

## Child protection and social inequality Understanding child prostitution in Malawi

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### Abstract

This article draws on empirical research seeking to develop more nuanced understandings of child prostitution, previously theorised on the basis of children's rights, feminist, and structure/agency debates, largely ignoring children's own understandings of their involvement in prostitution. Conducted in Malawi, one of the economically poorest countries in the world, the study goes to the heart of questions of inequality and child protection. With careful attention to ethical considerations, a participatory approach was used to enable 19 girls and young women, whose involvement in prostitution began in childhood, to convey their own experiences and understandings of involvement. Data were collected using a range of methods, chosen by participants to match their abilities and interests. Data analysis and interpretation were aided by reference to the capability approach focussing on questions of human rights and social justice for women and girls. Generating rare insights into participants' worlds, the research demonstrates how the persistence of deeply embedded cultural values in contexts of extreme poverty serves to sustain gender inequalities, constraining choices for girls and denying them opportunities to lead valued lives. The article ends by considering the theoretical and methodological implications of the study, policy and practice recommendations and opportunities for further research.

Keywords: child prostitution, global inequality, gender inequality, participatory research, capability approach.

## 1. Introduction and background

This article focuses on how complex intersecting inequalities (Walby et al 2012) based on poverty gender and age inform questions of child protection for girls involved in prostitution in Malawi. It presents an empirical study designed to develop a nuanced, contextualised, understanding of child prostitution in Malawi from the perspectives of those with experience of involvement in child prostitution.

### 1.1 Poverty and politics

Malawi, a landlocked country in Southern Africa is ranked 170 of 188 countries on the Human Development Index compiled from a range of health, education, income, and gender inequality indicators (UNDP, 2015a). Key socio-economic and health challenges include high levels of poverty with nearly three quarters of the population subsisting on less than \$US1.25 per day, and two-thirds experiencing multi-dimensional poverty that reflects access to health services and education as well as household income (UNDP, 2015b). Malawi is a very ‘young’ country with almost half its population aged under 15. A high adolescent fertility rate linked to early marriage<sup>1</sup> is associated with early school drop-out for girls and domestic violence is recognized as a serious problem<sup>2</sup> Over 10 percent of the adult (15-49) population is estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS and despite some gains in combatting tuberculosis and malaria, these diseases, together with other health conditions including diabetes and hypertension, contribute to high rates of child, maternal and adult mortality (WHO, 2014). Despite a moderate rate of urbanization from 15.4 to 16.45 per cent over the decade 2006-16 (World Bank, 2017) young people continue to seek opportunities for income generation in urban areas to sustain themselves and their families.

Emerging from nearly a century of British colonial rule Malawi became independent in 1964 but was subjected to the increasingly repressive rule of President Hastings Banda who sought to maintain tight control over citizens, limiting freedom of speech through the imprisonment of critics, and enforcing strict gender-based rules of dress and appearance for citizens and visitors to the country. Thirty years later the introduction of multi-party democracy following a referendum led to Banda’s defeat. But the persistence of power relations associated with patriarchy and deeply embedded systems of patronage and clientelism, incompatible with the concept of democratic governance, have held back economic growth through successive presidencies (Cammack, 2017). In 2012 Joyce Banda became the first woman head of state following the death of the incumbent president, rising from her position as vice president. As a survivor of a physically abusive marriage (Kiser et al, 2013), Joyce Banda was, and remains, a fierce proponent of the protection of women and girls against violence and promoter of women’s and girls’ human rights. She was subsequently defeated in a general election in 2014. But a marker

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<sup>1</sup> 47% of females marry before their eighteenth birthday (NSO, 2017)

<sup>2</sup> 42% of ever married women experience emotional, physical and/or sexual spousal violence, 34% sustaining injuries (NSO, 2017).

of her brief term in office was her efforts to disturb long held traditions concerning the place of women and girls in Malawi (Mbilizi, 2013). Formalised efforts to safeguard children against various forms of exploitation have gained prominence in the last decade through a series of legislative measures to address challenges related to child protection and justice, registration of births, inheritance entitlements, domestic violence, and early marriage. Yet, despite these measures, attention to child prostitution remains thin.

Focusing on Malawi, the objective of the study presented here was to further understanding of child prostitution within the context of current evidence and argument, produced predominantly by researchers from the global north, and by paying specific attention to the particular cultural and socio-economic contexts that are shaped by, and reflect, the inherent tensions of international and national politics in the wider arena of global ‘development’ (Banik and Chinsinga, 2016).

### *1.2 Gender inequalities*

Gender inequalities in Malawi are rooted in patterns of social interaction that characterize the daily lives of women (Minton and Knottnerus, 2008, p. 182). While economic factors and poverty play a central role in constraining women's choices and opportunities, long held and deeply embedded cultural practices continue to prescribe and proscribe roles and behaviours of women and girls limiting their access to key resources and perpetuating gender –based inequalities in the home, in school and in employment. This is despite substantial investment through bi-lateral aid, national and international non-government organisations’ programmes designed to address gender inequalities (Moser, 2005) including gender awareness training (Tiessen, 2004). A notorious example is the USA funded Girls’ Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) programme that introduced free primary education and a fee-waiver for girls in secondary schools in the 1990s. But overlooking structural specificities which led to opposition from some sections of society, and attitudes to external interference in policy making, initiatives designed to improving girls’ access to schooling were not fully internalised within the Ministry of Education. Under these circumstances parents needed little persuasion to maintain the status quo that prioritized boys’ over girls’ education (Kadzamira and Rose, 2003). As Moser (2005) has argued, while a gender discourse and gender policies have clearly been established, gender mainstreaming has been subject to ‘policy evaporation’ and the ‘invisibilisation’ of successes, symptoms of the resistance mounted by powerful political interests to limit the effectiveness of programmes channelled through the Ministry of Gender (Moser, 2005). As Cornwall and Rivas (2015, p. 396) have commented in a global context, ‘gender equality’ and ‘women’s empowerment’ are terms that have been eviscerated of conceptual and political bite, compromising their use as the primary frame in demanding rights and justice.

