Uncertainties of sex
Adolescent boys’ meanings and experiences of the first sexual intercourse in Chilumba, Malawi

Amsterdam Master’s in Medical Anthropology thesis

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List of abbreviations

DSS: Demographic Surveillance Site
JCE: Junior Certificate of Education
KPS: Karonga Prevention Study
MANEB: Malawi National Examinations Board
MDHS: Malawi Demographic and Health Survey
MSCE: Malawi School Certificate of Education
SCOM: Student Christian Organization of Malawi
Definition of terms

Chuma: Bride price

Kurya: Eating. Adolescent boys use it as a metaphor for sex
Summary

Malawi is one of the countries worst hit by the HIV pandemic, with estimates indicating that prevalence is as high as 12% among those aged between 15 – 49 years. Among adolescents, the estimate is at 4.3% (National Statistical Office (NSO) [Malawi] and ORC Macro 2005).

Epidemiologists and public health experts have drawn attention to the timing of the first sexual intercourse as an indicator of risk of HIV transmission, pregnancy and cervical cancer. Early sexual initiation has also been associated with risky behaviour later in life (Harrison, et al. 2005; White, et al. 2000). Similar attention on the first sexual intercourse in relation to HIV transmission from an anthropological approach has been far from widespread. Even though there are studies that have considered sex in general – adolescent sex, its meanings and links to masculinities etc, similar consideration pinpointing the first sexual intercourse are rare.

With this background, I conducted a focussed ethnographic study among adolescent boys aged 15 – 19 years attending Chilumba secondary school, in Karonga, northern Malawi. The objective was to explore their meanings and perceptions of the first sexual intercourse. Data was collected using participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussion, key informant interviews and informal conversations. Data analysis will be done manually.

I used Jennifer Johnson-Hanks concept of vital conjunctures – “socially structured zones of possibility that emerge around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives” (Johnson-Hanks 2006:22) to look at adolescent boys’ aspirations, fears and possibilities that surround the first sexual intercourse.

The first sexual intercourse is an event shrouded in uncertainty for the adolescent. Its precarious nature is manifested in the short and long term. While it opens new possibilities in the life of the adolescent, it also has the potential to close them. Albeit being a horizon in itself that emerges around puberty, it is its own event that warrants separate treatment.
Chapter One: Introduction and background

Introduction and background

Prior to joining the Amsterdam master’s in medical anthropology programme, I worked for the Karonga Prevention Study (KPS) in Chilumba area of northern Malawi. I was involved in a qualitative research project whose objective was to understand the influence of antiretroviral therapy on sexual behaviour in marital unions. KPS also conducts cross-sectional studies aimed at monitoring HIV and sexual behaviour in this area. From these studies, HIV prevalence rate has been estimated at about 10%.

Living in this area, I often heard stories of adolescent relationships and sex. One of the common stories is of adolescent girls going out with older men, some even from KPS. A common perception in the area is that KPS employees get a lot of money and hence attract and/or are more attractive to young girls and women. Also falling in this category are taxi and road tanker drivers. This perception is also held by adolescent boys. However, similar rumours, stories and narratives concerning adolescent boys’ sexual escapades with older women are not as common. Perhaps of interest is that adolescent boys are said to be in relationships with the same girls that are rumoured to be in relationships with older men. The implication of these dynamics on the risk of cross generation HIV transmission cannot be overlooked. I often wondered what the adolescent boys are doing knowing that ‘their girls’ are having sexual relations with older men. With this in mind, some of the questions that I asked myself include: what is it that motivates them to have sex with the girls or not? What is the influence of knowledge of HIV/AIDS, school lessons, church teachings etc on adolescent boys’ sexual behaviour? Borrowing from Arthur and Joan Kleinman, I sought to find out ‘what is at stake’ for the adolescent boys when it comes to the experiences and perceptions first sexual intercourse (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991).

My interest in adolescent boys’ first sexual intercourse experiences was further sparked by an analysis by Professor Judith Glynn and others focussing on age at menarche, schooling and sexual debut (Glynn, et al. 2010). Their main focus was on adolescent girls in the area, prompting me to ask, what is happening to the boys?

Statement of problem

Malawi is one of the countries that have been worst hit by the HIV pandemic, with prevalence among men and women aged between 15 – 49 years estimated at 12% (National
Statistical Office (NSO) [Malawi] and ORC Macro 2005) and 4.3% among adolescents in the 15 – 19 age category (ICF Macro 2010).

Epidemiological studies have indicated that early onset of sexual activity correlates with a higher risk of HIV infection as it translates to a longer period of exposure to HIV (Pettifor, et al. 2004). Other epidemiological studies also show that early sexual debut is associated with likelihood of extramarital sex among men (White, et al. 2000) and multiple sexual partnerships (Harrison, et al. 2005). These and similar findings have informed sexual and reproductive health interventions whose primary objective has been to delay onset of sex among adolescents. The messages put forward have emphasized the benefits of abstinence, promoting acceptability of romantic relationships without sex and condemning sexual coercion among youth.¹

Sexual activity among adolescents in Malawi is quite common. The 2004 Malawi demographic and health survey (MDHS) indicates that slightly more than 50 percent of adolescent boys and girls in the 15 – 19 year age range had had sex by the time they were being interviewed (National Statistical Office (NSO) [Malawi] and ORC Macro 2005). But there are significant gender disparities in terms of timing of initiation of sex. A higher percentage of adolescent boys report to have had sex by the time they were 15 years old as compared to adolescent girls in the 15 – 19 years age category (18% and 14% respectively) (National Statistical Office (NSO) [Malawi] and ORC Macro 2005). Based on a cross sectional behaviour study conducted in Chilumba, a rural area of Karonga district in the northern region of Malawi from 2008 - 2009, Glynn et al. (2010) found that the median reported age at first sex is estimated at 17.5 years for women and 18.8 years for men. Further to this, age at first sex has remained relatively stable for women in different cohorts while for men, age at first sex and age at first marriage have occurred at relatively younger ages for most recent age cohorts.² In urban areas, the median age at first sex is estimated at 17.9 years for women and 18.3 years for men (National Statistical Office (NSO) [Malawi] and ORC Macro 2005). Perhaps of significance is the finding that most men delay for more than a year between their first sexual intercourse and their first marriage (Glynn, et al. 2010), a period that is characterised by high partner change, and hence increased risk for HIV transmission.

¹ For example see http://www.psi.org/our-work/healthy-lives/interventions/delayed-sexual-debut
Even though anthropologists have shown interest in sexuality in general dating back to Bronislaw Malinowski’s *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1929), similar attention has not been paid to the first sexual intercourse experience. On the other hand, epidemiologists and public health specialists have focussed on the first sexual intercourse as a proxy for risk of HIV transmission, cervical cancer and unintended pregnancy. Understanding meanings and experiences of adolescents’ first sexual intercourse is of both theoretical and practical import. Theoretically, it is a step towards understanding how and where the first sexual intercourse fits in adolescent sexuality. For example, even though puberty has been associated with perceptions of uncontrollable urges for sex (Nobelius, et al. 2010) and developing an interest in girls (Munthali, et al. 2006), the first sexual intercourse does not necessarily follow as the next step. Indeed Nobelius et al. (2010) report of adolescents who had their first sexual intercourse prior to puberty, suggesting that these are two different events in the life of the adolescent which presumably have different meanings and each warrants special attention in its own right. Also of significance is some careful consideration of their relationship to one another. Practically, the first sexual intercourse ought to be reconsidered due to its potential to transform the future life course of the adolescent in terms of risk to HIV infection or prevention. In this vein, the study could potentially inform public health interventions in adolescent sexual and reproductive health, although this is not its primary objective.

In considering the first sexual intercourse as a potential transformative experience, I use Jennifer Johnson-Hanks’ concept of vital conjunctures – “periods in which a wide range of futures is possible and there is no clear path forward” (Johnson-Hanks 2005:383). In doing so, I have considered the futures that can be made possible and impossible as a result of the first sexual intercourse. In doing so, I privilege adolescent narratives of their aspirations in relation to the first sexual intercourse, moving away from models that have considered the first sexual intercourse as an event.

**Structure of the thesis**

This thesis is organized in eight chapters. In chapter one, I present how my interest in studying this topic came about and frame my research problem. I start the second chapter by briefly discussing the study of sexuality in anthropology. Then I consider the concept of adolescence with respect to the Malawi context. I then proceed to consider how the first sexual intercourse has been studied elsewhere. In this chapter, I also discuss how
the first sexual intercourse relates to puberty. Lastly, I discuss the concept of vital conjunctures and its appropriateness in considering the first sexual intercourse experiences. Chapter three details the methodology that was used to collect data. I consider issues of sampling, negotiating gatekeepers and data collection tools. I then reflect on my role as a researcher among adolescent boys in school setting. In Chapter four, I discuss the research context in which the study was conducted. The ethnographic results of the study are presented in chapters five, six and seven. Chapter eight discusses the findings by contextualizing them in existing literature and presents the conclusion.
Chapter Two: Literature review and theoretical orientation

Anthropology, sexuality and HIV/AIDS

Writing in 1991, Carole Vance argued that the study of sexuality in anthropology remained marginal as it shared the then prevailing cultural influence model that regarded sexuality not a legitimate area of study (Vance 1991). But this does not mean that anthropologists have never been interested in adolescents and their sexuality. Margaret Mead’s *Coming of age in Samoa* is one of the classic ethnographies that dealt with adolescent sexuality. The significance of this book lies in the fact that it focused on adolescents, at a time when most ethnographic research was about villages, communities and the cultures. Written in 1928, the book details the influences of the social context on experiences of life as an adolescent girl in Samoa (Mead 1928).

The advent of the HIV pandemic in the 1980s reignited interest in sexuality research, which had been neglected in most countries (Parker 2001). This culminated in surveys of risk related behaviours, knowledge, practices and attitudes/beliefs associated with HIV infection. Anthropological interest in HIV/AIDS research has progressed from an interest in cultural systems shaping cultural practices relevant to HIV transmission and prevention in the 1980s to interest in interpretation of cultural meanings in the transmission of HIV in different settings and the development of culturally appropriate prevention programs characteristic of research in the 1990s (Parker 2001). Anthropologists have also paid attention to structural factors shaping vulnerability and the political economy of HIV/AIDS. More recently, with the advent of antiretroviral treatment (ART), anthropologists have been interested in issues of challenges to access and adherence to treatment (for example Hardon et al. (2006)) and effects of ART uptake on sexual behaviour (for example Sarna et al. (2009); Bunnell et al. (2006)).

Adolescence and sexuality

Adolescence has often been defined as a period of time from age 10 – 19 years that marks as a transition from childhood to adulthood (Adamchak, et al. 2000; UNICEF 2011). Using this biological age-based definition, adolescence is further divided into two parts: early adolescence (10 – 14 years) and late adolescence (15 – 19 years) (UNICEF 2011). Using these definitions has not been unproblematic. Some authors have argued that the time that adolescence starts and ends is a matter of social construction. For example among the Yao...
of southern Malawi, the concept of adolescence applies mainly to boys as they are considered to experience a transition from childhood to adulthood. Girls, on the other hand, are considered ready for marriage at menstruation. They are hence considered as adults already (Jimmy-Gama 2009). For both boys and girls, once they are married and have a child, they automatically qualify to be called adults regardless of their age. Apart from being socially constructed, defining adolescence using age is also problematic because different individuals experience changes that are associated with adolescence at different times (UNICEF 2011).

One of the salient characteristics of adolescence in Malawi is that it is a period in "when social identities associated with being male or female are reinforced" (Jimmy-Gama 2009:31). Munthali et al. (2004) reports similar sentiments. It is a period in which hegemonic forms of masculinity for example dominance in sexual issues are inculcated. However, during this period of adolescence, sexual activity is prohibited. Further to this, interaction between boys and girls is not condoned (Munthali, et al. 2004). The school is one of the few settings where this interaction is allowed. However, it is closely monitored and in some cases restricted.

**Meanings of the first sexual intercourse**

As noted above, the first sexual intercourse in terms of age at which it occurs has been mainly addressed by epidemiologists and public health specialists as an indicator of risk for HIV transmission. They have looked at it not only as an event (for example sex with an HIV infected person) but also its association with future risky behaviors. One of the consequences of this is that the first sexual intercourse is regarded as a similar biological event across different contexts and time periods, with similar consequences (HIV risk, pregnancy etc) and hence to be addressed in a similar manner (cf. van der Sijpt 2010). Similar in the sense that what constitutes sex in one context is the same in another context. Biomedical research models tend to treat sexuality as a direct derivation of physiological make up and hence a universal functioning of the body (Vance 1991). There is a tendency to de-contextualize the first sexual intercourse in this type of research. It is not uncommon to find analyses of the first sexual intercourse based on questions like: “How old were you when you first had sexual intercourse with a woman (if ever)?” (National Statistical Office

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3 This idea is taken from van der Sijpt (2010) who argues that pregnancy loss has been regarded as similar biological event across contexts requiring to be treated in a similar way.
While such questions give useful information in terms of trends for example, they do not paint a full picture of the first sexual intercourse in terms of how it is experienced.

