

**Perceptions of Adolescent Sexual Activity and the Threat of Schoolgirl  
Pregnancy in Rural Malawi**

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## **Introduction**

Given the nearly universal view in rural Malawi that educational attainment is the primary pathway out of poverty (van Blerk and Ansell 2006), it is surprising to find qualitative evidence that some parents encourage or force their daughters to leave school after learning that they are sexually active. Although the relationship between adolescent sexual activity and educational attainment in sub-Saharan Africa is complex and insufficiently examined, from the perspective of parents in rural Malawi sexual activity appears to signal the risk of pregnancy and subsequently lower likelihood of eventually completing secondary school. This paper will use qualitative data collected in rural Malawi to explore parents' beliefs about adolescent sexual activity and schoolgirl pregnancy, as well as how these perceptions intersect with adolescent sexual agency and influence family decision-making about girls' schooling.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent girls who are enrolled in school are significantly less likely to have ever had sex than girls who are not enrolled in school, controlling for age (NRC-IOM 2005). In-depth evidence from rural Malawi supports this association (Poulin 2007), but also explores the ways in which schooling choices and adolescent sexual activity are endogenous. Young women who defer sexual activity believe that sexual relationships may interfere with their ability to do well in school and thus jeopardize future employment opportunities, whereas young women who lack the same aspirations may have been both less compelled to remain in school and less motivated to resist sexual proposals. The importance of school experiences and performance has been identified elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, notably the association between poor school performance and the subsequent risks of either becoming a pregnant schoolgirl or dropping out of school for reasons other than pregnancy in

South Africa (Grant and Hallman forthcoming) and the association between classroom gender bias and the onset of premarital sex in Kenya (Mensch et al. 2001).

In rural Malawi, the relationship between girls' schooling, sexual activity, and risk of pregnancy is particularly fraught, given that significant increases in schooling over the past decade have not been accompanied by comparable declines in adolescent childbearing.

According to the Demographic and Health Surveys, the mean educational attainment for 15-19 year old females in Malawi has increased from 3.4 grades in 1992 to 6.0 grades in 2004, while the percentage of 20-24 year olds who had a child before age 18 only declined from 38 to 34 percent over the same period. Nonetheless, schoolgirl pregnancy remains a relatively rare event in rural Malawi. Data from the 2006 Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (MDICP) indicate that among women who ever attended school, only 3.5 percent of 15-19 year olds and 8 percent of 20-24 year olds became pregnant before they left school. Despite this evidence to the contrary, schoolgirl pregnancy has emerged in public discussion in Malawi as a significant social problem.

I expect to find that the public discourse of schoolgirl pregnancy is influencing the way that families respond to adolescent sexually activity. Although adolescents exercise considerable agency in determining whether to engage in premarital sex, decisions related to the duration of schooling involve parents as well as adolescents given the financial costs of continued school enrollment. My qualitative data suggest that parents assume pregnancy is a leading reason why girls do not complete school, and that parents equate sexual activity with eventual pregnancy. Several parents comment that any money spent educating a sexually active daughter is "wasted", since she will eventually become pregnant and leave school without completing secondary school, the minimum level of education assumed to lead to significant employment

opportunities. In this paper, I will explore parents' aspirations for their children's educational attainment, perceptions of the relationship between adolescent sexual activity and school performance, and responses to the perceived risk of schoolgirl pregnancy. By contextualizing these findings with data from the MDICP, I will show how parents' overestimation of their daughters' risk of pregnancy is contributing to greater school dropout rates among sexually active schoolgirls.

## **Data**

This paper will focus on qualitative data collected by the author in rural Malawi during the summer of 2006. In-depth interviews were collected from 60 adults aged 25-50 who were the parent of at least one school-aged child. The respondents were randomly sampled from the list of respondents to the Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (MDICP), a longitudinal survey that has been following approximately 1,500 women and their spouses since 1998. All interviews were collected in Mchinji district, located in the central region of Malawi. This subsample of the MDICP is predominantly Chewa, an ethnic group in transition from matrilineal to patrilineal descent and residence patterns. All interviews were transcribed and translated into English. They were read closely by the author and coded as themes emerged from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Interviewers were instructed to take a complete educational history for each of the respondent's children and to ask about the respondent's health expectations. For each child in the household, parents were asked to describe the child's current school enrollment status, age at school entry, grade progression, age and grade at school exit, and reasons why the child failed to finish school if they were no longer enrolled. In addition to collecting information on each child's schooling status and progress, most interviews gave considerable time to discussing the

value that parents placed on education and parents' perceptions of schooling patterns in their community. Other than these questions regarding schooling history, the interviewers were not given more specific interview guidelines but were encouraged to use a conversational tone and to allow the respondents to share their experiences and opinions. Any discussion of schoolgirl pregnancy in the data arose spontaneously and is not the product of specific questions prompts, which enhances the validity of these findings.

## References

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