### *1.3 Child protection*

Malawi ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) in 1991, and the optional protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography

(UN, 2001) in 2009. These commitments provide a basis against which progress in providing for basic survival and development needs, in measures to protect children from abuse and exploitation, and in promoting the participation of children in decisions that affect their lives (Jones and Welch, 2018) can be evaluated. Malawi is also a signatory to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child that was brought into force in 1999 in response to the views of African states that African cultural values and experience should be considered in relation to the rights of the child in Africa (Olowu, 2002).

The 2012-2016 Malawi Child Protection Strategy (UNICEF, 2011) described the child protection situation for many Malawian children as being 'dire' with one in six children in Malawi vulnerable to violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect, and at risk both to and from HIV and AIDS. The foreword to Malawi's National Plan of Action for Vulnerable Children 2015–2019 (Government of Malawi, 2015) begins: The child protection situation in the country remains dire. The situation analysis conducted in 2013 found that there are over 1.8 million vulnerable children in the country ... many ... subjected to various forms of abuse, exploitation and lack of access to essential services.

Girls are reported as being slightly more likely to be vulnerable than boys (53/47per cent) with vulnerability conceptualised as not living with birth parents, living in households where no adult has had at least primary school, or being an orphan of one or both parents. Among this group are an estimated 12,000 children living in child-headed households and around 10,000 in institutional care. However, while many terms referring directly or indirectly to children's engagement in sexual activity - early marriage, early sexual debut and teenage pregnancy, early sexual intercourse, sexual violence, sexual abuse - are used in the Action Plan, the term prostitution does not appear.

#### *1.4 Child Prostitution: Theoretical perspectives*

Prostitution has been defined by O'Connell- Davidson (2007) as a term referring to the trade of sexual services for payment in cash or kind, a form of social interaction that is both sexual and economic. Children's involvement in prostitution, or 'child prostitution', as a social phenomenon has been conceptualized in different ways reflecting diverse and changing cultural understandings of childhood across the globe. In this section we provide a brief critical analysis of three dominant discourses in this field: children's rights, feminist perspectives and structure/agency debates. Arguing that all three perspectives are inherently adult centric, we explore the potential of the capability approach (Sen, 2005; Nussbaum, 2005) to develop a more nuanced understanding generated by those with experience of involvement in child prostitution.

##### *1.4.1 Children's Rights*

The children's rights perspective has been highly influential in debates about child prostitution for the last 25 years. Article 34 of the UNCRC (UN 1989) refers to children's right to be protected from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse

including inducement or coercion to engage in any unlawful sexual activity, and exploitative use in prostitution. And the subsequent Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (UN 2000) articulates the need to protect children against prostitution as a form of sexual abuse. The result is an equation between child prostitution and child sexual abuse (Pearce 2006; Brown and Barrett 2013). The children's rights perspective has moved perceptions of children involved in prostitution from being seen as delinquent (Phoenix 2002), to being seen as victims of child sexual exploitation in need of protection (Van Meeuwen et al. 1998; Hounmenou 2016; Montgomery 2001; Pearce 2014; Phoenix 2007). However, this has led to a generalised perception that children must have been forced into prostitution (Stacey 2009; ECPAT 2011), supported by vivid imagery of living conditions characterised by abuse and exploitation including being chained in brothels, drugged, raped/gang raped and trafficked (Pearce, Hynes and Bovarnick 2013).

Despite the impact of the children's rights perspective in recognizing adult power over children it is limited by lack of attention to diverse contexts of children's involvement in prostitution, depicting children as a single group, building on normative concepts of childhood. This has led to the marginalisation or exclusion of children involved in prostitution from critical engagement in decisions that affect their lives. It has perpetuated thinking that all children become involved through a process of 'being prostituted', and led to a narrow range of 'rescue' responses. Most studies of child prostitution rely on information from service providers, including police, and are produced by, or carried out on behalf of, organizations working with the aim of rescuing children from prostitution. This has led to a stereotypical understanding of child prostitution (O'Connell Davidson 2005; Montgomery 2007). As Melrose (2010, p. 18) explains, this discourse does not provide a means to understand the often messy, complex, realities that underpin the lives of those who become involved. In the following subsections we consider alternative perspectives that call for closer attention to the structural contexts in which children become involved in prostitution.

#### 1.4.2 Feminist perspectives

Feminist perspectives have emerged in response to the moralist discourse in which prostitutes and prostitution are conceptualised as immoral and constituted as a social problem. The moralist view is often held in contexts of conservatism and strong religious beliefs, including Malawi where prostitution was popularly understood to be a criminal offence until a recent High Court ruling (CHREAA 2016). Feminist writers argue that the moralist discourse overlooks the roles of those who extort, exploit, control and/or intimidate women in prostitution (Phoenix 2007, p. 79) but remain largely unchallenged in law.

