

**Researching livelihoods and
services affected by conflict**

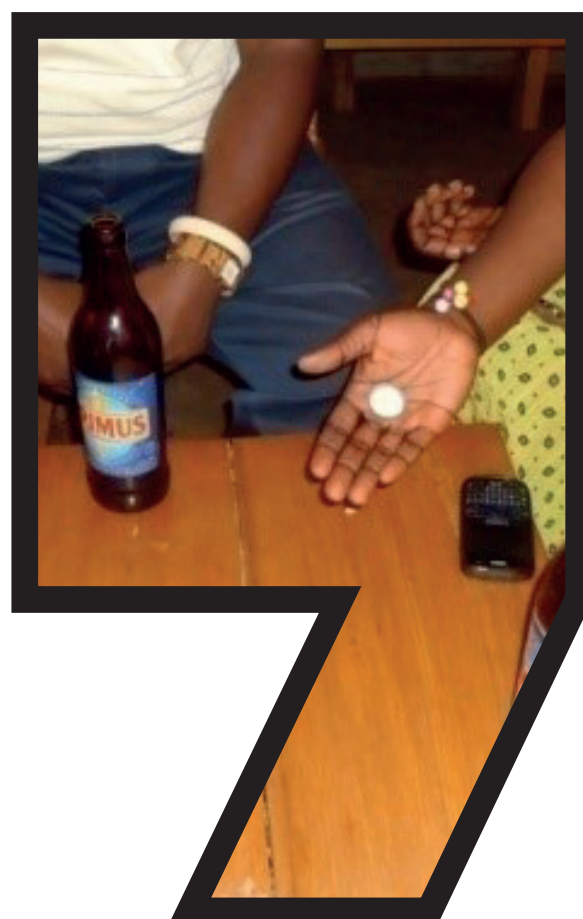
**The many faces of
transactional sex:
Women's agency,
livelihoods and risk
factors in humanitarian
contexts:**

A Literature Review

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About us

Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) aims to generate a stronger evidence base on how people make a living, educate their children, deal with illness and access other basic services in conflict-affected situations (CAS). Providing better access to basic services, social protection and support to livelihoods matters for the human welfare of people affected by conflict, the achievement of development targets such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and international efforts at peace- and state-building.

At the centre of SLRC's research are three core themes, developed over the course of an intensive one-year inception phase:

- State legitimacy: experiences, perceptions and expectations of the state and local governance in conflict-affected situations
- State capacity: building effective states that deliver services and social protection in conflict-affected situations
- Livelihood trajectories and economic activity under conflict

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is the lead organisation. SLRC partners include the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) in Sri Lanka, Feinstein International Center (FIC, Tufts University), the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Pakistan, Disaster Studies of Wageningen University (WUR) in the Netherlands, the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

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Contents

About us	2
Acknowledgements	2
1 Introduction	4
1.1 Methodology and limitations of the analysis	5
1.2 Approach and organisation of the analysis	5
2 Transactional sex practices in sub-Saharan Africa	7
2.1 Defining transactional sex	7
2.2 Motivation for engaging in transactional sex	8
2.3 The nature of transactional sex relationships	9
2.4 The societal meaning of transactional sex	10
3 Transactional sex in humanitarian crisis and post-conflict contexts	11
4 Transactional sex and women's agency	14
5 The risk factors	16
6 Conclusion	18
7 Bibliography	20

1 Introduction

Women in humanitarian crisis adopt various adverse coping mechanisms in response to the multiple risks¹ and vulnerabilities² that they face. One such coping mechanism is to engage in transactional sex as a survival mechanism. Transactional sex refers to the exchange of sex for material or financial resources or gifts (Chatterji et al., 2005). Transactional sex occurs in diverse contexts, is motivated by various factors, and is influenced by gendered socio-economic and cultural factors. Transactional sex relations often take place in a context in which choice and opportunities for women are limited. To get a proper understanding of the phenomenon, these different contextual factors need to be considered.

