to highly prevalent HIV/AIDS. In a study of nearly 1,400 pregnant women seeking routine antenatal care in Soweto, 21 percent had engaged in transactional sex with a non–primary partner and held a 54 percent increased risk of HIV infection as a result (Dunkle et al. 2004). This risk was observed even after controlling for potential exposure to HIV because of lifetime number of sexual partners and length of time a woman had been sexually active. The authors postulate explanations for this finding, including the disincentive to use condoms in a financially motivated relationship, as well as the possibility that men who transact may be more likely to be infected because they have had more partners. Both of these are highly plausible in the context of our study, posing a significant threat for infection for migrant women in these circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS

Through an ethnographic approach to studying the thirty women presented here, we attempt to deepen what has previously been a gendered, binary understanding of migration and health, especially as it relates to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We illuminate the voices of women who add another dimension to the story of migration and AIDS in South Africa—those who develop partnerships with migrant men in destination communities and are themselves migrants with complex motivations, needs, and objectives. In turn, we observe that women’s experience of migration is distinctly different from that of their male counterparts.

Situating these women within a history of the male migrant labor system as well as a lesser-known account of female mobility in South Africa reveals the desperate circumstances compelling movement, as well as the sheer enterprise required to do so. In a system where the formal economy is unable to absorb the number of women entering the workforce, and where rural livelihoods are destroyed by decades of out-migration, these women represented a shining light of persistence. They capitalized on a newfound sense of social latitude enabled by moving away from their traditional rural communities; they engaged in the increasing materiality of sex to better the lives of themselves and

their families. In addition, finding love and fulfilling lust was an end in and of itself in the harsh environment in which they lived.

Nevertheless, the structural inequalities that prompted their migration in the first place would eventually predominate over their individual attempts at independence and autonomy. Their needs for subsistence and consumption led to economic dependence on men, which had detrimental effects on their sexual decision-making power. Their inability to negotiate condom use, especially with their main boyfriends, holds an important significance for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS.

By highlighting their efforts to assert agency in addition to those where they had little control, opportunities to intervene emerge. For one, we may construct alternative economic opportunities that will enable women to fulfill the provider role they wished to play vis-à-vis their families. It is essential to view the migration of women as not just an economic process but a socially transformative one as well, in order to succeed in preventing and treating HIV. The social context of female migration can help us to exploit the collective sense of agency exhibited by a network of women migrants in order to cultivate mutually reinforcing, risk-minimizing behaviors. Finally, a better understanding of migrant women's social and sexual dynamics with men will be necessary to inspire empowerment-based interventions. Given the centrality of women to HIV/AIDS in this region of the world, there is no doubt that more robust, female-centered efforts will play a pivotal role in turning the tide on this disease.

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