The feminist approach has generated two distinct responses: the radical and the liberal. The radical feminist perspective frames prostitution as male driven violence and exploitation of women (Phoenix 2012) based on the notion of power imbalances in

paternalistic societies in which men control women who occupy powerless, peripheral positions with limited opportunities. Like the children's rights perspective, proponents of this feminist position stress that choosing sex work is impossible ... sex work is per se a human rights abuse, and thus choice is negated, irrelevant (Doezema 2010, p. 25). On this basis, radical feminists argue that prostitution should be prohibited, a view that is challenged by liberal feminist theorists and activists who promote the rights of sex workers on the basis that, precisely because society is structured paternalistically and women's opportunities highly constrained, they may decide to engage in prostitution as a means of earning a living with the intention of overcoming their deprivation and constraints. In doing so they are able to exercise agency and make rational decisions albeit within constrained choices (Doezema 2010). In this sense liberal feminism rejects the view that all women in prostitution are prostituted, forced against their will and subjected to exploitation and abuse. However, it does acknowledge that sex work is a very risky route to livelihood and calls for measures to protect women from abuse and exploitation, decriminalizing prostitution and criminalising exploitative practices in order to protect sex workers (Phoenix 2012). Limitations of the liberal feminist perspective relate to its lack of attention to social divisions within the broader category of gender, and in particular its failure to work through the implications for children involved in prostitution and for male clients of female prostitutes.

In discussing the merits and limitations of children's rights and feminist discourses, Phoenix (2007) argues that prostitution can better be understood by complementing acknowledgement of agency (rejection of arguments that rest solely on victimhood) with closer attention to historical, cultural, political, legal and economic factors that shape the structural conditions of prostitution.

#### 1.4.3 Structure and agency

The importance of structure and agency as inextricably linked derives from Giddens' (1986) theory of structuration which conceptualizes individuals as active agents, aware of, and negotiating with, different situations or structures. Just as social structures influence individual agency, with awareness of those structures, individual agency can influence social structures. Drawing attention to the importance of structural specificities and human agency, a structure/agency perspective has the potential to develop further understanding of (child) prostitution, focusing on how individual actors engage with particular structures to make particular decisions (Phoenix 2002; O'Connell Davidson 2005; Montgomery 2001). As Hwang and Bedford (2003) demonstrate, despite some similarities of circumstances surrounding children's involvement in prostitution, specific conditions and motivations for joining, continuing or leaving prostitution differ widely within and between countries. This demands ways of making sense of child prostitution that go beyond a generalized overview of what constitutes child prostitution, to access the understandings of those with experiences of involvement and the structural conditions in which they engage in prostitution. Limited studies

adopting this approach (Montgomery 2001, 2007; Phoenix 2001; O'Connell Davidson 2005) have focused largely on the contexts and structures in which children involved in prostitution make decisions and/or their active agency. But there has been little development of ways in which this knowledge can be extended to explain why particular structures lead children and young people to make particular decisions, or to the impact particular structures and particular decisions can have on children. So it is here that we turn to the capability approach that expands the framework offered by the structure and agency debate by examining the impact of structural factors, and the freedom that individuals have to make decisions that contribute to their well-being (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2001; 2005).

#### 1.4.4 The Capability Approach

Underpinning contemporary measures of human development, the capability approach is centrally concerned with human rights and social justice, referring to the freedom of individuals to "lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value" (Sen 1999 p. 18). The approach treats well-being as a matter of individual evaluation rather than as something that is objectively measured as, for example, in Hounmenou's (2016) structured survey of child prostitutes in Ouagadougou. The capability approach lent itself to the purpose of the study reported here, to develop more nuanced understandings of children and young people's involvement in prostitution based on their own experiences and their own ways of understanding their involvement. Nussbaum's role in developing the capability approach has focused thinking about its application in understanding women's and girls' human rights and capabilities. Unlike Sen who argues that the determination of specific capabilities may vary depending on diverse cultural understandings of valued lives, Nussbaum (2003) has defined basic capabilities central to human life including the ability to have: good health including reproductive health; adequate nourishment and shelter; security against violent assault; the ability to think and reason in a truly human way informed by an adequate education; emotional development not blighted by fear and anxiety; the ability to form a conception of the good life and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life, the social bases of self-respect, non-humiliation, dignity and worth equal to that of others without discrimination. Nussbaum (2005) outlines how structural and cultural factors can have a disabling effect on capabilities, especially those of girls and women in patriarchal societies. She argues that girls, not seeing any viable alternative, exercise adaptive preferences conforming to culturally normative expectations, and complying with structural inequalities. But because the capability approach focuses on what individuals are able to do and to be, it challenges an over-emphasis on structural inequalities that give rise to exploitation rationalized on the basis of cultural relativity (Nussbaum 2005) and opens a new space for making sense of children's involvement in prostitution.

Like the children's rights approach, the capability approach is thought by some to be heavily influenced by western thinking linked to individualist liberal ideas of what

constitutes development and well-being (Jaggar 2006), paying little attention to power inequalities associated with structural factors (Dean 2009). However, the capability approach has been employed to explore questions of ‘well-being deprivation of sexually exploited trafficked women’ (Di Tommaso et al. 2009) and has been discussed in relation to children in a range of settings including education and the street (Biggeri, Ballet and Comim 2011; Peleg 2014). The study reported here represents a significant development in the use of the capability approach as a framework for furthering understanding of children’s involvement in prostitution, and how this can be understood as an issue of social justice beyond the logic of the children’s rights perspective that equates sexual activity with children with sexual abuse. The approach also extends other perspectives and debates that inform understandings of child prostitution by exploring the freedoms and ‘unfreedoms’ of those involved to make choices that will enable them to achieve well-being. In this way, the capability approach stands out as an alternative lens through which to develop a more nuanced understanding of child prostitution.