Much of the existing literature suggests that in humanitarian crises women engage in transactional sex primarily to meet the basic needs of their households. Engagement in sexual relationships for material and financial gain in an effort to mitigate the impact of food insecurity³ has been referred to as 'survival sex'. Due to the magnitude and impact of HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), increased attention has been paid to transactional sex and a wealth of research has been conducted on the topic (for example, Hunter, 2002; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Robinson et al., 2011). This research often focuses on the health implications of engaging in transactional sex in an effort to better inform HIV prevention policy and programming, looking at why women engage in transactional sex and the different forms of transactional sex that exist. There is limited research, however, on transactional sex in humanitarian contexts. Women and girls in conflict situations are among the most vulnerable and at risk. In the face of displacement, vulnerable social structures, income poverty and limited livelihood opportunities, a small body of literature testifies that women in humanitarian contexts engage in sexual relationships with material and financial gain as a survival mechanism in response to adverse shocks. As such, women's engagement in humanitarian crisis is significantly linked to the need to meet the basic needs of their families. This literature⁴ shows how survival sex is a high-risk behaviour that exposes women to various forms of abuse, including emotional abuse and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

SGBV has been one of the most horrific aspects of the decades-long war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Rodriguez, 2007). Bordering Rwanda and Burundi, South Kivu is an entry point for armed groups that participated in the war. It is in this context that the *Institut Supérieur de Développement Rural* (ISDR) seeks to undertake research focused on *Mapping the diversity of prostitution and transactional sex in South Kivu*. The research to be undertaken by the ISDR strives to contribute to the knowledge base on transactional sex in humanitarian contexts. This review of the literature is meant to inform the research of the ISDR and carries a particular focus on women's engagement in transactional sex in humanitarian crisis and post-conflict contexts, which is currently an understudied area. In doing so, a general review of the literature on transactional sex is undertaken, with a particular focus on women's engagement in transactional sex as a means of livelihood and an expression of agency.

It is important to highlight that transactional sex is a vast topic. There are many complex factors at play that due to time limitations and data availability cannot be fully addressed through this review. This

¹ Risk refers to the occurrence of uncertain socio-economic events that impact negatively on the income or welfare of households, and can be idiosyncratic (at the individual level) or covariate (take place at community level) and for vulnerable groups result in cumulative disadvantage (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004).

² Vulnerability refers to the inability to cope with exposure to high socio-economic risks that have negative livelihood effects (Chambers, 2006).

³ According to Normén et al. (2005), food insecurity is defined as having an uncertain or limited availability of nutritionally adequate or safe food or the inability to procure food in socially acceptable ways.

⁴ Sources identified include: Maclin et al. (2015); UNHCR (2011); Muhwezi et al. (2011); World Bank (2015); Watson (2011); Agjiresaasi (2011) and Atwood et al. (2011).

review should therefore be seen as indicative of some of the key issues. It is intended to contribute to the body of knowledge in this area and highlight the areas in which there is need for further in-depth holistic research and analysis. As a starting point, it attempts to address the following questions:

- What patterns of engagement can be established to classify transactional sex?
- What is the vocabulary used for different types of transactional sex, and how are these types perceived in terms of power and morality?
- What is the motivation for women's engagement in different types of transactional sex?
- What is the role of violence in transactional sex?
- What degree of agency do women have within the practice of transactional sex?
- Are women able to negotiate for safe sex in various transactional sex relationships?

Some have called for closer examination regarding whether and how men are selling as well as buying sex (Chatterji *et al.*, 2005). However, due to time and data limitations, the scope of this review is limited to transactional sex where men buy sex from women or girls.