Social constructionist theorists in anthropology and other disciplines have argued against the tendency to treat sexuality as both universal and transcultural. They have argued for the need to recognize that definitions and meanings of sexuality change over time and within populations (Vance 1991). They have argued that experiences of the first sexual intercourse, for example, have divergent meanings for young men and young women. Based on qualitative research among sexually active young people in Manchester and London in 1988 (among young women) and 1992 (among young men) respectively, Holland et al. (Holland, et al. 2000) sought to find out how gender plays out in heterosexual sexual encounters, with a primary focus on the first sexual intercourse experience. They argue that the onset of menstruation and reaching puberty is what makes adolescent girls that they spoke to consider themselves as ‘women’. On the other hand, the adolescent boys that they spoke to said they have to wait for their first sexual intercourse to attain a similar status, that of becoming a ‘man’ (Holland, et al. 2000). The young men that they spoke to talked about the first sexual intercourse as a performance and they talked about it in a positive way. On the other hand, the young women’s accounts of the first sexual intercourse were “more disembodied and distanced from the experience than those of the young men (Holland, et al. 2000:227). While the young men’s accounts were replete with narratives of getting erections, orgasm and penetration, young women were concerned with how to make sense and manage the experience of their first sexual intercourse. It is crucial to keep in mind that the study by Holland and others was done in the early stages of the HIV epidemic. Further to this, the context of this research (Manchester and London in the late 1980s and early 1990s) is significantly different from the present day Chilumba in Malawi, the area where I conducted this study. For example, knowledge of HIV in terms of ways of its transmission and prevention methods are at present quite high (see National Statistical Office (NSO) [Malawi] and ORC Macro 2005). This notwithstanding, the fact that the research approach privileged adolescent narratives of the first sexual intercourse renders this paper to be of methodological import. Its emphasis on meaning is a clear example of

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4 The demographic and health surveys (DHS) use standardized questionnaires to collect, among other things, sexual behavior data.
the social constructionist approach to which this study subscribes to. It invokes questions as to what sorts of meanings adolescent boys attach to the first sexual intercourse in Chilumba.

The search for meaning of the first sexual intercourse has not only been limited to asking what sorts of meanings to people attach to it. Others have sought to trace discourses that underlie the various meanings that are attached to the first sexual intercourse. Ana Amuchastegui attempted to do this in a qualitative study among young men and women aged 15 – 30 in Mexico (Amuchastegui 1999). She does this by tracing the construction of meanings of the first sexual intercourse and the elements that define these meanings. She argues that among the young men and women that she spoke to, meanings attached to virginity and the first sexual intercourse are informed by three different discourses – that of the church, social background and modernity. She also found that these discourses were inherently contradictory. By emphasizing the inherent contradictions in the discourses that inform meanings of virginity and the first sexual intercourse, Amuchastegui (1999) draws our attention to the potential for uncertainty that may surround the first sexual intercourse. She invites us to see that the contradictory discourses can result in myriad aspirations around the first sexual intercourse, making it what Johnson-Hanks (Johnson-Hanks 2005; 2006; 2002) refers to as vital conjunctures – structures of possibilities emerging around a period of potential transformation. Methodologically, Amuchastegui (1999) draws our attention to the fact that young men and women talk of the first sexual intercourse in terms of narratives, metaphors and rhetoric devices. Similarly, a qualitative study among adolescents aged 14 – 19 years in Malawi which aimed at analyzing how adolescents talk about sex showed that the predominance of use of metaphors. For example young men talked of seeing their sexual partner as “brand new” and “opening her [a sexual partner]” if their sexual partners were virgins (Undie, et al. 2007:226). Use of metaphors that Undie and others draw our attention to is important as they can potentially help in explaining the meaning that the adolescent boys attach to the first sexual intercourse.

Notably, the study by Amuchastegui (1999) does not frame the first sexual intercourse as has been done in the biomedical models – as an indicator of risk for HIV transmission, cervical cancer and pregnancy. In this way, she has shun away from treating the first sexual intercourse as problematic, hence something that needs solutions. It is in this vein that this study was conducted.
Puberty and the first sexual intercourse

Herdt and Leavitt (1998) define puberty as a universal physiological process that transforms a child to an adult, characterized by reproductive maturity, adult size and shape. Puberty has often been implicated in initiation of sex among adolescents. In a qualitative study among out of school boys and girls in rural Uganda, Nobelius et al. (2010) found that the time of initiation of sex had to do with perceptions of bodily changes by adolescents themselves or by others. Among most boys aged above 15 years, there were perceptions of uncontrollable urges for sexual pleasure that start at a certain age which unfortunately the author does not specify. On the other hand, girls reported that physical growth especially breasts attracted men to ‘pester’ them for sex. In Malawi, Munthali et al. (2006) reported that adolescent boys’ puberty is marked by developing an interest in girls. Sexual urges on their own cannot explain why someone would have sex. Adolescents in Nobelius’ study did not mention sexual urges as the reason they had sex. They said they had initiated sex as a result of pressure from friends, prior to experiencing the ‘natural’ sexual urges. Similarly in Malawi, Helitzer-Allen and Makhamba (1993) report of adolescents starting sex prior to puberty. However, there is need to proceed with caution. We need to ask what we mean when we say the adolescents had sex. Or rather we need to find out what the adolescents meant when they said they had sex so as not to fall in the trap of universalising sex. As an example, Nobelius et al. (2010) reported that some adolescents who participated in their study had a tendency of differentiating what they referred to as ‘childish play’ and their adult experiences of sex, suggesting that ‘childish play’ is different from ‘real sex’.

It is safe to say that the link between the first sexual intercourse and the onset of puberty is anything but clear cut. The onset of puberty does not necessarily signify that adolescents will start having sex for as we have seen, some adolescents can start having sex prior to reaching puberty. Statistical findings by Glynn et al. (2010) for example clearly indicate that some adolescent indeed start having sex after they’ve gone through puberty. Clearly, the relationship between these two events is anything but clear cut. It does warrant looking into to find out what is involved. This raises questions as to the situatedness of the first sexual intercourse in relation to emic conceptualizations of puberty.

As alluded to above, some initiation ceremonies in Malawi have been known to include curricula that, among other things, encourage initiates to have sex (Munthali, et al.
In Mangochi district, southern Malawi, Munthali and Zulu (2007) found that some adolescent boys were told to have sex after being initiated. After having gone through such initiation, it is highly likely that adolescent boys’ meaning of the first sex would be influenced. This raises questions as to what meanings adolescent boys who haven’t undergone initiation hold as regards the first sexual intercourse. It also raises questions as to how such adolescents construct their meanings of the first sexual intercourse. Chilumba area in Karonga district, northern Malawi, is one such area where adolescents do not undergo specific initiation ceremonies upon reaching puberty. The absence of these organised initiation ceremonies means adolescent boys are exposed to limited and adhoc counselling on sexuality mostly from friends, uncles and grandparents (Munthali and Zulu 2007). This raises questions as to what other discourses inform adolescent boys’ meanings of the first sexual intercourse.

**Theoretical framework**

In analysing adolescent boys’ meanings of the first sexual intercourse and puberty, this study uses the concept of vital conjunctures as formulated by Jennifer Johnson-Hanks so as to highlight what is stake in the first sexual intercourse experience. According to Johnson-Hanks (2006:22), vital conjunctures are “socially structured zones of possibility that emerge around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives. They are temporally configurations of possible change, critical durations of uncertainty and potentiality.” Developed in reaction to the limitations of the life cycle model, the concept of vital conjunctures is a useful for theorizing all life transitions (for example pregnancy, migration, getting a degree etc) by analysing “… the possible futures that social actors envision, hope for, or fear” (Johnson-Hanks 2006:3) and “how these orientations might motivate specific courses of action” (Johnson-Hanks 2006:25). Faced with a vital conjuncture, individuals see themselves in a variety of possible future states (horizons). These horizons are socially structured and influenced by the specific combination of possibilities and constraints a situation or an event will present to an individual (van der Sijpt 2010). The vital conjuncture only comes to pass once major outlines of the future to

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5 Over the years, the curriculum that is taught in initiation ceremonies has not remained the same. It has been influenced by the advent of NGOs working in the field of HIV see for example (http://www.jhr.ca/blog/2011/03/from-culprits-to-catalysts-girls-initiation-in-malawi/)

6 I collected data among adolescent boys (15 – 19years) attending Chilumba Secondary School. See Chapter four for a full account of the research context.
which the person was oriented appear stable, whether these are the same or different from those expected before the conjuncture (Johnson-Hanks 2006). Rather than looking at life transitions as events in their own right, this approach calls for analysing the possibilities that a particular event presents and the aspirations and expectations of the individual faced with that event which then motivate their courses of action. Johnson-Hanks has used this concept to explain why young, educated women from the Beti tribe of southern Cameroun delay the birth of their first child and hence entry into the social category of motherhood (Johnson-Hanks 2002). She argues that Beti motherhood, rather than being a clear threshold into female adulthood, is a loosely bounded, fluid social status. As a result, young, educated Beti women postpone motherhood while attempting to bring about contexts in which it is socially sanctioned. They do this in an attempt to achieve honourable motherhood. Also in Cameroon, van der Sijpt (2010) uses the concept of vital conjuncture to analyse pregnancy loss. She highlights the uncertainties and potentialities for transformation of one’s life trajectory that surround pregnancy loss.

I use the approach of analysing vital conjunctures because it attempts at understanding quantitative demographic phenomena through the analysis of individual aspirations, systems of meaning and the context in which the individual are situated. It shifts away from fixed and individualistic conceptions of events, while drawing attention to “opening up and closing down of different horizons in different situations with different social actors involved and with different norms and configurations at play” (van der Sijpt 2010:1779). In so doing, the approach highlights social processes and mechanisms that underlie the observed demographic phenomena. It shows how ‘things’ work so as to produce what is observed. Further to this, the approach emphasizes that life events ought not to be addressed in the same way as they are experienced differently, and they are situational rather universal events (van der Sijpt 2010). In the present study, an attempt is made to look at the vital conjunctures that emerge around puberty and the first sexual intercourse so as to explain demographic observations for example why delaying first sexual intercourse reduces not only short term but also long term risk of HIV infection.

I also use the concept of masculinities (Connell 2005) when considering the first sexual intercourse experience. This study uses a definition by Kimmel & Aronson (2004:503) to define masculinities as “social roles, behaviors and meanings prescribed for men in any given society.” Scholars have argued that masculinities change over time and that men
constantly renegotiate them so as not to appear “un-manly or have their masculinity called into doubt” (Spronk 2005:25). Based on the idea that there are several forms of masculinities, individual men do not necessarily conform to one form of hegemonic masculinity (Spronk, ibid). It follows that in conforming to certain form of masculinity, a man may appear to be exhibiting behavior that is not masculine.

Sex, in terms of frequency, having/not having it and number of sexual partners, has been linked with the attainment of a masculine identity (Reysoo 2005; Spronk 2005). On the other hand, the ability to control one’s sexuality has also been taken as a marker of masculinity (Spronk 2005). Apart from sex, economic stability and financial responsibility have also been noted as markers of masculinity. In a study among Mexican adolescents aged 10 – 18, Reysoo (Reysoo 2005) found that the ability to provide for one’s family was one of the indicators of masculinity.

The first sexual intercourse is an event that marks some form of transition. By focusing on ‘what is at stake’ in puberty and the first sexual intercourse experience, the study highlights other ‘zones of possibilities’ that emerge around these events and how these work together to motivate or de-motivate adolescent sex, and hence short term and long term risk of HIV infection.

**Research questions and sub questions**

The main research question is how do adolescent boys aged 15 - 19 in Chilumba, Karonga district experience their first sexual intercourse in terms of envisaged futures, aspirations and what is at stake in it.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the first sex relate to the experiences of puberty as a period of transition?
2. ‘What is at stake’ in the first sexual intercourse in terms of hope, aspirations and fears?
3. What zones of possibilities emerge around the first sexual intercourse and puberty?
4. What are the perceptions of the first sexual intercourse in terms of HIV transmission and prevention?
Chapter Three: Research methodology and data analysis

Introduction

This chapter discusses the methods that were used in collecting data for this study. It also highlights some of the challenges that were faced during the data collection by reflecting on my presence in the field and how it affected the data collection process. It also discusses the impact of data collection on me as a researcher.

Study type and population

The study was a focussed ethnographic study among in school adolescent boys aged between 15 – 19 years attending Chilumba secondary school. Initially, I had planned to conduct the study at a primary school, but most of the adolescents in primary school have not yet reached the age of 15 years. It turned out that the modal age of entry into form one was about 14 years. Data collection took place over a period of six weeks between May and June, 2011. Because I am not fluent in the local language (Tumbuka), I enlisted the help of an interpreter and interviewer, Blessings Mwandosya. He has been working for the KPS for close to two years as a qualitative interviewer.

The appropriateness of ethnographic methods for research on meanings, perceptions and experiences of sexuality has been noted by several studies (Plummer, et al. 2004; Tadele 2006). For this study, I used ethnographic techniques as a way of improving rapport and openness among the adolescents. Further to this, ethnographic techniques allowed observations and conversations of and with adolescent boys in their ‘natural’ setting. Rich data was collected during these informal conversations.

Gatekeepers and Recruitment

I sought ethical approval to conduct the research project from the National Health Sciences Research Committee (NHSRC), an organ of the Ministry of Health charged with reviewing social research adherence to ethical standards in Malawi.

Once this approval was given, I approached the headmaster of Chilumba secondary school, Mr. N. Ngwira, to explain the details of the study and what participation would entail. The headmaster has had previous contacts with the Karonga Prevention Study (KPS). As such, it was not difficult to convince him that I should conduct the study at the secondary

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7 This refers to those who enter form one through government selection process (those in day school). These ages are more varied for those in open school (See below).
school. His only concern was that whenever we schedule interviews with students, they should not coincide with the time they ought to be in class. This meant conducting interviews in the afternoon for students who attend classes in the morning (also called ‘day’ school students). This was also to my advantage as I could spend time transcribing and analysing the data before a subsequent interview. Further to this, I could also conduct interviews with students who attend classes in the afternoon (also called ‘open’ school students) in the morning before meeting those from the ‘day school’ in the afternoon.