We turn now to the empirical study designed to extend understandings of how and why children and young people in Malawi engage in prostitution, and how they understand their involvement in prostitution.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Design*

The research questions called for a qualitative approach to generate rich, deep, contextualised and nuanced multi-dimensional insights into the social phenomenon being examined in a specific context (Mason, 2007). They also called for methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation that would place children and/or young people with relevant experience at the centre of the process. Given the sensitive nature of the research and the importance of emphasising dialogue in documenting participants’ accounts, a participatory research framework was adopted (Kendon, Pain and Kesby 2007; Jupp-Kina 2010). Based on the belief that “human beings are dynamic agents capable of reflexivity and self-change” (Kendon, Pain and Kesby (2007 p. 13), participatory research facilitates the generation of knowledge through ‘negotiated spaces’ based on a commitment to sharing power so that the knowledge generated is of direct relevance and benefit to the participants involved (p. 22). This was particularly important given the (male) gender of the lead researcher whose role would necessarily involve direct engagement with girls and young women in a cultural context strongly influenced by traditional structures of male power and dominance.

### *2.2 Ethical considerations*

Scrupulous attention was paid to ethical considerations in this highly sensitive area of research in the context of an ‘illicit economy’ (Sanders, 2006). The process for gaining ethical approval, granted by [anonymised for review] University and Malawi’s National Commission for Science and Technology’s Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities, involved close attention to principles of informed

consent, anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, anticipation of risks and the avoidance of harm to participants, including the researcher. Close attention was also paid to the probability of meeting unanticipated challenges, and a need to be continuously mindful of 'situated ethics' (Perez, 2017; Sultana, 2007) in maintaining a feminist ethical stance (Usher, 2000). The introductory stages of fieldwork involved the assistance of female research assistants and participants were assured that they could withdraw, temporarily or permanently, from the research at any point, for any reason or none, without repercussion. Practical arrangements were agreed such that contact between (female) participants and the (male) researcher would not risk compromising the safety of either. These measures to increase participants' confidence in the research process as being one of shared endeavour enabled the research process to follow the pace and daily realities of participants' lives, particularly important given participants' needs to engage with income generating opportunities that were neither regular nor entirely predictable. Recognizing the economic circumstances of participants, they were compensated for their time and in recognition of their contributions to the research with food for their families and drinks and snacks during meetings.

### *2.3 Sample*

Access to participants was negotiated through two national non-government organisations (NGOs) working primarily in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention. The original intention had been to engage directly with a sample of children under 18 engaged in prostitution. However, changes in NGO funding and programmes necessarily led to the recruitment of a purposive sample of young female sex workers involved in programmes to encourage safe sexual practices. While all but one of the participants were over 18, all had first engaged in prostitution as children. Adapting to the realities of participants' lives, and responding to what can be seen in hindsight as a serendipitous opportunity, the research was refocused to include links between child and adult prostitution. The final sample consisted of ten women in their twenties, eight in their thirties and one twelve year old girl given the pseudonym Loni, the daughter of a participant in her thirties. Having accompanied her mother to initial meetings Loni expressed strong enthusiasm to tell her story. She was the only member of the sample who was not actively involved in prostitution at the time of the study having escaped from the brothel to which she had been lured under false pretences and then forcibly confined. Only one participant had completed secondary education, and over half had not completed primary school.

### *2.4 Data collection*

Early meetings involved discussions about the purpose of the research and how it could be shaped to maximise benefits for participants. Unused to being respected in setting terms of involvement, participants asked for guidance about different ways they could share their experiences. The result was the use of a range of techniques reviewed by Jupp-Kina (2010), and included problem trees, photo-voice, character drawings, paper

cuttings (whereby personal information is recorded by each individual anonymously and submitted to a collective data source), storyboards and a ranking exercise, followed by group discussions and narrative interviews to elicit participants' meanings of their visual data. In this way multiple data collection methods captured participants' experiences and knowledges in their chosen ways enhancing richness and addressing emerging gaps in continued discussions (Ansell et al. 2012).

Special care was taken in relation to Loni's participation recognizing her age-related vulnerability. Four meetings were held with her at a centre frequented by participants, with Loni's mother and another trusted participant nearby, but out of ear shot. The first meeting was to ensure that Loni had sufficient information and understanding to give her own fully informed consent. In the second, she was introduced to different possible methods to convey her experiences. The third and fourth meetings centred on Loni's construction and discussion of a character drawing enabling her to convey her story of involvement in prostitution.

Two further, semi-structured, interviews were conducted with representatives of the government social welfare departments operating in the areas involved in the research in order to understand the involvement of state social welfare structures in working with children engaged in prostitution.