1.1 Methodology and limitations of the analysis

This literature review was a desk study based on secondary data. A three-step process was adopted to undertake the review: (1) searching the literature, (2) gathering, reading and analysing the literature and (3) writing the review. A comprehensive search for literature was conducted for both published and unpublished works using Google, Google Scholar and Scopus. Key search words included: transactional sex; prostitution; survival sex; sex crisis situations; transactional sex humanitarian; transactional sex post conflict. The various publications were categorised and a preliminary review conducted, during which further relevant publications were sought based on review of the bibliographies of publications deemed most relevant. Several search sessions were conducted with each round of review in an effort to access as much literature as possible. In the final stage of the process, the various publications earmarked for further study were read in detail and key emerging themes categorised. The final step in the process was report writing. In developing the report, first an initial review was conducted and then a further in-depth review of the literature was undertaken in order to refine the report.

Considerable effort was made to identify publications on transactional sex in general and in particular on transactional sex practices in humanitarian crises. However, a limitation of this review is the fact that relatively few sources focus on this nexus. Due to the paucity of literature in this area, no concrete conclusions can be made regarding the nature of transactional sex practices in humanitarian contexts. Therefore, this analysis should be seen merely as indicative of the nature and scope of transactional sex in humanitarian contexts.

1.2 Approach and organisation of the analysis

The objective of this literature review is to understand the nature of transactional sex relationships in post-conflict contexts, but due to the paucity of literature in this area, it extends to transactional sex in other humanitarian contexts as well as non-humanitarian contexts. The considerable body of literature on transactional sex practices in SSA is included in an effort to gain insights into the nature and motivations for engaging in transactional sex. In line with this approach, the remainder of this report is divided as follows:

- Section 2 focuses on transactional sex practices in SSA, and in so doing defines transactional sex (section 2.1), looks at women's motivations for engaging in transactional sex (section 2.2), reviews the nature of transactional sex relationships in SSA (section 2.3) and concludes with a discussion on the societal meaning of transactional sex (section 2.4).
- An analysis of transactional sex in humanitarian crises is provided in Section 3.

- Section 4 reviews women's agency in the context of transactional sex relationships.
- A discussion of the risks of engaging in transactional sex is provided in Section 5.
- Section 6 concludes.

2 Transactional sex practices in sub-Saharan Africa

This section of the report defines the term transactional sex and reviews the motivations and the nature of transactional sex practices.

2.1 Defining transactional sex

Defining transactional sex is not a straightforward task. In simple terms, it means *sex provided in exchange for something*, but the literature shows that interpretations of transactional sex are culturally determined and constructed. The term transactional sex is used by various scholars to refer to engagement in sex in exchange for cash, goods, services, commodities, or privileges in order to meet the needs and wants of the parties involved (see Chatterji *et al.*, 2005; Dunkle *et al.*, 2004). In SSA in particular, the term is used to emphasise the ‘centrality of material exchanges to everyday sexual relationships and to clearly differentiate the practice from “commercial sex” and prostitution with their stigmatising connotations’ (see Blommaert, 2014; Hunter, 2002; Cole, 2007).

Hunter (2002) found that transactional sex ‘has a number of similarities to prostitution... [but] differs in important ways: participants are constructed as “girlfriends” and “boyfriends”... and the exchange of gifts for sex is part of a broader set of obligations that might not involve a predetermined payment’ (Hunter, 2002). The literature suggests that transactional sex is grounded in a set of motivations distinct from sex work, where the exchange of sex for material gain is predetermined in a ‘prostitutes’–‘clients’ relationship (Hunter, 2002). Consequently a distinction is made between transactional sex and prostitution. With regard to ‘prostitution’ or ‘commercial sex’, the literature (e.g. Hunter, 2002; Farley and Barkan, 1998; Wojcicki, 2002a; Luke, 2003) makes reference to sexual exchange based on predetermined forms of remuneration (usually cash) to those who provide sex on a professional basis (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; also see Hunter, 2002 and; Cole, 2007). Therefore, a distinction is made in that in ‘everyday’ transactional sex relationships, ‘exchange is not necessarily a straightforward cash transaction and sex is not pursued on a professional basis’ (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Watson, 2011; Hunter, 2002; Luke, 2003).