Having lived in Chilumba for close to one year prior to my studies, I knew some of the teachers on a personal basis. One case in point is Joe Makiyi, a geography and bible knowledge teacher. Joe is also the responsible for student entertainment. Having graduated in 2010 from Mzuzu University, Chilumba secondary school is his first teaching post. He is admired by most male students. Most of the students that I spoke to knew me as Joe’s friend. Joe became one of my key informants, benefiting from the many informal conversations that we had.

It is highly likely that my association with the headmaster, Joe and other teachers at the school could have an influence on recruitment and participation in the study. For example, on the day that Blessings and I went to recruit students from the day school, Mr. Nkhata, the deputy headmaster, instructed the students to “listen to what we were going to say and answer our questions.” None of the adolescent boys that we had asked to meet refused to participate even though we emphasised that they would not be any consequences from the teachers if they refused participation. Fearing that the students may be participating because they were afraid of the teachers, we made it a point to remind them time and again of their right to opt out of the interview.

**Sampling**

During the study, we used several sampling techniques to include adolescent boys with diverse views. I deliberately set out to include students of varying characteristics. I therefore used maximum variation sampling to achieve this. The criteria used for this variation were age (15 - 19), grade in school (form one to form four) and whether one is from ‘day’ school or ‘open’ school. I also deliberately set out to include those that have had sex and those that hadn’t. Maximum variation sampling was possible for those who are in ‘day’ school because the school keeps attendance registers which have student personal
details including age and grade. The same does not apply for students in the ‘open’ school. The only sampling frame available is a list of students that is used for verifying whether a student has paid school fees or not. Such lists are not as detailed as the attendance registers. As a result, I had to rely on other sampling techniques including snowballing and convenience sampling to select students from the ‘open’ school.

The criterion of including students who had ever had sex and those who hadn’t was not unproblematic. It was impossible to ascertain in advance whether one had had sex before or not. As such, serendipity played a key role. For instance, when I met Arnold, I did not know whether he ever had had sex or not. It only came out during one of our many informal conversations.

For some participants, I used theoretical sampling to include them in the study. Green and Thorogood (2004) defines theoretical sampling as selecting participants on the basis of understanding of the field, emerging hypotheses based on on-going data analysis and deliberately attempting to test those hypotheses. I selected Kennedy for example after I had heard from Joe that Kennedy’s ex-girlfriend, Mercy had been suspended for having spent one week outside campus, apparently living with an another boyfriend.

I selected my key informants based on convenience (Joe and Mr. Flemmings Mwangolowo) and because of the positions they held at the school. As I indicated earlier, Joe and I are friends. I have known Mr. Mwangolowo since I joined KPS. The deputy headmaster, Mr. Nkhata, was selected because he heads the school’s disciplinary committee and he was well informed about cases of student sexuality that had come to the administration’s attention.

In total, 24 students and 4 key informants participated in the study. This number does not include adolescent boys with whom I had informal conversations. I also attended one disco, an entertainment activity at the suggestion of Joe. This was meant to illustrate the dynamics of students’ interaction.

**Data collection techniques and tools**

Several techniques were used to collect data and these included informal conversation, participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and analysis of written records. As I indicated earlier, I was accompanied by Blessings, who acted as my translator and interviewer. Blessings is a 25 year old young man who has been working for KPS since 2010. He is not married and has some friends who are also students at
Chilumba secondary school. I have no reason to believe that his presence negatively affected the responses that I got, especially in relation to sensitive topics.

During the data collection, I faced a methodological dilemma of how to sequence the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. One alternative was to start with focus group discussions and select students who are active in the discussions to participate in the in-depth interviews. The underlying assumption behind this alternative is that students who actively participate in the focus group discussions will also be active during in-depth interviews. The second alternative was to start with in-depth interviews. I chose the latter. The main advantage of this was that it allowed me to incorporate some of the findings from the in-depth interviews in the focus group guide. This was meant to verify whether these were concomitant with the widespread norms and values.

I did however use the recruitment session to select students who seemed lively and eager to participate in the study. But I got mixed results from this. Some of the participants who were very lively in the recruitment session were not as lively in the in-depth interviews and vice versa. As it turns out, starting with the in-depth interviews did not pose as a methodological challenge during data collection.

Analysis of written records

During my interview with the headmaster, it came out that the students learn about adolescent sexuality in a subject called life skills, among other subjects. I therefore sought the text books that are used to teach this subject. These included students’ books and teachers’ guides. There are three text books that are used for teaching life skills. Book 1 is used in Form 1, book 2 in form 2 and book three is used for form 3 and 4. I looked at what sorts of messages are being put across to the students during life skills classes. I also analysed posters and school rules and regulations to provide the context in which the first sex occurs or is likely to occur. Specifically, I looked at what the school policy is on adolescent sex, relationships and pregnancy but also its efforts towards prevention of HIV/AIDS.

Observation

I observed students’ interaction in and out of the school setting so as to have “access to what people [adolescents] do, as well as what they say they do” (Green and Thorogood 2004:132). My participation in the student activities ranged from full participation in
student games (volley ball) to overt observation in student entertainment activities. On some occasions, we got meals from the students’ kitchen and ate with the students. One of the places where we usually chatted with the students was at what they called a ‘Mphala’, a makeshift table which was used as a table during meals and a desk for studying. In some cases, we would just sit there and chat. For some activities, my participation was limited to observation partly owing to my association with teachers, especially Joe who accompanied me most of the time. Even though my association with the headmaster and other teachers could have ‘contaminated’ and influenced adolescent behaviour in the ‘natural’ setting, I believe my continued presence at the school reduced this likelihood. I was at Chilumba secondary school for most of the days during data collection.

In-depth interviews

Out of 24 adolescent boys who were recruited, 10 participated in in-depth interviews. I conducted a minimum of two interviews with each of them. I also had informal conversations with most of them. The names that I use in this thesis are not the real names of the adolescent boys that I spoke to. I have used pseudonyms to mask their identities.

Table 1: List of in-depth interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day school Students</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petros</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelvin</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open School Students</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davie</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aubrey</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnold</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For students from the ‘day’ school, interviews were conducted soon after classes. Mostly, we would start interviews at 3 pm in the afternoon. For those in the ‘open’ school, we had interviews in the morning, in most cases around 10 am. Interviews with students from the ‘open’ school were slightly difficult to set up as they are involved in household chores for example cooking and buying foodstuffs.

The ultimate aim was to get information rich narratives – personal or otherwise of the first sexual intercourse experience. Following Amuchastegui (1999), the study privileged narratives as units of meaning and ways of organising experiences when it comes to the first sexual intercourse. Initially, we had planned to introduce topics relating to adolescent sexuality after the first interview. However, for some participants, this came out even in the first interview itself.

**Informal conversations**

I also benefitted a lot from the informal conversations that I had or which I overheard in the course of data collection. Where I had a chance, I deliberately steered the conversation to cover topics of adolescent sex and relationships.

**Focus group discussions**

With the assistance of a translator, I conducted three focus group discussions with groups of 6 participants each. Two focus group discussions were conducted with students from the ‘day’ school while one was done with students from the ‘open’ school. During these discussions, we explored themes relating to perceptions of puberty and sex, meanings of the first sex, and what is at stake in adolescent sexuality emphasizing on the sexual debut. The focus groups discussions were also used to explore issues that emerge from the in-depth interviews and observations. This necessitated data analysis to be conducted at the same time as data collection.

Due to the difficulty in setting up focus group discussions, I did not conduct role plays and vignettes. The initial plan was to incorporate these at the end of the focus group discussions. This proved difficult because the focus group discussion guide was longer after incorporating questions that emerged from in-depth interviews. It was not possible to have the vignettes at the end of these discussions due to time constraints.

The period for data collection coincided with timing for national examinations. Students in Form 2 had already started writing examination when we started data
collection. For those in form 4, they were scheduled to start examinations on the 28th of June, three days after completion of data collection. As such, it was difficult to trace some students as they were reportedly studying in the ‘jungle’ in preparation for the examinations. Some students would request that interviews be curtailed to give them time to study. This did not pose as a problem as we had already planned for more than one interview session with each of the participants even though reasoning behind had been to increase rapport between us.

**Key informant Interviews**

In his influential book, Michael Quinn Patton defines key informants as “people who are particularly knowledgeable about the enquiry setting and articulate about their knowledge – people whose insight can prove particularly useful in helping the observer understand what is happening and why” (Patton 2002:231). The key informants who participated in the study were selected because they were well conversant with the local social and cultural context within which adolescent boys find themselves – both in the school setting and in their home villages.

I interviewed four key informants (three teachers and one village elder). The teachers included the headmaster and his deputy, and Joe Makiyi. The headmaster and his deputy provided the historical context of the school. They also provided the regulatory framework of the school in terms of policies, rules and regulations that students are supposed to adhere to. The deputy headmaster, who also chairs the school’s disciplinary committee, gave me concrete examples of students who have had cases of sex at the school and what measures were taken against them.

The village elder, Mr. Flemmings Mwangolowo, is, among other things a Church elder at one of the local churches in the area, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterians (CCAP). Born in 1954 in Karonga, he has lived in Chilumba area since 1979 when he joined the Karonga Prevention Study (KPS). A combination of his age, the time he has spent living in Chilumba and the fact that he has children who are in adolescence and some past adolescence makes him an invaluable source of information pertaining to local customs and norms of adolescence, puberty and marriage.
Data collection, management and analysis

All but the key informant interviews with teachers were conducted in Tumbuka. I used a translator who also helped in the transcription and translation. We recorded all interviews with the permission of the participants. Informal conversations were not recorded during data collection. For these, we relied mainly on field notes which were written down as soon as time permitted. Data analysis started as soon as we finished the first interview. This allowed exploration of the emerging themes by incorporating them in subsequent interviews.

Ethical considerations

Considering that I recruited my participants from the school, I sought permission to interview them from the teachers. This also applied for those from the ‘open’ school who are staying with guardians. I did not seek permission from the guardians.

Due to my association with teachers, I felt that some students may have felt obliged to take part in the study. Therefore, I constantly reminded the students that their participation was voluntary and they could opt out of the study at any time.

Reflections on talking about sex with adolescent boys

When I arrived in Chilumba, I was informed that one of my colleagues from KPS had started a volleyball team. Having played volleyball when I was in secondary school, I decided to join the team as a pastime. I did not know that I was going to meet some of my participants at the volleyball court. The volleyball court was located about 5 minutes from where I was residing. I first met Aubrey one evening when I was coming from the volleyball court. He was coming from school with a group of other students. We spoke briefly, with him telling me why he hadn’t made it to the volleyball court that day. After a couple of meetings at the volleyball court, I asked him if I could interview him. Like most of his friends, he was enthusiastic. Things changed the day we had the first interview. Aubrey became very shy when I asked about whether he had a girlfriend or not. I am not sure whether it was because I was recording the interview. The other day, as Aubrey was coming to my place, he met Arnold and they came together. We talked about several issues – football, life in Chilumba etc. Arnold then asked me about whether I was dating one of my colleagues at work. I said no, which was true. I took it as an opportunity to talk about their dating life. Arnold was very open about his girlfriends and the fact that he had had sex before. When he
saw that Aubrey was not responding to the conversation, he asked him to talk about his girlfriend. Aubrey started by refusing that he doesn’t have one and that he had never had sex. When Arnold started revealing about one of Aubrey’s girls, he started to open up. A couple of minutes later, he was freely talking about his sexual experiences – from getting into a relationship, how to have sex with girls and what one needs to do so as to get a girl etc.

Adolescent sex, as I have noted elsewhere, is something that is not condoned by parents in Malawi. However, I was lucky that even though I was someone who was working and living in my own house, my participants regarded me as their peer. At some point, Aubrey once told me that it was a good thing to have ‘someone like me’ talk to them.

There were mixed reactions when it came to talking about sex with the adolescents. Some of my participants were very willing to talk about their sex life. On the other hand, I sensed that some were not being truthful. In one of the focus group discussions, there was a tendency for some participants to begin their responses in the following fashion: “I have never done it [sex] before, but from what I heard ...” “My friends have told me that ...”, “I overhead some students in the hostel saying that ...” It may be possible that these were indeed true reflections on what had happened. But it was the reaction from one of the participants, Henry, that illuminated everything. After one of the participants had responded with reference to what he had heard, Henry, while laughing, said “If only we had labels on our foreheads indicating whether we have had sex or not, most of us would not be talking the way we are doing now”. Ironically, Henry was no exception when it came to talking about sex in terms of referring to what he had heard rather than what he had experienced. The whole group laughed at this remark, but I could sense some uncomfortability in the laughter. After the interview, Blessing told me he had also noticed the uncomfortability. We had deliberately refrained from asking the participants whether they had had sex before in a group setting for fear that it may cause them to be uncomfortable or even to lie about their experiences. We cannot tell whether this way of talking about sex was a result of being in a group.

Related to this talk of sex as something they had heard about rather than experience was the common reference to the perception that girls take a very active role in the processes leading to the actual sexual intercourse. The adolescent boys spoke of girls acting in “…way[s] that shows that they want you to have sex with them or propose to them”
This does not reflect the thinking of the majority of the boys. Some boys felt that initiating sex was something they could brag about among their friends. They portrayed it as an achievement of a masculine identity.

Some adolescent boys talked about sex in a negative way. They referred to it as ‘foolish behaviour’, ‘risky behaviour’, ‘sin’, ‘immorality’ etc. This was reminiscent of the language of the school rules and regulations that referred to sexuality in these terms. There were also exceptions. Henry, for example, spoke time and again of the sweetness of sex.