### *2.5 Data Analysis*

Nineteen participants generated a rich and diverse data set of 18 character drawings, nine problem trees, 194 photographs, two storyboards, five sets of paper-cuttings, and 96 audio recordings from discussions and narrative interviews conducted in Chichewa. Data analysis was an ongoing process with initial themes emerging during participants' own discussions of the visual images or text-based data they generated. All audio data were transcribed in Chichewa to retain accuracy and originality, followed by translation into English. NVivo was used to assist with the management of this large quantity of data that revealed knowledge and experiences of: i) initial stages of involvement in prostitution; ii) reasons for involvement; iii) processes of becoming involved; iv) experiences of involvement, v) participants' understandings of their involvement; vi) responses of social welfare and justice systems, and finally, vii) the prospects for children born to those involved in prostitution. Further layers of interpretation drew on the theoretical perspectives discussed earlier in this article and on field notes that also contributed to making sense of the data. These interpretations in turn were shared and discussed with participants.

## **3. Results and discussion**

### *3.1 Data generation*

Encouraging choice of techniques to convey experiences enabled participants to express themselves in ways that were sensitive to their abilities, skills and interests. This resulted in the production of rich data that were discussed further, individually and/or in

groups, nurturing self and collective reflection without becoming hostage to methodological claims of validity and reliability (Kemmis et al. 2014, p. 70).

Paper cutting and ranking were popular ways for participants to document biographical data including ages of first involvement in prostitution as well as how they made sense of their involvement, expressing aspects that really mattered to them. Descriptions of the contexts in which they first exchanged sex for money or goods revealed that most had experienced their first involvement while still at primary school, and as young as eleven years. Ranking was effective in indicating priority concerns, including non-payment by clients and the challenges for their livelihoods of unpredictable demand for business. Photographs provided a rich source of data not only about places where they met and engaged with clients, but also about perceptions of what life might be like if it were not necessary to engage in prostitution, an aspiration that seemed beyond the reach of most participants. Character drawings were used as a basis for individual or group discussion and prompted spontaneous role-play to show the complexity of life in a patriarchal culture typified by women's economic dependency, but also revealing their agency. Problem trees identified particular challenges and potential solutions. Story boards, produced by only two participants, were used in different ways. One captured details of her involvement in prostitution including negotiations with clients, the abuse of male power and broken agreements leading to rape. The other produced three separate sketches to describe her initial engagement in prostitution, her decision to continue involvement and how she made sense of her current involvement. This storyboard in particular demonstrated the impossibility of mapping involvement in prostitution as a simple linear process. In the remainder of this section we present and discuss the results of this empirical study by addressing each research question in turn.

### 3.2 *Why and how do (girl) children and young people in Malawi engage in prostitution?*

Nearly all participants had first engaged in sex in exchange for money or goods as children. They used expressions including *ali mwana* (child), *wachichepele*, *wang'ono* (young/younger) and *ali ku primary* (while at primary school) when talking about their own initial involvement and that of children and young people currently joining prostitution.

Dominant and interconnected themes underpinning participants' stories were the absence of family support, whether through extreme poverty or orphanhood, and the role of cultural norms that proscribe early marriage for girls, limiting opportunities for educational attainment and independent income generation. An additional factor for some was their resistance to normalised gender-based violence within marriage. But having left their marriages they found that prostitution was the most feasible way of generating sufficient income to meet survival needs. A small minority, however, explained that they had first engaged in prostitution after being introduced to transactional sex (Kaufman and Stavrou, 2004) at the suggestion of friends or relatives who were already engaged. The youngest participant's story demonstrated vividly her

experience of coercion into prostitution, while several other participants described practices of coercion and trafficking that they reported as being more common amongst younger girls.

Poverty was the principal reason for engaging in prostitution, perceived as the only feasible means of meeting their own basic needs and often those of their children, siblings or parents. Despite the urban locations of the fieldwork, on the basis of their own earlier experiences and knowledge of other girls arriving in urban areas, participants commented on the similarity of experiences for girls whether they lived in rural or urban areas. Bureni, who first exchanged sex for money as an adolescent, explained: *Mostly, it's because of problems; being without food because my parents were destitute ... I would buy food and support my mother with the money I earn from prostitution.* Asked why she felt it was her responsibility to provide this support she replied: *Because she could not afford food. She lacked support. I would then buy clothes for her.*

Orphanhood, associated in Malawi with the loss of one or both parents, was a common experience among participants. With husbands and fathers being widely perceived in Malawian society as responsible for generating the means for family survival, and with little or no protection in terms of inheritance rights, the loss of a father through death or divorce is associated with loss of the primary source of family income. Mpaseni, for example, first engaged in prostitution following the death of her father. At that time she was still at school. She explained that her father's relatives: *took everything. They left us without anything. They also collected my father's pension on pretence they were looking after us and paying for our school fees.* Her mother, unable to support Mpaseni and her brother, returned to her home village. But still unable to meet their basic needs Mpaseni accompanied her mother to Lilongwe, the capital, on a daily basis, to beg. Mpaseni subsequently married a street trader and was briefly able to stop begging, but following her own husband's premature death she was once again deprived of a culturally normative means of survival and turned to prostitution.