The difference between transactional sex and prostitution is difficult to draw in analytical terms as there are many grey areas bordering them. Although empirically close, however, the difference between transactional sex and prostitution is maintained in many local vocabularies and hence the distinction is socially relevant in many contexts. Wojcicki (2002b) found that in Soweto and Hammanskraal in South Africa, two different Zulu words were used for the two practices. The term *ukuphanda* (loosely meaning to get money) was used in reference to informal transactional sex, while *marhosha* or *matekatse* were used to refer to commercial sex work (Stoebenau *et al.*, 2011). In Lesotho, transactional sex relationships are referred to as *bonyatsi*, which is a socially acceptable extramarital relationship of a long-term nature in which men provide material and non-monetary assistance. On the other hand, the term *botekase* is used to describe prostitution which is deemed socially unacceptable (Stoebenau *et al.*, 2011). In the context of Madagascar, Stoebenau (2009) found that in Antananarivo night clubs women who engaged in transactional sex did not self-identify as prostitutes (*mpiraro-tena*) but rather saw themselves as ‘going out to *mitady vady vazaha* (look for foreign husbands). Overall the literature reveals that women engaging in transactional sex do not self-identify as prostitutes (see Wojcicki, 2002b; Caldwell *et al.*, 1989; Hunter, 2002; 2004; Kaufman and Stavrou, 2004; Nyanzi *et al.*, 2004; Poulin, 2006; Wight *et al.* 2006). In various sources (Swidler and Watkins, 2006; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Wojcicki, 2002a) a further distinction is made between transactional sex and prostitution based

on the physical appearance of the women engaging in the two forms of sexual relationships. Women who wore revealing (and culturally undesirable) clothing, such as short skirts and shirts, and who engaged in sex for money were classified as prostitutes (Wojcicki, 2002a).

On the discourse on transactional sex in SSA, Stoebenau *et al.* (2011) succinctly summarise that:

- Transactional sex is shaped by a number of economic, social and political conditions motivated by either the need for survival or consumption;
- It is motivated by material and/or monetary gain;
- It is conceptualised in a distinct language among those engaging in such practices, where various phrases and expressions are used to articulate the positive and negative aspects of the phenomenon;
- Relationships are often categorised as love relationships in the context of boyfriend/girlfriend relationships where gifts are an expression of love and;
- Transactional sex relations exist in highly unequal gendered power relations and as such are implicitly coercive in the context of women's limited livelihood opportunities.

2.2 Motivation for engaging in transactional sex

Hunter (2002) argues that three factors collectively lead to transactional sex. The first is 'the privileged economic position of men, rooted in their access to the most lucrative segments of the formal and informal economy as well as to resources such as housing', while the second is 'masculine discourses that place a high value on men having multiple sexual partners'. The third, by contrast, relates to an expression of women's agency: women engaging in transactional sexual relationships not as passive victims but rather in order 'to access power and resources in ways that can both challenge and reproduce patriarchal structures' (Hunter, 2002).

In the literature reviewed on transactional sex in SSA, an underlying driver for engaging in transactional sex was the economic gain, with various studies pointing to consumerist motivations (Stavrou and Kaufman, 2000; Leclerc-Madlala, 2001; Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; Nyanzi *et al.*, 2001; Silberschmidt and Rasch, 2001; Hunter, 2002; Thorpe, 2002; Selikow *et al.*, 2002; Wojcicki and Malala, 2001; Wojcicki, 2002a; and Wight *et al.*, 2004).