Use of metaphors was a common thing in the study. Most interesting was the metaphor in reference to sex. ‘Kurya’ was one of the metaphors the adolescent boys used in reference to having sex. The English translation of this metaphor is to eat. When we asked why is sex associated with eating, the adolescent boys said that since sex is a response to feelings in the body, having sex results in satisfaction that parallel the satisfaction that one gets after eating. Sexual feelings were hence perceived to parallel hunger, which require that someone does something about: eating. ‘Kurya’ also had connotation of the adolescent boys being the subject of the whole process. Adolescent boys could say ‘Ndarya chick’ (literally: I have eaten a chick). It portrayed girls as being on the receiving end of the whole process, while boys’ agency is emphasized.

During the course of the study, I had two moments which I consider as turning points in the way I conducted the study. The first one occurred after an interview with Collins, a form three student. Collins had told me that he had had sex before and was very open during the interview. When I asked him if he had any questions, he asked me if I had had sex before. A similar moment was when Arnold asked me whether I was dating one of my workmates. When I was going to the field, I had planned that I will be open to share my own sexual experiences with the students. Yet the actual process of talking about it made me feel very uncomfortable and vulnerable. Here I was talking to them about their sex life, yet I was not comfortable talking about my own sex life. The experience of discomfort made me to be more sensitive the next time I spoke to my participants about sex. It made me sensitive to the extent to which I pushed them to talk to me about their first sexual experiences.

The second moment occurred after one of the focus group discussions. Some students had talked of the negative effects of having a relationship while in school in terms of affecting one’s concentration in class. After the discussion, one of the participants,
Christopher, took me aside and asked me if it was alright for him to have a relationship. I told Christopher that for me, it was not a problem as long as they protect themselves if they have sex and they get tested. I also told him that if the school policy does not allow it, he should not do it for fear of getting expelled.

Reflections on doing research at Chilumba secondary school

Prior to starting my research project, I was told that there had been some rumours circulating in the area to the effect that I was in a sexual relationship with one of the female students at Chilumba secondary school. I have indicated elsewhere that such sexual relationships with non students are not uncommon. The fact that I was accompanied by Blessings most of the time that I was at school did not help matters. Blessings, as a working and unmarried young man, falls in the same group of outsiders who are perceived as being attractive to school girls and hence have sexual relationships with them. Even though in my case the rumour was not true, I felt uncomfortable in the initial stages of the research project. I knew that if these rumours got their way to the headmaster’s attention, my research project would be jeopardised. Further to this, these rumours could potentially create some hostility from boys who would perceive Blessings and I as competitors. Having gotten assurance from Blessings that he had no intentions of starting a relationship with any of the student girls, we resolved to minimise as much as possible our interaction with adolescent girls. As such, we hardly spoke to any of them. In the few instances that I did, it was in the presence of other students or teachers. We avoided situations that could be categorised as ‘pairing’ (see below). But I believe the study could have benefitted from getting the perspective of girls, especially in terms of issues of relationships.

Limitations of the study

As noted elsewhere, adolescent sex is prohibited in the Malawian cultural setting. As a result, it is shrouded in secrecy. For the adolescents who reported having had sex, it had not been done in recent times. As a result, they had had time to reflect on the encounter and hence may have changed the meanings that they once attached to it. The influence of sexuality education cannot be overlooked here. Some adolescent boys would therefore look at it with regret, some with a sense of achievement. I believe the perceptions would be different for adolescent boys who have had their first sexual intercourse experience recently.
Chapter Four: Research context

Chilumba, Northern Malawi

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranked at number 153 according to the United Nations’ human development index (Undp 2010). Located in the south eastern part of Africa, Malawi shares borders with Tanzania to the north, Mozambique to the south and Zambia to the west. According to the 2008 population and housing census, the population of Malawi is estimated at about 13 million (National Statistical Office (NSO) [Malawi] 2008). The country is administratively divided in three regions: north, central and south. Each region is subdivided into districts. There are 28 districts in total: 6 in the northern region, 9 in the central region and 13 in the southern region.

The study was conducted in Chilumba, a rural area in Karonga district, northern Malawi (See map 1). Chilumba is part of a demographic surveillance site (DSS) for the Karonga Prevention Study (KPS), a large scale epidemiological research programme that has been operating in Malawi since the 1979. The DSS covers an area of about 135 km$^2$ in the southern part of Karonga district (Jahn, et al. 2007). Currently, the population of the DSS area is estimated at 32,000 (Glynn, et al. 2010). The population of the area is predominantly composed of the Tumbuka ethnic group. Other ethnic groups in the area include Tongas, Ngondes (from the northern part of the district) and even some Chewas from the southern and central regions of the country. The Tumbukas have a patrilineal lineage system in that descent is traced through the father. Residence is mostly patrilocal. Marriage involves payment of Chuma (bride price) to the woman’s family, and subject to this payment being made, the children belong to the father’s family (Floyd, et al. 2008). Whereas initially this payment was in form of exchange of cattle, money is now the acceptable means of exchange. Situations where a young man and a young woman marry without paying Chuma are not uncommon. However, it becomes a problem when there is a funeral, especially if the young woman dies. The young man’s family is forced to make extra payment as punishment for ‘stealing’ the young woman. The population is mostly Christian from diverse religions (40% Presbyterian or Roman Catholic), with a small minority (2%) of Muslims (Floyd, et al. 2008). There is a proliferation of Pentecostal churches in the area.

The people of Chilumba derive their livelihoods from fishing, subsistence farming, and small scale trading. There is one market place, Jetty market. People sell clothes, fruits,
groceries and meat. There are also video show rooms where they beam West African films and football.

One of the most outstanding landmarks of Chilumba area is the port which has a jetty and fuel reserve tanks. Every Sunday night, Malawi passenger vessel, the MV Ilala 2 docks at Chilumba. It’s a day on which people flock to the Jetty for business or just to pass time. There is a row of small grocery stores, bottle stores, rest houses, restaurants, video show houses and barbershops on both sides of the road just before the jetty. There is also a truck stop just after the groceries and bars. Road tanker drivers spend nights here. At a time, there may be at least 3 road tankers.

Estimates indicate that HIV prevalence among those aged 15 – 59 years is at 10% (Glynn, et al. 2010). This is against a national prevalence of about 12%. According to the 2004 Malawi demographic and health survey (MDHS) HIV prevalence in the 15 -19 age group is estimated at 3.7% among girls and 0.4 % among boys (National Statistical Office (NSO) [Malawi] and ORC Macro 2005). There is one government run health centre in the area (Chilumba rural hospital). The Catholic Church also runs a hospital at one of its parishes, St. Annes.
Map 1: Study Location (Chilumba, Karonga District, Malawi)

Adapted from (Hemmings 2007)
Education system

The education system in Malawi involves eight years of primary school (Standards 1 - 8), four years of secondary school (Form 1 - 4) and four years of tertiary school\(^8\). A school year is divided in three terms of about 16 weeks each. The government, through the Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB), administers three examinations: after eight years of primary school (Primary school leaving certificate examinations), after two years of secondary school (junior certificate of education) and after four years of secondary school (Malawi school certificate of education).

In Chilumba area, there are four primary schools (Luromo, Uliwa, Chisumbu and St. Anne’s) and two secondary schools (Chilumba and Tauka). Chilumba is a government run secondary school while Tauka is a private secondary school\(^9\). Chilumba secondary school started as a night secondary school in 1963 by a local church and it was then called Eureka secondary school. The Malawi government took over running of the school in 1966. During this time, it had no boarding facilities. Boarding facilities were introduced in the early 1970s. During this time, only boys were admitted to the school. The school started admitting girls in 1999 but they were operating from home as there were no boarding facilities for them. In 2005, the ministry of education introduced boarding facilities for girls at the school.

Currently, there are five hostels (three for boys and two for girls)\(^10\). On paper, the boarding facilities are supposed to cater for 320 students (240 boys and 80 girls). However, currently the school has 413 students of which 129 are girls. The school was recently chosen to be a centre for special needs education to cater for three districts in the northern region: Rumphi, Karonga and Chitipa. Students that are using the boarding facilities are what comprise the ‘day’ school. These students start classes at 7:30am and finish at 2:20pm from Monday to Friday. They return to class in the evening from 6:30pm to 8:30pm for evening studies (prep) in preparation for next day’s classes. Ideally, there is always a teacher on duty

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\(^8\) Four years of tertiary education culminate in the award of a university degree. At present there are about five government accredited universities offering degree and diploma programs. Entry into these universities is difficult. However, there are many private run colleges that offer tertiary education ranging from a few months to about three years.

\(^9\) After eight years of primary school, students sit for the primary school leaving certificate examinations (PSLCE) administered by the government. Based on these examinations, some are selected to go to government secondary schools. The rest go to private secondary schools which are more expensive and in most cases of low educational standards (http://www.maravipost.com/malawi-politics/society/2318-govt-cracks-whip-on-schools-under-par.html).

\(^10\) In 2010, a new hostel for girls was opened. The school is currently constructing a new hostel for boys.
who is supposed to supervise the evening studies. This is not always the case as there are some teachers who reside far from the school campus due to lack of accommodation. By the time students start evening studies at 6:30, such teachers have long gone to their homes.

At 2:30pm, a new set of students start their lessons. They finish classes at 5:30pm. These comprise the ‘open’ school students. Formerly called ‘night school’, the ministry of education directed the name change to reflect the fact that it is open to everyone. Operating on ‘first come, first served’ basis, the ‘open’ school attracts students who are repeating classes (especially form four), those who have not been selected to government secondary school and cannot afford a place at a private secondary school (the school fees are slightly higher at private schools) and people that are working and or dropped out of school for some reason (for example pregnancy, school fees etc) and want to attain a Malawi school certificate of education (MSCE). Currently, there are about 500 students in the open school. The open school students have to arrange their own accommodation. Some live with their parents (those from within Chilumba) while others live with relatives. A significant number of them live on their own in rented houses (what they refer to as ‘self boarding’). A group of about five students rent a house and share the costs. In other cases, students may join existing households where they are given a room to sleep in. In such cases, the students prepare their own meals, independent of that household. This notwithstanding, most of the ‘open’ school students are at greater liberty in terms of movement and association than their ‘day’ school counterparts.

The school has 21 teachers of whom 4 are female. It is run by a headmaster who is has two deputies: one responsible for academic affairs and the other for administration. Due to scarcity of housing, the school provides accommodation for a few teachers. Teachers who have not been allocated school houses live outside the campus, mostly at Uliwa trading centre located about 2Km away. Teachers have the responsibility of supervising night studies and each one is allocated a week to do this. Ideally, teachers who live outside campus are supposed to make arrangements with other teachers to cover them when it comes to supervision of students during night study. Sometimes, this does not happen.

The headmaster reiterated that because the school is not fenced, it is difficult to supervise the students, especially ensuring that they do not go outside the school campus without permission. Similar sentiments were expressed by Mr. Joe Makiyi and Mr. Nkhata.
As if to underscore this, Joe and I met two students (boys) at around 6pm at a nearby market outside the school premises. Even though the ‘day’ school students can manage to go ‘out of bounds’, most of them are relatively under control in comparison to their ‘open’ school counterparts. According to the headmaster, the only time the administration can exercise control over open school students is when they are on the school campus. When they are outside, they are the responsibility of their guardians, who may not be staying with them.

Once in a while, the day school students are allowed to go for outings. These are normally on Saturday mornings, from 8 am – 12 noon. The idea is to allow them to go to local markets and purchase groceries. After the outing, teachers conduct roll calls to check if all students are present. Those that are absent are severely punished. Boys and girls do not go to outings on the same day to prevent those that are in relationships meeting and having sex on these days. If boys go to an outing on a Saturday, girls will have their outing the next Saturday. But there are special cases in which a student can request to go out of the school. These include going to the Chilumba rural hospital for treatment or to visit patients, going home to collect school fees and going to church on Sundays.

From the interviews with school authorities and the students, it was clear to me that the school administration is serious when it comes to controlling sexuality among the students. At the beginning of each term, students gather for a school assembly where the school rules and regulations are reiterated. The rules are re-emphasized during the course of the term through punishment of the students when they do not follow the rules. When it comes to sexuality, the school rules and regulations stipulate that a student can be suspended (for a period ranging from two to six weeks) for, among other things, being pregnant or being responsible for pregnancy and indecent/immoral behaviour which includes kissing or “being found in pairs with the opposite sex in the dark or other questionable places”. Immoral behaviour and aborting a pregnancy are included as reasons for excluding someone from school. John Chirwa is one of the students who had recently returned from suspension because of sex. I first learnt about his story from Joe who told me that he had been found with a girl at night. Joe told me that the girl confessed to having have had sex. John told me his story when we were waiting to go into a disco on one of the Saturdays. I had earlier on seen him talking to a girl and I asked if she was his girlfriend. He refused and said he could not do that as he had just returned from suspension. But he said
he didn’t have sex with the girl. However, he admitted having met the girl at night. He said he had asked her to bring him his books from class.

There are notable differences in how boys and girls are controlled at the school. There is a matron who ensures that all girls are in their hostels and do not go out after coming back from evening study at 8:30pm. Boys on the other hand, can continue studying in the classrooms after 8:30pm. Some boys even told me that they go to study after 12 midnight.