Orphanhood was no less challenging for those whose mother had died. As Labani explained: *losing your parents can drive you to prostitution particularly if it is your mother because your father will find another woman who may be abusive or not care enough for you ... this is likely to make you consider other options rather than embrace the mistreatment.* She went on to explain: *what else could I do except this? ... but that does not mean I like what I am currently doing. I have tried to leave before...I once went to South Africa as I was trying to find things I could do. But even there I was working like a slave [so] I returned home and rejoined sex work.*

A similar theme emerged from Diami's story. She explained that she and her sisters had been taken in by their grandparents following the death of both parents. But they had been overworked and deprived of food. Their response had been to run away which, in the cultural context, was seen as an act of rebellion, yet one that can also be interpreted as one of resistance and resilience (Williams, 2010). Wider group discussions revealed a

common understanding that extended family structures could not necessarily provide a safe environment for children who had been orphaned. As Babani explained: *There are some orphans who manage to be fostered and taken into care by very supporting and loving relatives. Maybe we were just unlucky that our parents' relatives were cruel.* For the participants in this study, prostitution offered a means of meeting daily needs in response to poverty, exacerbated by violence associated with a strongly patriarchal society and a lack of public services to support families in meeting basic survival needs, even when assuming responsibility for orphans. However, this knowledge alone does not explain how they become involved in prostitution.

Participants were aware that not all girls and young women in similar circumstances became involved in prostitution and their stories included strong clues about additional factors that pulled and pushed them into prostitution. They drew attention to the roles of family members and friends in their decisions to engage in prostitution. Some considered involvement as almost hereditary, or a family occupation, for example Bureni who explained: *My cousin who is currently in Lilongwe started when she was young. She has even been to Mozambique where she had followed her mother who is also a sex worker.* Mpalini added another dimension to Bureni's explanation saying: *Bureni used to admire those of us who were doing sex work. Much as we shared the food we prepared from our earnings with the rest of the family, we always got the lion's share to go with the labour pain of our involvement.*

Group discussions concluded that growing up in a household or neighbourhood where relatives and close friends were selling sex would enable children to normalise prostitution as a way of meeting their needs. But importantly participants stressed that it was only in circumstances of poverty and hardship that the influence of social networks would tilt children and young people into perceiving prostitution as a possible form of livelihood. They also drew connections between poverty, early marriage and withdrawal from school. While cultural expectations of marriage in adolescence for girls divest parents of financial responsibility for daughters, participants also associated early marriage with risks of domestic violence, pre-mature pregnancy, early withdrawal from school and denial of opportunities for economic advancement. For example, Mazani presented a photograph of a car and her understanding that the female owner must have: *reached the point of buying the car because of school.* Referring to the wider discussion Labani explained: *We pondered on what could have happened if we had also gone further with school... if only we had had all the support we needed, we could have reached her stage.*

The route from poverty to prostitution was not direct. Exercising ambiguous agency (Bordanaro and Payne 2012) some participants had reluctantly accepted offers of poorly paid employment as house maids or bar workers where they found themselves experiencing abuse and exploitation. Nussbaum (2000, 2003) refers to this process as the exercise of constrained choices or adaptive preferences. In hindsight these offers of

employment were understood by participants as thinly disguised inducements to engage in prostitution. As Mpaseni explained: *There are some girls who are deceived with promises that they will be working as maids or ushers at a restaurant only to be told that they will be working in prostitution. The pub owner tells them that he will be collecting money from the clients and that they would be paid on monthly basis.* Twelve year old Loni described her own experience: *We were not informed in advance of the nature of the work or how much we would be getting. We were only told upon arrival to start opening beer for people. I was very shy and nervous. But they said I will not be getting food if I insisted on not working.* Once in the grip of brothel owners young prostitutes were controlled through threats of non-payment, violence and food deprivation. Loni continued: *I was afraid of the owner who his friends called Soldier. Some said he was given a 30- year jail sentence for murder but he managed to break out of prison. I thus would just submit to whatever he said.* Kept out of sight of any client or visitor suspected of being a police officer, Loni was prevented from drawing the attention of authority figures who she hoped, recognizing her extreme youth, might have helped her.

This section has shown a complex set of responses to the question ‘why and how do children and young people engage in prostitution?’ In the following section we go on to explore participants’ understandings of child prostitution in further detail.

### 3.3 Understanding (girl) child prostitution – participants’ perspectives

Explaining why and how they became involved in prostitution, it was clear that participants did not see themselves as passive victims. At different points on their journeys they had made active decisions that led them directly or indirectly into prostitution as a means of their own, their children’s, siblings’ or parents’ survival. But once involved they found themselves exposed to various forms of exploitation and abuse. Despite recognition of the roles of poverty, early marriage and withdrawal from school as drivers of childhood prostitution they did not articulate their understandings in terms of the broader structural factors behind these circumstances leading to their involvement in prostitution.

Loni’s story can be considered an information rich extreme case (Palinkas et al. 2015) and demonstrates the importance of avoiding unidimensional theoretical explanations for children’s involvement in prostitution. Loni recognized her involvement as constituting abuse and exploitation having been tricked under the pretence of employment as a maid before being coerced into prostitution. But her initial search for employment demonstrates her agency in the face of social structures that threatened her survival, and in her quest to achieve a life she could value. Once she had been coerced into prostitution she became increasingly controlled by the brothel owner pressurising her to meet the sexual demands of clients. Her own attempts to explain to clients that she was not old enough to have sex were unsuccessful and met with physical attacks and injuries sustained through clients’ attempting to have penetrative sex. In this sense Loni did see herself as a victim and her experience of prostitution as abusive. She used the

expression ‘*anabedwa*’ (stolen against her will), speaking to the children’s rights approach to child prostitution. But she also referred to having been used as a sexual object, ‘*mwana dala*’, speaking to the radical feminist discourse.