In a review of the factors influencing transactional sex among young men and women in 12 SSA countries, Chatterji *et al.* (2005) found that young unmarried men and women were more likely to engage in transactional sex than older and/or married men and women. Other studies on transactional sex in the same region indicate that among the youth, engagement in transactional sex relationships has both economic and consumer purposes. An extensive literature review conducted by Luke (2003) on transactional sex among adolescent girls in SSA highlights that adolescent girls in particular engage in transactional sex for various material, financial and social gains in contexts where they have limited negotiating power. As articulated in Caldwell *et al.* (1989), for many young women, engagement in transactional sex 'is the only way of having a relationship with a high-status or powerful man and of gaining an entrée to society. It is also often only one part of a strategy for advancement, success, and high income in the world of government and business.' Evidence from Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa reveals that through transactional sex relationships young women are able to 'cover education-related expenses and gain connections in social networks' (Chatterij *et al.*, 2005).⁵

⁵ For the specific country studies see: Barker and Rich (1992) on Nigeria and Kenya; Calves *et al.* (1996) on SSA; Meekers and Calves (1997) on SSA; Mensch *et al.* (1998); Kaufman *et al.* (2001) on South Africa.

Peer pressure and parental pressure are cited as other factors behind why the youth exchange sex for material gain. The youth feel pressured to keep up with their peers with regard to 'luxury items, such as expensive clothing, jewellery, fashionable hairstyles, accessories, and make-up' (Chatterij *et al.*, 2005; see also Bledsoe, 1990; Calves *et al.*, 1996; Meekers and Calves, 1997; Ankomah, 1998; Temin *et al.*, 1999; Hulton *et al.*, 2000; Nyanzi *et al.*, 2001; Gregson *et al.*, 2002; Longfield *et al.*, 2002). The literature also suggests that parents put pressure on their daughters to engage in transactional sex. In these settings girls are encouraged to become involved with older well-off men in order to meet the needs of the family. In post-conflict Uganda and Liberia, Agiresaasi (2011) and Atwood *et al.* (2011) found that parents uphold this practice but that adverse effects were felt in family system functions and the wider socio-cultural context.

In contexts of humanitarian crisis, the primary motivation for entering into transactional sex relationships is food insecurity. Women in these contexts engage in transactional sex to meet the needs of their families in adverse economic conditions. Being a breadwinner is closely linked to the status of being the head of a household and the power that accompanies this role (Lwambo, 2011). This type of transactional sex that is associated with requiring basic needs is often referred to as 'survival sex'. It is supposed to be distinct from transactional sex that is more geared to consumer wants. Survival sex refers to transactional sexual relationships that arise in direct response to the need to meet basic needs in situations of poverty or food insecurity (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). Some sources distinguish between transactional sex to meet consumer wants and that of meeting *basic needs*. While these are all forms of transactional sex, the motivations for engagement differ. Leclerc-Madlala (2003), for instance, found that in an urban township in Durban South, transactional sex relationships were 'more about satisfying "wants" as opposed to meeting "needs"' (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003).

A neat distinction between 'needs' (survival sex) and 'wants' (consumer sex) is too simplistic. It glosses over the fact that the two motivations are not mutually exclusive and can overlap. It also ignores the fact that in some societies a seemingly luxury item as a mobile phone can be considered a necessity of life. Finally, the distinction does not acknowledge that transactional sex can also be an investment in a more solid future, for example through education or social mobility. While the term 'survival sex' is appropriate for specific situations, we propose to juxtapose it with the term 'strategic sex.' Survival sex is also strategic, yet connotes situations where women have extremely limited options, whereas in other contexts women may choose to engage in transactional sex for different purposes.

2.3 The nature of transactional sex relationships

Qualitative evidence suggests that material exchange in transactional sex relationships is seen as an expression of the worth of a woman to a man. In Burkina Faso for example, Gorgen *et al.* (1993) found that receipt of 'gifts or money in exchange for sexual favours is considered unremarkable. A girl would feel humiliated and disrespected if she received nothing for engaging in sex' (Luke and Kurz, 2002). As such, a man's ability to provide such material gifts is a key factor when a woman decides to enter into a relationship with a man (Luke and Kurz, 2002).

