

# The condom is an ‘intruder’ in marriage: Evidence from rural Malawi

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## Abstract

This paper assesses the condom situation within marriage in Malawi with particular attention to people's perceptions about the compatibility of condoms and marriage by analyzing the Malawi Demographic and Health Surveys 1992 and 2000, and via semi-structured interviews with married men and women from three districts in rural Malawi. There are four striking findings. First, condom use is negligible inside marriage. Second, there is considerable talk about condoms, especially among male social network partners. Third, virtually all the discussion of condoms, by both men and women, is in the context of preventing STI/HIV-AIDS infection in extramarital partnerships. Lastly, and critical for this paper, is that initiating a discussion of condom use for preventing infection in marriage is like bringing an intruder into the domestic space. Thus, there is evidence that change in attitudes about condom use may be occurring, but only outside marriage. This evidence concurs with Malawian government policy that advocates for condom use in marriage only if either spouse has more than one sexual partner. The AIDS epidemic is therefore bringing sexual behavior change outside marriage and not within.

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**Keywords:** Malawi; Condoms; Marriage; Social network partners; Domestic space; HIV/AIDS

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## Introduction

This paper assesses the condom situation within marriage in Malawi with particular attention to people's perceptions about the compatibility of condoms and marriage. To explain the relationships between sex, marriage and condom use, I refer to existing literature on peoples' views about marriage—why people marry and people's perceptions and values about sex in marriage.

Although traditional marriage systems<sup>1</sup> still exist, the family as a social unit is undergoing changes and

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<sup>1</sup>In Malawi, there are two types of traditional marriage systems: matrilineal/matrilocal and patrilineal/matrilocal. The central and southern regions of Malawi follow the matrilineal/matrilocal system while the north follows the patrilineal/matrilocal system. In a matrilineal/matrilocal system descent is traced through the mother's matriline but adoption of their personal praise name is through their father's matriline (Marwick, 1965). Inheritance is matrilineal through the maternal uncle. It is the brother of the mother who owns and controls the inherited property and any significant family resources including land (Phiri, 1983). Material gifts for marriage are tendered in form of a *bride service* such as the husband building a house for

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consequently, there are changes in perceptions and values of sex and marriage. This is mainly due to a combination of factors: education, migration, inter-marriages, economic crisis and the AIDS crisis (Chimbiri, 2002). Within the extended family system, these changes have led to the empowerment of individuals and couples while lineage heads have lost their decision-making powers. Kaler (2001) describes the changing institution of the family (marriage) as a 'degenerate institution' since evidence suggests that marriages in modern Malawi are unstable as divorces have become frequent. Due to the co-existence of traditional and religious systems, Christianity diluted the traditional practice of polygyny and instilled the concept of monogamy (Kaler, 2001). But polygynous unions are still common (Chimbiri, 2002; Government of Malawi (GOM), 1992, 2000) and extramarital sexual partnerships have become the norm. Some changes relate to marriage process and marital residence. Informal marriages are becoming common. Due to intermarriages and migration increasingly common are marital residences in places other than maternal or paternal origins (Chimbiri, Tizifa, Maleta, & Gondwe, 2005) or separate residence of marital partners (husband residing in the city or town and the wife residing in the village), which do not imply marital breakdown (Chimbiri, 2002).

The paper is presented in five main parts. The first considers government policy on condom use, comparing the pre-AIDS period with the current reproductive health policy. The second is a discussion of the data. The secondary analysis of Malawi Demographic and Health Survey data compare trends in condom use among married and unmarried men. I also describe the qualitative data that I

used to explore married people's perceptions about condom use in marriage. The third examines what people say in their social networks about condoms. The fourth focuses on the conceptualization of sex and marriage. The fifth is the concluding section in which I summarize key findings and evaluate possible future developments.

### *Government policy on condom use*

In the 1960s, there was some promotion of family planning, including condoms, by foreign agencies, but by the late 1960s modern family planning was banned by the Government (Chimbwete, Zulu, & Watkins, 2002; Demographic Unit & UNFPA, 1987; Government of Malawi, 1996). Subsequently, contraceptive services were provided in public clinics only in cases when childbearing threatened the life of the mother (Zulu, 1996). In 1982, the Government approved the establishment of a National Child Spacing Program aimed at reducing maternal, infant and child mortality by lengthening birth intervals (Government of Malawi, n.d.)<sup>2</sup>. Between the time contraceptive services were re-introduced and the time a population policy was formalized in 1994, the focus of the Child Spacing Program was education about the dangers of close births, early and later childbearing and too many births (GOM, 2001a). During this period, condoms were recommended by health providers as a method for disease prevention outside marriage (Thompson, 1995) and as a back-up contraceptive method for married adults (Namate & Kornfield, 1997a).

Malawi supported the adoption of the new international reproductive health policy developed at the International Conference of Population and Development (ICPD) at Cairo in 1994. The conference called for the provision of reproductive services that allow individual women and couples to make informed choices about when to space births, stop child bearing and even what type of contraceptive method to use. The international reproductive health policy therefore prescribed the provision of reproductive health services that ensure equal access to reproductive health rights by individuals as well as couples. Malawi subsequently developed its own reproductive health policy (GOM, 2001c). The guidelines for implementing

(footnote continued)

the parents of the bride. Marital residence is matrilineal or patrilineal. A patrilineal/patrilineal system is one whereby descent is traced through the father and sons, and sons or male relatives inherit property. Marriage process involves payment of bride price, which serves as compensation to the bride's parents for the loss of their daughter and as a guarantee that the husband will fulfill his obligations. Bride price payment marks the transfer of these rights or any offspring of a woman between kinship groups (Lesthaeghe, 1989a). The payment is tendered in material goods such as livestock or money. Marital residence is patrilineal (among the husband's family). Polygynous unions are a common practice. This practice is an outcome of preferential rules, which allow men to marry more than one woman among the patrilineal groups and govern the marriage of widows. Levirate rules, for example, prescribe the *inheritance* of widows by a brother of the deceased husband.

<sup>2</sup>The author was personally involved in the process of developing this first population policy, which introduced the concept of 'family planning'.

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