Despite clear evidence of abuse Loni’s story demonstrates agency throughout. One of five children of a lone mother who was also involved in prostitution, Loni had sought ways to help support her family. Her age and lack of educational achievement meant that the only employment opportunities open to her were in the informal economy where wages are low. Her search brought her into contact with traffickers who tricked her into accepting a job offer that turned out to be a thin disguise for prostitution. Isolated from her family, her earnings controlled, threatened by non-payment and food deprivation Loni ‘conformed’ to the circumstances in which she found herself before exercising agency in the strongest way by planning and achieving her escape. She returned to her mother’s home and involved the police who intervened to ‘rescue’ others being held against their will in the brothel. Despite her experiences, her original motivation to support her family led her to reflect: ‘*sindikanapangira mwina*’ (I could not do otherwise).

Older participants viewed their participation in prostitution as ‘*kuutsanza mtima*’ (personal choice depending on circumstances). But they also identified with experiences of exploitation and victimhood. Without explicit reference to the basis of exploitation, their stories were full of references to age and gender, illuminating the complexities and contradictions of prostitution originating in childhood and cutting across the children’s rights, radical and liberal feminist, and structure/agency theoretical frameworks described earlier. The hegemonic power of men was strongly evident in their accounts in ways that demonstrated an acceptance, albeit unconscious, of existing social structures. A vivid example was offered in a discussion about the hardships endured as a prostitute that arose from Emoni’s and Diami’s storyboards that depicted non-payment, refusal to use condoms, violent rape and threats of murder. Yet Jobani used the term ‘*iweyo wamuyamba mwamunayo*’ (clients cannot be violent or abusive unless you instigate it) seemingly promoting the benefits of women’s submission, a view reflecting feminist understandings of the marginal positions held by women in patriarchal societies.

While engaging in prostitution was an illustration of participants’ agency in attempting to better their lives, it is also an illustration of ambiguous agency (Bordanaro and Payne 2012), and adaptive preferences (Nussbaum 2001). And likening their experiences of clients’ abusive behaviours to those encountered in marriage demonstrated awareness of male hegemony across social institutions. The value of the capability approach here lies in offering a more nuanced understanding of the circumstances and motives behind the decisions to engage in prostitution as well as the effects of those decisions on the well-being of participants. This is particularly important in identifying appropriate ways of addressing the complex combinations of circumstances that draw girls into prostitution. Despite experiences of abuse and exploitation participants in this

study had chosen to continue their involvement since, despite threats to a number of central capabilities (Nussbaum, 2001) it seemed to offer the only way of assuring survival. As Bureni put it: *no-one quits prostitution*. And other participants described themselves as '*chiwanda cha uhule*' (possessed by prostitution). Rather than providing a means of livelihood, prostitution involved facing challenges of non-payment, violence and coercive control. But the lack of alternative means of survival left them 'choosing' to continue their involvement.

We turn now to consider the question of protection of girl children engaging in prostitution, framing our consideration from an inequalities perspective.

### 3.4 Protection of (girl) children involved in prostitution

Reflecting the lack of explicit recognition of child prostitution in Malawi's National Plan of Action for Vulnerable Children 2015–2019, interviews with two district social welfare officers in the fieldwork sites confirmed a lack of specific policies or programmes to prevent or respond to child prostitution. Instead children involved in prostitution are assimilated into the broader category of street children and remain largely invisible in programmes to combat the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on the livelihoods of Malawian citizens. This contrasts with other categories of 'vulnerable' children including child labourers on tea and tobacco estates and girls experiencing early marriage, and arguably reflects attitudes surrounding premarital and extramarital sex as symbols of masculine prowess, while sexual activity outside of marriage for girls is strongly discouraged and stigmatised (Kelly et al. 2013). State responsibility for child protection lies with the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare. However, state capacity to address issues of child protection are limited both by poverty and the persistence of a patriarchal society that slow down the rate at which legislation to address a range of inequalities affecting children, and girl children, can have a positive impact. Furthermore, much financial and capacity building support, including the development of social work training, is provided by international donors and organisations implying the use of western models that are questionable in the Malawian context (Kakowa, 2016).

Malawi's position on the Human Development Index, reflecting severe problems in the fields of health, education, income, and gender inequality, leaves many children without an effective means of support (Kidman and Heyman, 2016). Under these circumstances, together with the stigma surrounding sex outside marriage for girls and women, it seems likely that explicit attention to child prostitution has been viewed as an unachievable policy goal. However, we argue that an understanding of inequalities in the protection of child prostitutes is also rooted in the stark inequalities associated with geopolitics further limiting state capacity to address social problems. These include impoverishment associated with tax avoidance by multi-national corporations that limit the potential for tax revenues (Dahlbeck 2016; Conroy, Blackie, Whiteside, et al. 2016); austerity conditions accompanying international interventions to support economic development that limit investment in public services; and programmes funded through bilateral aid and international NGOs that are heavily influenced by values of neo-liberalism

that fail to account for complex cultural specificities and are limited in their effectiveness (De and Becker 2015; Özler 2016). The failure or limited impact of these interventions are also commonly associated with poor internal governance and allegations of corruption. While more nuanced than commonly understood (Anders 2010; De Maria 2010) these problems are acknowledged as having played a part in limiting the effectiveness of poverty reduction plans and programmes.

#### **4. Implications**

Here we reflect on the insights from the empirical study that, despite limitations of scale and specific location, reveal clear implications for theoretical understanding, methodological opportunities, policy and practice challenges, and future research in the field of child protection and social inequality.