The headmaster, deputy headmaster and Joe both stressed that ‘pairing’ is prohibited and they try as much as possible to separate those that have paired. When I asked what ‘pairing’ is, the deputy headmaster defined it as interaction between a boy and a girl over long periods of time, whether in open space or in hiding. He further stated that “... it is hard to know whether students who are interacting are talking about academic or intimate issues. That’s the main problem. Generally, when three or four students sit in the open, we just leave them like that but if they are only two [a boy and a girl], we suspect that something is happening even if they are sitting in the open (Laughter).” As if to illustrate students pairing and how teachers stop it, Joe invited me to disco one Saturday evening. Joe and I sat on one side of the hall. I was surprised to note that the students who were dancing were concentrated on the corner diagonally opposite from where we sat. Once in a while, Joe would mingle with dancing students. When I asked where he was going, he told me that he was trying to prevent ‘pairing’. When I showed him a boy and a girl who were dancing while holding hands, he said that constitutes ‘pairing’ and he immediately sent a student to warn them to stop. At the end of the disco, Joe announced that two students (a boy and a girl) should see him the following day for he had found them ‘pairing’. He said he could have them suspended for that. A couple of days later, he told me he had just punished them.

Looking through the school rules and regulations, I could not help but notice the use of words like ‘indecent behaviour’, ‘immoral behaviour’ and ‘immorality’ in reference to sexuality. When I asked the headmaster the rationale behind the policy, he stated that it is meant to prevent unwanted pregnancies and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The school therefore provides an environment where the students can potentially interact under the watchful eye of the teachers. They then have to devise ways and means of interacting in secret.
Chapter Five: Meaning and experiences of puberty

Introduction

Puberty has often been linked to sexual activeness among adolescents. Munthali et al. (Munthali, et al. 2006) notes that knowledge and preparedness for pubertal changes have been used as an indication of sexual and reproductive health information that adolescents receive.

This chapter discusses adolescent boys’ perception of puberty so as to explore how it relates to the first sexual intercourse.

Defining puberty

We asked adolescent boys what puberty means to them. Two things were noticeable in the way adolescents responded. Firstly, most adolescents spoke about puberty in terms of their personal experiences. Most of them said they had reached puberty when they were 15. They said they were speaking about what they had gone through ‘when they reached or entered the pubertal stage’. Secondly, there was a similar pattern in terms of adolescent boys’ responses. Almost all adolescent boys gave similar answers, explaining that puberty is a stage in between adulthood and childhood. This was usually followed by listing characteristics that signify being in puberty. There was also a tendency to treat puberty and adolescence as one and the same. The similarities in responses prompted us to raise questions as to why the adolescent boys were responding that way.

Life skills education and puberty

We decided to ask our key informants to find out what the students are taught when it comes to adolescent sexuality and puberty. According to the headmaster, life skills education is one of the subjects in which sexuality is taught to the students. The subject is taught in all forms (1 - 4). He also said sex and reproduction is a topic that is covered in biology and agriculture.

There are three books that are used for teaching life skills. They are said to be organised according to the needs of the adolescents in different stages of their lives. The introduction to book 1 states that life skills education aims at “helping you [the adolescent] to understand the demands and challenges of growing up and how they impact on your [the adolescents’] lives in order to develop appropriate life skills needed to deal with them” (Malawi Ministry of Education 2004:viii). In teaching life skills, teachers are expected to use
participatory approaches so as to encourage students to share life experiences of their daily challenges. In all the three books on life skills, puberty is portrayed as a stage that marks a transition from youth to adulthood which comes with physical and psychological changes. These changes bring about challenges for the adolescent in terms of sex and sexuality which may confuse them. The books proceed on the assumption that adolescents are ill prepared to handle these challenges. This being the case, the adolescents need skills like critical thinking, negotiation, handling peer pressure etc to handle these challenges. Through life skills education, the students are expected to gain these skills. Below is diagram portraying these changes:

Source: *Life skills and sexual and reproductive health education book 1 p.34*

When we asked Collins what they are taught in life skills classes, he mentioned that they are taught about the changes that occur when boys and girls are growing up. He also said they are taught how to control and overcome their sexual feelings.

It is worth pointing out that life skills education is not a mandatory subject, especially in forms three and four. As such there are some students that do not take life skills classes. Some adolescent boys even had negative attitudes towards life skills classes, describing them as simple and hence not worth spending time on. Sciences subjects (biology, mathematics and physical science), they argued, are what are worth spending time on. Similar sentiments are noted by Chamba (2009) who argues that because life skills
education is not part of the subjects that are examined during national examinations, students and teachers do not take it seriously. This notwithstanding, it is important to note that similar ideas are being imparted in other subjects, most notably biology. Further to this, some of what is taught in school during life skills classes bears similarities to what some adolescent boys said they had been told by their parents.

“*What our parents teach us is the same as what we learn in school. For example they tell us that a person cannot do two things [being in school and having sexual relationships] at the same time. You have to finish one and then proceed to do the other*” Petros, 15yrs, Form 1

As if to underscore Petros’ sentiments, Mr. Mwangolowo, the key informant, perceived puberty as being a stage in the life of a person. He also spoke of adolescent boys ‘reaching’ the stage of puberty and the challenges they face.

**Puberty as a normal stage**

One of the most common perceptions of puberty was that it is an inevitable stage that everyone has to go through as they are growing up. Puberty was viewed as being normal. Most of the adolescent boys that we spoke to explained that puberty is a stage in a person’s life with clearly defined physical and psychological changes. Once these changes start occurring, a boy realises that they have reached puberty. Some of the most commonly mentioned changes include: development of a deep voice, enlargement of private parts, growth of pubic hair, wet dreams and sexual desires and feelings. For girls, the adolescent boys mentioned the growth of breasts, development of ‘sweet’ voice and menstruation as indicators of puberty. The production of sexual hormones was mentioned as a change that occurs for both boys and girls.

**Puberty, wet dreams and production of sperm**

Almost all adolescent boys mentioned the production of sperm as the main indicator of having reached the pubertal stage. For most of the adolescents that we spoke to, they realised that they can now produce sperm through wet dreams. Almost all of them, including those who said they had never had sex before, said that they haddreamt that they were having sex with a girl. They woke up to realise that there was ‘something’ in their
underwear. Some adolescent boys said they had already heard about wet dreams and when it finally happened, they were not surprised. Others said they discussed their experiences with their brothers and/or friends the following morning. They said they were told that now you are an adult. In talking about wet dreams, the adolescents portrayed it as something that happens without much of their control as it was just a dream. Related to the production of sperm was the perception that they have now reached a stage where they can impregnate a girl. These sentiments were similarly echoed in my interview with Mr. Mwangolowo. In his advice to his sons, he said he had told them that reaching puberty means they can now impregnate a girl if they have sex. He said he further told them that if one of them impregnates a girl, he will not be responsible for caring for the pregnant girl. Rather, the son would assume that responsibility.

**Puberty, being a grown up and behaviour changes**

Apart from the different indicators, some adolescent boys felt that puberty means that they are now grown up. They said when these changes are occurring, one realises that they are now grown up. They said it means that they ought to change the way they behave. They are no longer expected to behave like children but rather as adults. Most adolescents could say in detail behaviours that are associated with being a child and behaviours associated with being an adult. One of the behaviours that are associated with reaching puberty is having sexual relationships.

“There is a difference between a child and older person. A child does not have sexual relationships with the opposite sex because at that stage, he/she does not know much.”

Focus group discussion with day school students (Form 3 & 4)

The adolescent boys spoke at length that upon reaching puberty, they start thinking about proposing to girls. Interestingly, this was attributed to the influence of hormones, rendering it as something that is ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ in their lives.

Another commonly mentioned behavior that the adolescents associated with puberty was the tendency to rebel against authorities, including teachers and parents. Some referred to this as a tendency to be rude. Most adolescents said that once they reach
puberty, they want to try out the things that they have all along been prohibited from doing. These include drinking alcohol, smoking and sex.

Handling puberty

It is worth noting that there are no specific pubertal rites that adolescent boys undergo in this area. This is different from some areas especially in the southern region of Malawi where there are specific puberty rites for both adolescent boys and girls. Adolescent girls, on the other hand, may receive some specific advice upon reaching menarche. In the absence of such advice, the adolescent boys said they rely very much on experiences of older friends and relatives to explain the changes that they are going through. Further to this, the adolescent boys also draw from what they learn in school in an attempt to make sense of the changes that are happening when they reach puberty.

Puberty for most adolescent boys coincides with the time they are admitted into secondary school. When they start school, most parents give advice to the adolescent boys and girls pertaining to avoiding groups of friends that can influence them to start drinking alcohol, smoking and/or sexual relationship. The advice is centered on getting the adolescents to work hard in school. The advice does not necessarily pertain to having reached the puberty stage.

“They advise me that I shouldn’t like chatting with girls most of the times.”

Jones, 19yrs, Form 4

Parental advice is about adolescent boys avoiding behaviors that are seen as detrimental to their schooling. It is in this vein that the parents talk about issues of sex and pregnancy. They talk about it as something that will prevent the boys from finishing school.

Puberty and sexual feelings, emotions, desires

The emergence of sexual feelings, emotions and desires is one of the common characteristics of the pubertal stage that the adolescent boys spoke about at length. When we spoke to the adolescents, there was a tendency to use the terms sexual feelings, sexual emotions and sexual desires interchangeably. For the rest of the thesis, the use of the term sexual feelings, unless otherwise specified, is meant to encompass these three concepts.
The adolescent boys said sexual feelings are manifested through an erect penis and/or strong desire to have sex.

**Sexual feelings as normal**

Being part of the inevitable stage of puberty, sexual feelings were also shrouded in the discourse of inevitability and normality. The adolescent boys said that it was normal to experience these ‘things’. None of the adolescent boys that we spoke to said they did not experience sexual feelings.

> “It’s normal for everyone to reach puberty and develop those feelings, but I need to wait until the right time [to have sex] comes.” Collins, 19yrs, Form 3

**Sexual feelings as internal force**

Apart from being normal, feelings were also described as an internal force that comes at its own volition. The boys mentioned that the feelings come and catch a person. To an extent, they were described as being outside the control of the adolescent in that they come on their own.

> “I have realized that [having sexual feelings] is just natural, it’s not that one can be ready for the feelings; the feelings can come at any time. Feelings can come at any place, they might come while you are sleeping, and you are in class or playing football.” Kennedy, 19yrs, Form 4

**Control of Sexual feelings**

Related to the perception that sexual feelings are outside the control of the adolescent is the perception that they are difficult to control. Adolescent boys’ description of sexual feelings gave an impression that controlling these feelings involves a struggle between them and the feelings. Mostly informed by what was learnt in class, puberty is characterised by the production of sexual hormones. The adolescents said the hormones are responsible for producing sexual feeling, sexual desires or sexual emotions. They felt that sexual feelings are difficult to control because they result from the action of hormones which are produced inside the body.
“When you are young, you do not have sexual hormones that can force you to desire women.”

Focus group discussion with day school students (Form 3 & 4)

“You can’t escape when sexual feelings have been raised. But you can escape before the sexual feeling has been raised” Kennedy, 19yrs, Form 4

Despite being the normal outcome of being in the puberty stage and being difficult to control, adolescent boys felt that successful adolescence requires dealing with these feelings. In this case, successful is as defined by teachers, parents and other adolescents who do not desire to have sex. The language used in terms of dealing with these feelings was that of controlling these feelings and/or overcoming feelings. The adolescents portrayed it as a struggle which they have to go through time and again. There were mixed feelings among adolescent boys as regards control of sexual feelings. Some adolescent boys felt that they can control their sexual feelings successfully, albeit after struggling. Some of the strategies that they use to control feelings include: stopping thinking about sex, joining others people who are chatting about a subject other than sex instead of being alone or getting away from girls when they see that their sexual feelings are rising. Jones is one of the adolescents who said he successfully used the last option as a strategy. During class break one morning, he had decided to remain in class while other students went out to get their tea. One of the girls stayed behind as well and asked him to help her with a mathematical problem. As he was helping her, the girl got very close and started rubbing herself against him. Jones thinks she was doing it deliberately. Jones said his sexual feelings started to rise as a result. He said he excused himself that he was going to the toilet and he did not come back until after the other students had returned. On the other hand, some adolescent boys felt that they cannot escape from sexual feelings once they catch you. They argued that this is mainly problematic where a boy and a girl are together in a secluded place. They argued that once the sexual feelings have caught you, you have to have sex there and then or you masturbate.

Conclusion

In forming these adolescent perceptions on puberty, life skills education plays a key role as evidenced by students’ responses. Even though some students may not take it
seriously, life skills education is key in informing adolescent boys’ discourses pertaining to puberty. Chamba (2009) makes similar observations, arguing that the implementation of the life skills education programme was adequate to impart the necessary skills it was meant for.

The adolescent boys whom we interviewed perceive puberty as a normal stage in life characterised by bodily changes. One of the key characteristics that they mentioned is the influence of sexual hormones on adolescent sexual desires. Hormones were perceived as normal, an internal force and difficult to control. Apart from bodily changes, adolescent boys also spoke of behaviour changes in terms of starting relationships with the opposite sex. It is in this vein that the next chapter seeks to shed more light on adolescent relationships.
Chapter Six: Adolescent relationships and first sexual intercourse

Introduction

It would seem that adolescent relationships are an important aspect of their lives judging from the fact that most of them are talking about them. They are often the subject of ‘Magemu’ – teasing among young adolescents. Further to this, some adolescent boys are trying, with different levels of success, to get into relationships with girls. In the previous chapter, we saw that getting into relationships is one the behaviours associated with being a grown up. This chapter focuses on the adolescent relationship in term of how it starts, maintaining the relationship, the influence of money and lastly how relationships are linked to the first sexual intercourse.

Getting into relationships

Adolescent boys said relationships develop from being mere friends who are ‘just chatting’. As they are chatting, adolescent girls are said to do things that encourage the boys to propose to them.