Transactional sex relationships are characterised by multiple concurrent partnerships of varying lengths. In these settings, various partners provide different types of support: for example, through one relationship a woman is able to cover her electricity costs, while another takes care of selected food items. In South Africa the term 'roll-on' (seSotho: *nyatsi*; isiZulu: *makwapheni*) is used to refer to secret sexual relationships 'concurrent with, and hidden from, a primary relationship' (Dunkle *et al.*, 2004 based on Jewkes *et al.*, 2002). Dunkle *et al.* (2004) found that roll-ons may be 'an older man who provides financial resources (a *sugar daddy*'); the 'father of one or more of a woman's children with whom she continues having sex to secure financial support'; or 'any other man who provides some form of ongoing emotional and/or financial support'. There are also instances where women engage in one-off encounters with non-primary partners in anticipation of a longer-term relationship that does not

materialise. Research also shows that women may also engage in one-off relationships as a 'thank you' for receipt of particular items such as taxi rides, school fees, drinks, etc. This practice is found to be common among women who frequent local bars (*shebeens*) in Southern Africa (Wojcicki, 2002a).

In many African countries, the term *sugar daddy* is synonymous with transactional sex relationships (Hunter, 2002). These relationships are often relatively long term and may involve multiple concurrent partnerships by both parties. A key feature of these relationships is their intergenerational nature. In Southern Africa, the concept of *small houses* refers to medium- to long-term transactional sex relationships where men fully provide for the cost of living of women and go as far as to have children in these relationships. In Dakar, Senegal, transactional sex relationships are referred to as *mbaraan*⁶ and occur primarily in the context of multiple concurrent partnerships.

The literature suggests that younger and unmarried women are more likely than older and married women to engage in transactional sex (Chatterji *et al.*, 2005). Young women in particular are more likely to enter into transactional sex relationships with older men, who are better able to meet their material needs. As such there is a distinct intergenerational dimension as regards transactional sex relationships.

In the public health literature, the intergenerational nature of transactional sex relationships has been of great concern due to the rampant spread of HIV. Extensive research has been carried out on transactional sex practices among young people in an effort to a better understand the phenomenon, advise policy and programming towards the realisation of an AIDS-free generation. While extensive research exists on transactional sex among young people, in contrast limited research has been conducted on transactional sex in older age groups.

2.4 The societal meaning of transactional sex

Much of the literature focuses on motivations and relationships in transactional sex, which can be understood in terms of the objective of studies to inform health policy. Some studies look into the wider societal implications of transactional sex and ask how this phenomenon affects gender relations.

A study in DRC by Maclin *et al.*, (2015) found that the normative construct of familial roles and power relationships changed in this country as women were forced to take financial responsibility in response to men's joblessness (Maclin *et al.*, 2015). The study found that women's engagement in transactional sex as a response to lack of family income has resulted in men's greater dependence on women amidst shame and the inability to speak out against their wives' engagement in extramarital activities. Further, both men and women 'struggled with shifting gender roles as women became family leaders and men lost most, if not all, of their control at home' (Maclin *et al.*, 2015). Men felt threatened by the shift in power and both women and men expressed frustration over men's inability to provide for their families. A 'sense of failure often results in unhealthy outlets for asserting masculinity' (Lwambo, 2011). In a similar vein, Davis (2014) in a study commissioned by DFID on social norms governing adolescence in Kinshasa, found that the assumption that women at work engage in transactional sex negatively affects men's attitudes to working women.

A related question occasionally raised in literature, for instance by Leclerc-Madlala (2003), concerns the possibility of whether transactional sex can become a transformative factor in changing gender relations: that is, whether the choices to engage in transactional sexual relationships have the potential to challenge and destabilise social inequities or 'merely express and reproduce those inequities' (Kabeer, 1999).

⁶ The Wolf expression with reference to transactional sex.