##### *4.1 Theoretical implications*

Reflecting on different theoretical perspectives of child prostitution, the data generated in this study revealed vivid examples of the violation of children's right to be protected from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, and exploitative use in prostitution. Also evident were the roles of structure and agency, and of both radical and liberal feminist approaches that characterise prostitution respectively as exploitation and commodification of women's bodies, and freedom of choice within a wider context of gender inequality. But using the lens of the Capability Approach, the impact of structural factors on girls' and young women's wellbeing in the cultural context of Malawi became clearer, as participants demonstrated the ambiguous nature of their agency and the adaptive preferences they made in a context of constrained choices. These insights are particularly helpful in understanding why attempts to 'rescue' girls and young women from prostitution are often unsuccessful (Rafferty, 2016) and helps to make sense of Bureni's claim that 'no one quits prostitution'. This takes the understanding of child prostitution beyond competing theoretical claims, connecting explanations from different theoretical perspectives to capture the complex nature of girl children's and young women's experiences of prostitution.

##### *4.2 Methodological implications*

The use of a participatory approach yielded insights that would simply not have been possible through the use of methods controlled by researchers. There is significant debate about the validity and reliability of research findings about child prostitution particularly in cultural contexts where the stakes of speaking honestly about involvement in premarital or extra marital sex are high. Those favouring the use of surveys argue that the presence of human interviewers is likely to introduce bias, though Poulin's (2010) study comparing the use of a standard survey and an in-depth interview with 90 never-married young adults in rural Malawi to gain information about first sexual encounters, demonstrated greater honesty in the interviews than the survey. Poulin argues that the flexibility and reciprocal exchange of the interviews fostered greater trust and more truthful reporting. We argue that a power sharing, participatory, approach that embraced participants' own choice of methods and continuing dialogue to support the expression of their understandings of their involvement in

prostitution has brought rare insights that would have been difficult to access using more conventional research methods, either quantitative or qualitative. The approach avoided being seen as a threat to deep rooted cultural views, and, we argue, global efforts to encourage cultural shifts in thinking about gender and inequality must start with the experiences of girls and women.

#### 4.3 *Implications for policy and practice*

We argue here that efforts to support girls and young women to avoid or leave prostitution that disregard the strength of cultural practices that commodify girls and young women as housewives and child-bearers in waiting are unlikely to be effective. Perceived as a threat, by wider family and community interests, to normative expectations for girls and young women (Groves and Hinton, 2013) such efforts easily meet with resistance that is poorly understood. Policies to tackle chronic gender inequalities in child protection must have resonance for both national and international political actors, acknowledging similarly chronic inequalities between countries of the global north that dictate the terms of international aid and citizens of the global south who may exercise the power they have in resisting externally imposed solutions to social problems.

Interventions to address what is perceived as the injustice of having to resort to prostitution to survive, must be informed by a deep understanding of the cultural as well as economic factors that lead to the normalisation of transactional sex, and the broader impact of children's involvement in prostitution on society as a whole. International donors and local service providers must understand that social change involves challenging complex power relationships requiring engagement not only with national policy makers but with grass roots communities, critically considering the congruence or incongruence between political, organisational and community values and practices. This implies the identification of complex and interconnected threats to livelihoods, ensuring that legislation to address gender inequalities and gender-based violence is robust, fit for purpose and free of contradictions. It also implies finding effective ways of demonstrating the long term benefits of additional years in education for both boys and girls whilst also addressing the short term challenges for families that this implies.

The use of the Capability Approach to underpin the Human Development Index suggests that it could realistically be adopted by policy makers to offer a multidimensional way of conceptualising child prostitution, drawing attention to structural factors as well as individual behaviour and experiences, and linking child prostitution to questions of national development and social justice. Paying attention to structural factors that diminish the freedoms and choices of children and young women in Malawi, including a patriarchal society that lends support to the continuation of early marriage and childbirth, and acceptance of girls' limited engagement in formal education, would illuminate more clearly the discriminatory experiences of girls and young women involved in prostitution. This in turn suggests closer attention to and engagement with children and young people involved in prostitution. While most NGOs involved in this

area of work are informed by goals of HIV/AIDS prevention or control, children and young people are largely ignored as beneficiaries of such projects that tend to be targeted at adults. But as the study reported here has shown, the connection between child and adult prostitution is strong. While adults involved in prostitution were able to identify efforts of organisations to support them, they were clear that this was not the case while they were children.

#### *4.4 Opportunities for further research*

Discussion of policy implications arising from this study refer to the need for greater understanding of the factors that slow or prevent change not only to protect children more effectively but to do so more equitably. Here we make brief suggestions for further research opening up spaces to extend understanding of the effectiveness of interventions to enable children to avoid involvement in prostitution, to adopt the safest possible practices while they are involved in prostitution and to support them in finding alternative routes to live lives that they value. These include: i) further use of the capability approach to frame research for and by child prostitutes and those at risk of prostitution, ii) longitudinal research to develop a clearer understanding of the longer term outcomes of engagement in child prostitution, iii) an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act (Marriage Act) 2015 intended to protect girls from early marriage thereby reducing early pregnancy and school drop-out among girls, and iv) research to develop clearer understandings of the demand side of (child) prostitution offering insights into the potential for influencing the behaviour of men through challenging the logic and values of long established patriarchy and associated gender-based violence, what Jones and Trotman Jemmott (2016) refer to as cultures of male impunity and entitlement.

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