“\textit{What happened is that we were just friends with that girl; in the course of our friendship there were some actions that she was doing that influenced me to propose to her.}” Kennedy, 19yrs, Form 4

These actions include calling the boy names like ‘mwana’ (kid) and challenging him that he cannot do ‘anything’. It is worth noting that adolescent boys had a tendency to downplay their agency is getting into these relationships. They expressed similar sentiments when it came to talking about having sex. This does not mean that the adolescent boys are just sitting somewhere waiting for girls to act in ways that invite them to propose. Rather, they are also active in their own ways. For example they have to notice a girl who seems to be interested in them as well.

Significance of adolescent relationships

The significance of relationships lies in the fact that boys emphasized that sex mostly occurs within the context of a relationship with a girl. We asked Petros to tell us the type of person one can have sex with – stranger, friend or girl/boyfriend. In response, he laughed it off saying it is impossible for someone to have sex with someone who is not one’s girlfriend.
or boyfriend. While some adolescent boys mentioned that they have managed to have sex with girls with whom they are not in a relationship, they admitted that this is rare. Other adolescent boys said this can only happen if the girl is a prostitute.

At the same time, getting into a relationship is not an easy thing for the adolescent boy. Relationships depend on the willingness of the girl in question to tolerate a boy’s advances and accept their proposal for a relationship. The adolescent boys think that one has to be endowed with certain resources for a girl to accept their proposal. For example adolescents teased one another that not being in relationship is a result of being an ‘ugly boy’. Being good looking is a resource for getting into a relationship. Another important resource is money. There was a common perception that girls are more attracted to those that seem to have money.

**Relationships and exchange of money**

Money, according to the boys, is not only required at the beginning of a relationship but throughout its life course. The boys felt that the exchange of money is an important aspect of relationships with girls. They see themselves as being expected to give money to the girls rather than receive it. This makes the relationship difficult to maintain considering that the boys are dependent on their parents for money and the money they get is, in most cases, not enough.

Most adolescents that we spoke to were of the view that the girls at the school are more attracted to people from outside the school, especially those who are working for example taxi drivers, KPS employees and business men. Equally attractive are fellow adolescents who seem to come from well-to-do families. The boys said the girls are attracted to these groups as they can potentially give them money and buy them good food. The boys also report that some girls choose to have relationships with a fellow student and an outsider at the same time, using the outsider mainly to get money and other benefits.

I asked Arnold what it would take for a person to get a girlfriend at the school. For a moment, he thought I was planning to get myself one. He started by saying that that was not a problem as he could arrange to help me get one. All I had to do was to prepare some good food (rice and chicken) and some soft drinks, especially a local orange juice called Sobo and invite the girls to my place. He said he would bring them and once they see all these ‘good things’, they will be attracted and we can then start a relationship. Similar sentiments were echoed by other students in separate interviews.
Adolescent relationship and first sexual intercourse

I have already alluded to the common perception among the adolescent boys that I spoke to that sex can only occur in the context of a relationship with a girl. However, adolescent boys face several problems in getting into such relationships. Having fewer resources (especially money) as compared to outsiders who are working, the boys feel they are less attractive to the girls. Secondly, the fact that school rules prohibit relationships between boys and girls serves as a disincentive for some to start relationships that could potentially lead to sex. I have alluded to the fact that ‘pairing’ is an offence punishable by suspension according to the school rules. Being in a relationship on its own does not guarantee that the adolescent boy is going to have sex with his girlfriend. Once in a relationship, having sex depends on the willingness of the girl to have it.

Conclusion

Relationships seem to be an important aspect of adolescent boy’s lives, yet they are not easy to get into. Money plays an important role in these relationships, making them difficult to start and maintain. But they are also the context within which sex occurs for the adolescents.
Chapter Seven: Meanings and experiences of the first sex

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore how adolescents conceptualise the first sexual intercourse. I discuss adolescent boys’ ideal first sexual intercourse in terms of timing and sexual partners. I then proceed to look at the factors that are at play which can facilitate or hinder the adolescent boys from engaging in the first sexual intercourse within the school setting. I first consider the factors that can potentially make first sex attractive and then proceed to those that make it unattractive or difficult for the adolescent to engage in it.

Definition of the first sex

Of the ten adolescent boys who participated in in-depth interviews, four said they had had sex before. We asked the four adolescent boys who said they had had sex to tell us what they regard as their first sexual intercourse. The adolescents said that what they regard as their first sexual intercourse was when they made a vaginal penetration and managed to ejaculate. The implication of this statement is that they may have had penetrative sex before, but if they did not ejaculate, it does not constitute their first sexual intercourse. In relating these experiences, adolescents differentiated what they do now as adolescents and what they used to do as children, which they did not regard as sex. As children, the boys said, they would lie on top of girls and even touch each other’s private parts. That was what they would then call sex. In retrospect, the adolescent boys said they were just playing then. This is similar to what Nobelius et al. (2010) referred to as ‘childish play’. This is one of the points of departure from studies that only ask when one had their first sexual intercourse without finding out what it involved and what it meant to the adolescent.

Ideal timing of first sexual intercourse

We asked the adolescent boys who reported that they had never had sex when and with whom they would want to have their first sexual intercourse. Most of them said that they would want to wait until the ‘right time’ comes for them to have sex. Adolescent boys’ reference to the ‘right time’ for them to have sex had two different meanings. One group of adolescents felt that the ‘right time’ referred to finishing school. While finishing school meant having sat for the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) examinations for some adolescent boys, for others it meant having gone through tertiary education and
secured a job. The other group of adolescents felt that the ‘right time’ for them was to have their first sexual intercourse when they are married. They said they would wait until marriage because premarital sex is a sin against God. According to them, sex is only allowed among those who have been duly wedded in Church. George is a member of student religious group called Student Christian Organisation of Malawi (SCOM) which he joined as soon as he got to Chilumba secondary school in 2007. He said he has never had sex before. When we asked him when and who he plans to have his first sexual intercourse with, he said:

“It should be the girl whom I have married because there is no other way apart from that. If I get a girlfriend and have sex with her, it’s a sin to God. So to avoid sinning, it should be the girl whom I have already married.”

Ideal sexual partner for the first sexual intercourse

Having told us the aspired timing of their first sexual intercourse, we then asked the boys with whom they would want to have their first sexual intercourse. As indicated above, some adolescent boys said they would want to have their first sex with their wife. For other adolescent boys who reported that they hadn’t had sex, it did not really matter whether it was their wife or not. For them, what mattered was that they should have their first sexual intercourse with someone who is also a virgin. They said they did not want to have sex with someone who has been ‘used’ before. Asked why they would not want to have their first sexual intercourse with someone who has been ‘used’ before, the adolescent boys said they were making an effort not to have sex and it was only fair to be rewarded with someone who was making a similar effort. For other adolescent boys, preference for a virgin as an ideal first sexual partner was because they did not want someone who is more sexually experienced than themselves in the first sexual intercourse. Even though this is what they wish for, some adolescent boys noted that it may be problematic in practice. They noted that they have to depend on the girl’s reporting that they are virgins. They said it is something they cannot prove.

First sex and future roles

Some adolescents felt that the importance of the sexual relationship at this stage is that it is a form of preparation for their future roles. This preparation was in the form of
learning how to propose and be with a girl. The idea of preparing for their future roles was also mentioned in relation to having sex. They envision that they will one day have to marry and they have to be prepared for that.

“Some students think that if they do not get into relationships now, they will have problems to marry in future. So they propose to girls at this stage”

Focus group discussion with day school students (Form 3 & 4)

First sex and opportunities for future sex

The adolescent boys said having their first sexual intercourse has implications on how they relate with their girlfriends. Some adolescent boys felt that the first sexual intercourse is a gateway to more and more sex in future. The reasoning behind this perception is that once you have the first sexual intercourse, the next sexual intercourse will not need the same amount of negotiation. Further to this, the adolescent boys felt that after the first sexual intercourse, they are likely to be less shy in the presence of their girlfriends. They felt that their girlfriends would also feel the same way. After all, they had supposedly ‘undressed’ before each other during the sexual intercourse. Further to this, some adolescents felt that after the first sex, they are more likely to be well experienced when it comes to negotiating future sex. Interestingly, of the four that had had sex, two said they were now abstaining from sex. The reasons given were religion and desire to concentrate on school. One of them, Collins, said did not have a girlfriend, meaning he cannot have sex, at the time of the interview. He said he did not desire one as he now felt having sex is a sin. On the other hand, Peter still had a girlfriend but they rarely met as she was living in Mzuzu city, about 140 Km away. He was very indifferent about the relationship as he only meets his girlfriend during holidays, and only when he has gone to visit his relatives in Mzuzu. He said he feels indifferent about the relationship because he cannot monitor what the girl is doing. Being far from where he is, the girl can have other relationships.

Peer influence and the first sexual intercourse

Peer pressure does play an important role in the timing of the first sexual intercourse. Firstly, the pressure is on those who do not have a girlfriend to find themselves one. In some instances, the peers may play an active role in finding a suitable girl with
whom to be in a relationship. For example, Petros stated that his friends set him up with a
girl, even though he did not proceed to ask her to be his girlfriend. For those that have a girl
friend, the pressure is for them to have sex with the girl. Some adolescent boys reported
being told by friends that they should not to treat their girlfriends as if they were their
sisters. Collins and his girlfriend Maureen had sex eight months into their relationship.
During this period, he says was pressured by his friends to have sex.

“They said we were just playing; we don’t do anything, so it was like they
influenced me. Though I was ignoring it but I was later influenced by them.”
Collins, 19yrs, Form 3

Collins admits that even though he managed to endure for about eight months, it
always hurt him when the other boys were talking to him like this. This pressure came while
he was at a boarding primary school. His best friend, Jonas, hadn’t had sex by the time
Collins had. He didn’t even have a girl friend then. After Collins had sex, Jonas is said to have
started admiring his friend to the point of also searching for a girl. He asked Collins to assist
him to get a girlfriend as well. This would involve assisting in setting up a meeting between
the boy and the potential girlfriend.

The concept of ‘Life’ was used to refer to those that are ‘cool’ among the boys. It is
used to refer to those that have girlfriends, those that smoke and those that drink alcohol.
One does not have to do all these things to qualify as living ‘life’. Common usage of the
concept ranged from ‘knowing life,’ ‘enjoying life’, ‘living life’ etc.

“At times when we are chatting in groups, our friends who have girlfriends
tell us that we [those with no girlfriends] do not know life. They mean they
are enjoying more than us.”
Focus group discussion with day school students (Form 3 & 4)

“They say that those who don’t have girlfriends don’t know life” Kennedy,
19yrs, Form 4
At times, boys who do not have girlfriends may get away from such groups to avoid being ridiculed. This strategy works best in the afternoon, for they have alternative places to go. However at night, after night studies which normally end at 8:30pm, sometimes the ridiculing starts again in the hostels just before they sleep. They refer to this as ‘Magemu’. Even though ‘magemu’ tackle any subject, it is not uncommon for some to refer to the fact that one does not have a girlfriend. Those with no girlfriends are called names like ugly boy.

**Girls’ agency in the first sexual intercourse**

In talking about sex, I mentioned that most boys emphasized the role of girls in seducing them to have sex. This is not the whole picture. I stated elsewhere that it would have been illuminating if I had asked girls about their own experiences. But even though I did not get the girl’s perspective, some adolescent boys stated that some girls use strategies to delay the first sexual intercourse as much as possible. The most common one that was mentioned was that of the menstrual period. Girls tell their boyfriends that they cannot have sex because they are menstruating. This is a common belief in many communities in Malawi (Bisika 2008). The belief is that when one has sex during menstruation, the blood can hurt the man if he gets into contact with it (Munthali and Zulu 2007). Albeit in the short term, this strategy works to delay the (first) sexual intercourse. In a context where sex is not condoned, most adolescents do it in secret. Opportunities for this are not always forthcoming, given the school rules and regulations that I have mentioned above. This mainly applies for adolescent who are in the ‘day’ school. For students in the ‘open’ school, they are less constrained by these school rules. They are constrained by the societal norms that limit boy/girl interactions.

**Negotiating the first sex**

One of the salient things about the first sexual intercourse is that it is a negotiated event. Most adolescent boys expressed their desire to have sex, if not now then sometime in the future. However, whether they proceed to have sex depends on the girl with whom they want to have sex also having sexual feelings. They felt that if she does not have sexual feelings, they cannot have sex. When it was put to them that they can force a girl to have sex with them by overpowering her, the adolescent boys said they could not do that as it does not reflect love. None of the boys who had sex ever admitted to having forced someone to have sex with them. They also did not admit to ever having been forced to have
sex with an older woman. It is important to note that they report this in the context where the laws of Malawi and the school rules prohibit it.

Negotiating the first sexual intercourse is not always a difficult thing. Collins, for example, did not have problems negotiating his first sexual intercourse as his girlfriend, Maureen, was already willing to have sex. But this is not always the case. Other adolescent boys said they found the negotiation difficult. Where the boy wants to have sex and his girlfriend does not, the boys describe needing to ‘raise’ the feelings of the girl so that she would also want to have sex. One of the strategies that are used to raise feelings is talking about sex and/or private parts. Alternatively, touching was also mentioned as a strategy to raise the feelings in the girl’s body.

“You start touching and caressing the girl. As you do that, hormones and sexual feelings inside her body increase. She then gives in [to sex].”

Focus group discussion with day school students (Form 3 & 4)

The boys said that once both of them have these feelings, they can now proceed to have sex. A boy’s success in raising a girl’s sexual feelings is not guaranteed. It is does not necessarily follow that once they touch the girl or talk about sex then the girl’s feelings will be ‘raised’ and they will proceed to have sex as a result. In some circumstances, the girl can refuse these advances hence making the negotiation of the first sex uncertain.

An interesting note about the first sexual intercourse is that it usually involves bleeding for both the boy and the girl. According to the adolescents, there is a lot of friction as it has to be done in a hurry for fear of being discovered. This is further worsened by the inexperience and excitement that comes with doing something that all along has been prohibited.

“You become so excited, it’s a new thing and you do it fast. That way, you increase friction [between the penis and the vagina] which may result in the bleeding.” Jones, 19yrs, Form 4
First sex as disturbance for schooling

On the other hand, some adolescents felt that being in a relationship can potentially disturb schooling. The said it would mean spending most of their time thinking about their girlfriends rather than concentrating on school.

“When you are in a relationship, a lot can happen. For example, your girlfriend can end the relationship. Instead of concentrating on school, you will spend time thinking about that. You won’t do well in school and that is not a good thing.” Petros, 15yrs Form 1.

First sex as failure of self control

I have stated elsewhere that boys learn that the body produces hormones which are said to control their desire for sex. Whether one proceeds to have sex or not depends on the extent to which he or she can control their sexual feelings. The implication of this reasoning is that having sex means that one has failed to control those feelings for sex.

“It all depends on how they control their [sexual] hormones. Some find it difficult to control their hormones.” Collins, 19yrs, Form 3

First sex and fear of pregnancy

Most of the boys mentioned the fear of pregnancy as the most probable consequence of the first sexual intercourse. The felt that getting a girl pregnant would mean they will have to marry her right away. This was one of the reasons they gave for delaying the first sexual intercourse. They said they would like to wait until they are ready or when the time is right.

“Right now, I depend on my parents. If I have sex, I can impregnate a girl. I don’t have a house, a garden and I am not working. Where will I get the money to take care of the girl and the child on my own?”

Petros, 15yrs, Form 1

When I asked Mr. Mwangolowo about what happens when a girl gets pregnant, he told me that in most cases she is taken to the boy’s family. Similar sentiments were
expressed in informal conversations with some female friends. The pregnant girl is ‘dumped’ at the boy’s household and it is the responsibility of his family to take care of her – either the two will marry or she will just be part of the family. But this also requires that the family pay a certain amount of money locally called ‘Chibadara’, as a compensation to the girl’s family for the pregnancy and the fact that she has now stopped schooling. The assumption is that she will not return to school as the two will marry. In the event that the two decide to marry, there is also need to pay ‘Chuma’ to the girl’s family. Marriage also implies that the boy will have to live on his own with the pregnant wife and shoulder the responsibility of taking care of her. Considering that they are not financially independent, the boys felt that they cannot manage these responsibilities.

“Once a girl is impregnated, it is the boy who takes on the responsibility of taking care of her. When parents have realized that a girl is pregnant, they will bring her to the boy’s home. The boy now becomes the breadwinner. He will assume the task of sorting out all the problems.”
Focus group discussion with open school students (Form 3 & 4)

It is not automatic that when a boy impregnates a girl, he has to leave school and marry the pregnant girl. It also does not really mean that he will have to support the girl on his own. A case would be appropriate to illustrate this.

Grace, student at a local private secondary school, got impregnated by her fellow student. She dropped out of school and was taken to her boyfriend’s parents. Her boyfriend, however, continued to go to school. After a few weeks, Grace was sent to her mother-in-law’s village. She was meant to stay there until she delivered. (Informal conversation with Selina)

This above case notwithstanding, what happens to the pregnant girl partly depends on the socioeconomic status of the boy’s parents. The mother of the boy in this case was working as a teacher and hence her socio economic status is well above the majority of the people in the area. Sending a pregnant girl to the village is an option that is not available for most people of the area.
The school policy on pregnancy stipulates that a student will be suspended from school if they are responsible for pregnancy or they are pregnant. They can come back after a year or after the girl has delivered. Interestingly, the headmaster noted that most girls who get pregnant drop out on their own accord as the pregnancy is perceived as a source of shame among their peers. Similar sentiments were echoed by the boys.

“Girls are ashamed when they get pregnant while still in school. If she comes to school, her fellow girls will laugh at her that she is pregnant. That means she is finished. She won’t come again”

Focus group discussion with day school students (Form 3 & 4)

Adolescent boys, on the other hand, do not proceed to drop out on their own as the girls do. They can continue schooling as long as the school administration is not aware that they have impregnated a girl.

School rules, regulations and the first sex

Apart from difficulty of getting into and maintaining relationships with girls, the school context limits the opportunities for having sex, hence influencing the timing of the first sexual intercourse. In the context where those that have been caught having sex are heavily punished through suspension from school, most adolescents are not willing to take the risk of having it. To complicate matters, the school rules stipulate that before being admitted from suspension for having engaged in sex, the student has to be counselled in the presence of his/her parents. I have mentioned above about John’s suspension on allegations that he had sex. On being readmitted, he came with his parents and he was counselled in their presence. As a result, the idea of being suspended because of sex does not appeal to most of the adolescent boys. As if to underscore the fear of being suspended from school, two girls overdosed themselves with medicine one week before I finished collecting data. Apparently they had been suspended for being found out of bounds. It is said that they were afraid of facing their parents.

Opportunities for having sex are also limited by the restrictions that are placed on student movement within and outside the school premises. Elsewhere, I have written about organization of student outings whereby boys and girls do not go out on the same day as a
means of reducing the chances for them to have sex. This however, does not stop girls from meeting boys, especially those from ‘open’ school or those that are working. Even boys from the day school can go out of bounds to meet their girlfriends. Arnold, a form one ‘open’ school student, has a girlfriend who is in the ‘day’ school. When I met him one Monday afternoon, I asked him what he had been up to over the weekend. He told me his girlfriend had come to visit him on Sunday. I asked how that was possible; he said she had left the campus on the pretext that she was going to church.

**Shyness around the first sex**

The other factor that has implications for timing of the first sex is the perception that being the first one, it is surrounded by feelings of shyness. Boys expressed their discomfort in ‘undressing and being naked in front’ of their girls. They also mentioned that the girls are equally shy to do so. Hence the first sex is delayed for quite some time as a boy gets to familiarise himself with his girlfriend. Collins for example did not have his first sexual intercourse until after seven months into his relationship with Maureen.

**Condom use during the first sex**

There were different experiences when it came to use of condoms in the first sexual intercourse. Two of the four adolescents who admitted having had sex said they had used a condom during the first sexual intercourse. One of the two, Peter, said he got the condom from his friend. His friend had put the condom under the pillow in the room where Peter went to have sex. When we asked him if he would have used a condom had it been that his friend had not left it under the pillow, Peter said it was very unlikely that he would have. Some adolescents noted that it is usually not very easy to access condoms when they are in their homes. They argued that mostly condoms are sold in one of the village grocery stores and they are afraid that if they buy a condom, the store owner, who is most likely to know them, will report to their parents. When we asked them why they cannot collect from hospitals where condoms are distributed for free, the boys said that most of the staff are older and they are afraid their morals will be questioned when they go ask for condoms. Similar barriers have been found elsewhere, highlighting the fact that these fears are not unfounded. Researching in Mangochi, a district in Southern Malawi, Jimmy-Gama (2009) found that some health workers objected to giving sexual and reproductive health services
to unmarried adolescents due to societal expectation that they are not supposed to be having sex.

**First sexual intercourse and fear of HIV infection**

Interestingly, most adolescents that we spoke to did not mention the fear of HIV/AIDS as the main reason for waiting before they have their first sexual intercourse. The fear of HIV/AIDS was only mentioned after probing or was not even mentioned at all in some circumstances. Similar findings are reported by Van Reeuwijk (2010). Based on her research among Tanzanian boys and girls, she reports of fears of unwanted pregnancy being of great concern among them. Among other things, young boys mentioned fear of expulsion from school, ostracism in the event that they refuse responsibility for the pregnancy and being forced to marry. It is important to note that Van Reeuwijk’s study made reference to sex in general and the concomitant fears of pregnancy.

Among the adolescent boys that I spoke to, it was the responsibilities that would befall on them in the event that they impregnate that mattered most. Knowing that they can potentially impregnate once they reach puberty makes this fear of responsibilities surrounding pregnancy greater. They are afraid that they can impregnate the girl at the first instance and hence jeopardise their imagined portfolio of opportunities. For those that have had sex before, this fear of responsibilities is there, but it is reduced. After all, they have managed to do it before without impregnating the girl. Furthermore, as the boys get older, they interact with others who are more sexually experienced who can clarify some of their misconceptions as regards pregnancy.

**Perceptions on implications for HIV transmission**

Even though most adolescent boys mentioned the fear of HIV after being probed, some felt that they were at risk of HIV infection. The adolescent boys who felt this risk talked of not knowing the HIV status of the girls at the school and how this could potentially put them at risk of HIV infection. Even though statistics indicate that HIV prevalence in the 15 – 19 age group is quite low (3.7% among girls and 0.4% among boys according to the 2004 MDHS), the common perception among the boys was that girls would infect them with HIV if they had sex with them. They did not see themselves that they could infect the girls. The reasoning behind this perception was twofold. Firstly, they thought that the girls from the school are involved in concurrent sexual partnerships. They argued that the girls have
other boyfriends at home. When we asked Kelvin if he would consider having a sexual relationship with one of the girls from his school, his response was:

“You mean girls from this school? No way! When they are here, they tell you that you are their only boyfriend. But they also have boyfriends at their homes. At the end of the day, you can get something (diseases) or you can get disturbed in school.”

Secondly, and related to the idea of concurrency, was the perception that girls are having sex with older boys and men from outside the campus that could result in cross generational transmission. I have indicated above that most adolescent boys held the perception that school girls are more attracted to outsiders especially those who are working because of money. Before I started my fieldwork, I had heard about this sort of behaviour. The fact that there had been cases of this nature on campus served to justify this perception. In my interview with the deputy headmaster, I was drawn to the attention of a case where Mercy was suspended from school because she had gone away from campus for one week. During this time, she is said to have been living with a man who lives at Jetty market. She was Kennedy’s girlfriend at the time she is said to have done this. During our interview with Kennedy, he admitted that Mercy was at some point his girlfriend but he ended the relationship when this story broke out. He further told us that he had never had sex with her.

Most adolescents are not thinking about the risks attached to the first sexual intercourse when they are having it. Most of them are preoccupied with doing it right. There are some who stated that they had used a condom in their first sexual intercourse. I have already mentioned about Peter who used a condom because his friend had left it under a pillow. In a focus group discussion, one of the participants reiterated it as follows:

“Since it is the first time [that they are having sex], most adolescents are interested in experiencing how it is done and what it feels like. You know, it is difficult to be considering the pro and cons of something that is new. All you want to do is try it”

Focus group discussion with day school students (Form 3 & 4)
Conclusion

There are several factors that surround the first sexual intercourse that serve to encourage or discourage adolescent boys from engaging in the first sexual intercourse. Most important among these are implications of the first sex on the short term and long term aspirations held by the adolescent boys. Consideration of ideal partners, negotiations around the first sex, fears of pregnancy and HIV, peer influence are some of the factors that have implication on the timing of the first sexual intercourse: whether it is delayed or not.
Chapter Eight: Discussion and Conclusion

Vital conjunctures

In thinking about vital conjunctures, Johnson-Hanks (2006:23) argues that we can understand them through the “horizons, borders of possibility, desirability, and potential danger as perceived by the participants.” In analysing periods of potential transformation, we need to look for possible futures (horizons of the conjuncture) that the adolescent boys imagine that are created during the vital conjuncture. It is these myriad futures that create uncertainty around the period of transformation.

Vital conjunctures at puberty

As a period of potential transformation, puberty presents a vital conjuncture to the adolescent experiencing it. When an adolescent reaches puberty, he is faced several zones of possibilities. Puberty brings the horizon that the adolescent can no longer be regarded as a child. They are adults and they can do things that grownups do, among them drinking, smoking and even having sex. For this study, I only consider horizons that emerge in relation to the first sexual intercourse. Among the aspirations that the adolescent boy has at this stage is to behave like a grown up. Having sex is one of the domains in which the adolescent can do so. As stated above, adolescent boys described puberty as being characterised by the production of sexual hormones which then produce sexual feelings, desires and emotions in the adolescent. To the adolescent at this stage, societal expectation is being supported and justified by nature. In doing so, I am not saying that the adolescent boy has not had sex by the time he reaches puberty. He may have done so out of curiosity or may have been forced to have sex. As I indicated earlier, what constitutes the first sex is contested. The point I am making here is that puberty opens up horizons that are supposedly supported by nature.

Vital conjunctures around the first sexual intercourse

In discussing the vital conjunctures that surround the first sexual intercourse, I look at what sorts of horizons present themselves around the first sexual intercourse and what aspirations do the adolescent boys hold in relation to the first sexual intercourse.

In a context where the first sexual intercourse has always been prohibited and is hence seen as an adult preserve, it is not surprising that the first sexual intercourse is an exciting event for the adolescent boy. On the other hand, it is also marked by fears of being discovered and being punished. In the school context, this takes the form of a suspension.
At home, punishment may range from being beaten to admonition. Further to this, it may have negative consequences for example pregnancy.

**Horizons discouraging the first sex**

I have previously indicated that reaching puberty coincides with entry into secondary school for most adolescent boys. I also indicated that puberty is characterised by the emergence of desires for having sex. So what serves to limit these desires among adolescent boys that are attending school? Adolescent boys direct their attention to short term and long term zones of possibilities.

For most adolescents, being in secondary school opens new zones of possibilities to which the adolescent boys direct their aspirations. Most adolescents stated that they would aspire to join formal employment rather than go into farming or fishing as most of the people in the area do. The school therefore is viewed as an avenue through which aspirations can be achieved, most notably that of getting into formal employment and being financially independent. The fact that there are fewer opportunities for formal employment does not help matters for the adolescent. However, engaging in the first sexual intercourse can disturb the adolescent boys’ path to their aspirations. Glynn et al. (2010) have found that early sex, defined as sex at age less than 17 years, was less common among those with secondary education. Notably, the authors base this finding from analysis of data from age cohorts that do not include the adolescents that are now aged between 15 – 19 years. However, it would seem to appear that the mechanism that is at play is the same. By opening up new horizons, the school serves to reorient adolescent boys’ aspirations to the distant future rather than the immediate one. Further to this, it makes those aspirations appear feasible to attain.

The perception that puberty means that the adolescent can now impregnate is held even by those that are not in school, for example parents. The same message is repeated for the adolescent when they get in school. However, in the school context, it is presumably backed by ‘scientific truth’. The discourse on hormones which learnt is in biology and life skills serves to emphasize that this is how things work. As such, the adolescent boy thinks one act of sexual intercourse is risky enough to impregnate a girl. Abstaining in this case is the answer. They do not want to drop out as a result of impregnating a girl as this will disturb their path to achievement of formal employment and financial independence but also entry into marriage while prepared. This could be one of the explanations as to why
some adolescents abstain after having their first sexual intercourse. It could potentially be one of the explanations behind the finding by Glynn et al. (2010) that about most men delayed for more than a year between their first sexual intercourse and first marriage.

Having the first sexual intercourse while still in school is related to short term and long term adolescent boys’ aspirations of achieving a desirable form of masculinity. Chimaraaoke (2008) rightly notes the fragility of adolescent masculinities and the need to constantly protect them. In the short term, engaging in the first sex requires some investment and risk. In this case, investment is in form of money and time while the risk comes as a result of the perception that sex is a negotiated event. Refusal to be in a relationship or to have sex can result to peers questioning one’s manliness. It can be a source of ridicule for the adolescent that he is not man enough. The long term effect on masculinities has to do with adolescent boys’ aspirations of marrying after completing school. Completion of school is an enviable achievement in the area as it signifies potential to get into formal employment. However, adolescent boys’ wishes for completion of school are not about just getting the education per se but rather they are also about getting the means to support one’s family when they marry. Even those who only said they would want to have sex when they finish school without referring to marriage are also envisioning future financial stability. For the adolescent boys, financial independence means they are in a better position to handle the potential consequences of pregnancy in terms of supporting the girl and the child.

There is a common perception that the exchange of money is an important component of adolescents’ relationships. This is similar to findings in Southern Malawi by Poulin (2007) who argues that male-to-female money transfers are characteristic of Malawian relationships among youth. She further argues that the exchange obligation forms and sustains these relationships as it is interpreted as a gesture of love by both boys and girls. Poulin’s findings put into perspective the adolescent boys’ perception that they are less marketable as compared to people who are working. In the long term, this exchange is projected as being responsible for one’s family by providing for their needs. It is this role that adolescent boys envision for themselves. Succeeding in this role requires that they get formal employment, the prospects of which are made available through remaining in school. Dropping out as a result of impregnating a girl or otherwise can jeopardise this prospect. Hence abstaining appears more appealing to them.
Adolescent boys are not only orienting their actions in the future. Even in the immediate present, there are some factors that act as barriers to having their first sexual experience. Schooling, through life skills education, aims to teach the adolescent how to discipline their body by controlling hormones. This control of hormones is manifested in the ability to control the timing of the first sexual intercourse. Some adolescent boys perceive those that are having sex as having failed to control their bodies.

Even though national HIV prevalence estimates are low in the age group of adolescents that I spoke to (4.3% according to ICF Macro (2010)), adolescent boys said they abstain from sex based on the perception that adolescent girls are at a greater risk. Luke and Kurz (2002) report that in most African countries, cross-generational sex is a norm with the difference in ages ranging from 2 to 7 years. Supporting this assertion, adolescent boys feel most girls are more attracted to outsiders for money. Concurrency also plays a part in adolescent boys’ perception of girls, seeing them as having partners at school but also at home. Even though not based on statistical data, this perception is justifiable if we take into account the findings from National Statistical Office (NSO) [Malawi], and ORC Macro (2005) that HIV prevalence is higher among girls in this age group (3.7% compared to 0.4%). A future with ‘the disease’ as adolescent boys referred to AIDS is not one of the horizons which adolescent boys aspire to.

Horizons encouraging the first sexual intercourse

One of the characteristics indicative of reaching puberty is change in adolescent behaviour that is expected of adolescent boys. Parents expect them to be responsible for what they do as evidenced from the type of advice they give pertaining to their sexuality. At the same time, since they perceive puberty as meaning they are now grown up, the adolescent boys will want to behave like grownups do. Sex, having been regarded as an adult preserve, is one of the opportunities through which this perception of being grownup can be manifested. By engaging in the first sex, they complete the short term aspiration of being perceived and also perceiving themselves as grownup.

The first sex also presents them with a chance to conform to behaviours that are associated with maleness. It is also an indicator to their peers that they are behaving in a masculine way. When girls seduce them to have sex, the adolescent boys are likely to conform so as not to be seen as less of a man. When their fellow boys tease them that they are treating their girlfriends like sisters, they are likely to make the effort to have sex.
Raging hormones

As I have stated elsewhere, adolescent boys think that a boy and girl have sex because sexual feelings and/or hormones are in control of their bodies. It is interesting to note how the language of hormones forms part of their way of thinking. This discourse can be traced back to what is learnt in classes, especially during life skills education – reemphasizing its importance. It appears that hormones have become social facts that adolescent boys use to think with in trying to makes sense of their puberty and desires for having sex.

The description of hormones and how they work is similar to Amy Schalet’s description of parent’s view of adolescents’ sexual feelings. The parents referred to sexual feelings as “‘drives’ or ‘urges’ which they attribute to the physical processes of puberty. Puberty confuses the child, burdening him with a load of hormonally produced sexual feelings” (Schalet 2000:82).

The hormones are portrayed as being beyond the control of the adolescent, and hence needing some effort to control them. Backed by the learned scientific truth that hormones exist and they exert a force, some adolescent feel powerless to them. As such, they can potentially have their first sexual intercourse. After all, it was not entirely their own fault rather the work of raging hormones in their bodies.

Uncertainties of the first sexual intercourse

I set out to look at the first sexual intercourse in terms of the uncertainties it brings in the life of the adolescent boys. In doing so, I privileged adolescent boys’ narratives to portray the emic view of what the first sexual intercourse means to them and what horizons it opens up for them.

While it is tied to reaching puberty, considerations and perceptions of the first sexual intercourse create their own horizons whose interplay influences whether the adolescent boy decides to have sex or not.

For the life of the adolescent boy, the first sexual intercourse is an event that is shrouded in uncertainty. Uncertainties of the first sexual intercourse relate to the different and sometimes conflicting horizons that it offers. The adolescent boy is put in a quandary as to whether he should orient his actions to short term aspirations or long term aspirations. Firstly, uncertainty comes in as to whether the adolescent will manage to get a sexual partner and hence have sex with her. Once this stage is passed by successfully proposing
and being accepted by the girl, the uncertainty comes in the form of whether the girl will accept to have sex or not. At this juncture, feelings come into play. The need to synchronize sexual feelings makes not only the first sexual intercourse but also sex in general to be a precarious experience. The ability to raise the feelings of the girl is also something that is always being considered. Being inexperienced does not help matters for the adolescent boy. If the adolescent boy cannot raise the girl’s feelings, he cannot proceed to have sex with her. The failure to do so is something that the adolescent boy does not want. The adolescent boy is also not certain as to how he will perform in the first sexual intercourse. Being inexperienced, he is bound to make mistakes and this does not reflect well on his self perception as a male.

Further to this, while the first sex may signify the launch of one’s sex life, it does not necessarily mean sexual activeness. It may be followed by periods of abstinence as the adolescent boys shift his horizons partly due to being in school. It would be interesting to look at the kinds of horizons that emerge for out-of-school adolescent boys with regard to the first sexual intercourse.

The uncertainty of the first sex is also brought about by the fact that it has potential consequences on other horizons that the adolescent boy may hold. It can prevent or facilitate the advancement to these horizons. Important in this is the horizon of present and future masculinities. Adolescent boys perceive that short term aspirations for a masculine identity may lead to pregnancy and hence preventing long term aspirations of a husband who is financially stable and hence responsible for his family. On the other hand, the first sexual intercourse can also be a preparation for those future masculinities, especially in terms of finding partners in future.

By looking at the first sexual intercourse as causing a vital conjuncture and privileging adolescent boys’ narratives of their aspirations, I have attempted to highlight what is at stake around the first sexual intercourse in terms of imagined futures of the adolescent boys. It would be important to compare these with the horizons that emerge for adolescent girls with whom the adolescent boys are having sex.
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ANNEX 1: Student In-depth Interview guide

Introduction and rapport building

- Tell me about yourself: Age, Family background – parents, siblings, Where do you come from etc
- How do you spend your day (Home, School, after school, Weekdays/weekends, special days), what do you do for leisure? Likes and dislikes?
- Who are (is) your friend(s)? What do you talk about/ do you do when you are with your friends?
- What are your aspirations?

Exploring perceptions and experiences of puberty

- What is puberty? What happens in puberty? When does it start? What are the expectations of someone who has reached puberty?
- When did it happen for you? How did you know it had happened? How were you treated by others – friends/peers, parents, and teachers? Did you talk about it with your friends? How did you talk about it?
- What does reaching puberty mean/imply?

Adolescent relationships

- Do you have a relationship? With who? When did it start? How did it start? How long have you been in the relationship? How many relationships have you ever had in your life? Why do you have it?

If doesn’t have relationship:
- Have you ever had a relationship? With who? When did Start/end? Why did it end?
- Why don’t you have a relationship?

Adolescent sex

- Have you ever had sex?

(If not go to the section titled “For those who haven’t have had sex”)
FOR THOSE THAT HAVE HAD SEX (PERSONAL NARRATIVES ON THE FIRST SEX):

- When is the first time that you had sex? What happened for you to have sex? [Narrative]
- Who did you have it with? Why did you have it with that person? Where?
- What considerations/concerns did you have when this happened? Did you worry about anything?
- What happened after you had sex with this person?
- Did you talk about this to anyone? Who did you tell? What did they say about it? How did they respond after you told them this?
- Why didn’t you tell anyone?
- What does the first sexual intercourse mean to you?

Exploring ‘what is at stake’ when it comes to the first sexual experience

- What do adolescents take into consideration when having their first sexual intercourse?
- Do they worry about its consequences? What concerns do they have? (pregnancy, paternity/maternity, school)
- What do others – peers, teachers, parents say about (first) sex?
- Do you get pressures to have sex? How do you respond to pressures towards having sex?

Exploring the perceptions and meanings attached to the first sexual experience.

- Do you talk about issues of sex with your friends? What do you talk about? – Adolescents, teachers, parents, church people. How do they talk about sex? What do they say?
- Normally, who do adolescents have their sexual debut with? What is the right timing for this? How is this related to timing of puberty? What happens after the first sex/How do they (those who have had sex) relate?
• Why do adolescents have sex? Do they use condoms on their debut? Why/why not?

• How do boys/girls influence girls/boys to have their debut?

• How, when and why do adolescent boys seeking their sexual debut approach girls?

FOR THOSE THAT HAVEN’T HAVE HAD SEX (NARRATIVES ABOUT OTHERS – FRIENDS ETC)

• Why have you not had sex?

• When do you plan to have sex? With who – probe if they also want a virgin and why? Why then? Why that person?

• Do you know someone who has had sex before? Have they ever told you about the first time they had sex? What did they say happened (NARRATIVE)? How did they talk about the first time they had sex?

Exploring ‘what is at stake’ when it comes to the first sexual experience

• What do adolescents take into consideration when having their first sexual intercourse?

• Do they worry about its consequences? What concerns do they have? (pregnancy, paternity/maternity, school)

• What do others – peers, teachers, parents say about (first) sex?

• Do you get pressures to have sex? How do you respond to pressures towards having sex?

Exploring the perceptions and meanings attached to the first sexual experience.

• Do you talk about issues of sex with your friends? What do you talk about? – Adolescents, teachers, parents, church people. How do they talk about sex? What do they say?

• Normally, who do adolescents have their sexual debut with? What is the right timing for this? How is this related to timing of puberty? What happens after the first sex/How do they (those who have had sex) relate?
• Why do adolescents have sex? Do they use condoms on their debut? Why/why not?

• How do boys/girls influence girls/boys to have their debut?

• How, when and why do adolescent boys seeking their sexual debut approach girls?
ANNEX 2: Student Focus group discussion guide

Puberty

- What does it mean when we say one has reached puberty? (Boys and girls)
- What are the expectations of someone who has reached puberty? (Parental, Peers/friends, Teachers, girls expectations)

First Sexual intercourse

- What do adolescents take into consideration when having first sex?
- What is the right time for adolescents to have their first sexual intercourse? Why that time? With who? Probe for condom use.
- Who do adolescent boys normally have their first sexual intercourse with?
- How do boys influence each other to have their first sexual intercourse? What do they say?
- How do girls influence boys to have their first sexual intercourse? What do they say?
- What does the sexual debut mean to you?
- Do adolescents talk about issues of sex? First sex? How do adolescents talk about the first sex?
- How do adolescents perceive those who have had their first sex? Those who haven’t?
- What makes adolescents have their sexual debut? What happens if they don’t?