3 Transactional sex in humanitarian crisis and post-conflict contexts

Sex totally lost meaning... Women started to have sex for material gain and to support their families... Poverty drove people crazy at the peak of war here!... You would find one giving in to have sex because she wanted to earn a living... IDP camp life made the situation worse.

...All the deviance in sexual behaviour mainly resulted from difficulties that people face at the peak of war... There was food shortage and women started to exchange sex for food, gifts and other valuables. Girls started to be prematurely given out for marriage because of poverty... Orphaned teenage girls started to just give in to marriage as the only way to have a house.

Due to having just come out of a war situation, people generally feel dejected and hopeless, others feel they are the unluckiest in the world... Some see no reason to live on... Many women now exchange sex for food and other valuable items. Some have no fear of HIV/AIDS since unlike starvation, it will not kill them immediately... These are indications of despair.

(Muhwezi et al., 2011, based on interviews with community members in Uganda's Katakwi District)

Conflict and natural disasters push individuals, and sometimes entire communities, into poverty as crises destroy livelihoods, result in the loss of property and separate people from their economic networks. (Maclin et al., 2015; Hynes, 2004). The quotes above summarise the predicament of women in humanitarian contexts who resort to transactional sex as a coping mechanism in adverse socio-economic situations. Often women and girls disproportionately carry the burden of the consequences of war and 'suffer violations of human rights in situations of armed conflict, including terrorism, torture, disappearance, rape, ethnic cleansing, family separation and displacement. Moreover, they endure lifelong social and psychological traumas' (Hynes, 2004).⁷ Watson (2011) argues that women's lack of choice or opportunities provides the context in which various transactional sex relationships take place. Much of the research into human rights violations against women in conflict and post-conflict contexts is focused on sexual exploitation, abuse and violence. In order to respond sufficiently to the vulnerabilities and risks of women in humanitarian contexts, it is equally important to gain greater insight into the different practices of transactional sex and how they are organised and perceived in such contexts.

While scanty, the literature suggests a correlation between food security and survival sex in humanitarian contexts. Existing literature points to the fact that women's engagement in transactional sex in humanitarian contexts is for survival purposes in order to offset the multiple adverse shocks that arise from violent conflict situations (Agiresaasi, 2011; Dewey, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2012; Unger, 2012; UNHCR, 2011; Hynes, 2004). Motivated by the need for food, shelter and security, women resort to transactional sex to meet basic needs (Agiresaasi, 2011; Hynes, 2004). The literature further suggests that women's engagement in transactional sex is not only to meet their personal basic needs but often those of their entire family. In post-conflict DRC, for example, like in Uganda and Liberia, the changing socio-economic structures that have emerged after the conflict have forced women to take responsibility for their households as men have lost livelihood opportunities (Agiresaasi, 2011; Dewey, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2012; Unger, 2012; UNHCR, 2011; Hynes, 2004).

⁷ Also see www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/files/Download.pdf.

According to the World Bank (2015), in the artisanal and small-scale mining areas of North and South Kivu in Eastern Congo, women were forced to engage in transactional sex in order to gain access to and maintain employment. Women interviewed said that giving sexual favours was one of the ways to hold on to the few livelihood opportunities available to them. This highlights the 'close link between economic and sexual exploitation' (World Bank, 2015). This also suggests that the more food insecure and vulnerable women and girls, the higher the probability they will adopt extreme coping mechanisms, including survival sex (Agiresaasi, 2011; Dewey, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2012; Ungor, 2012; UNHCR, 2011; Hynes, 2004). Women, in these situations, may not consider that they have any other choice but to engage in survival sex.

In a study conducted on family dynamics in post-conflict Liberia, Atwood *et al.* (2011) found that young people attributed the emergence of transactional sex to the war. UNHCR (2011) found that in Haiti, women internally displaced by the 2010 earthquake and living in camps were engaging in transactional sex, which they had not done so before their displacement. In post-conflict Liberia, young people said that they were pushed into engaging in transactional sex by their parents in order to meet household needs. Atwood *et al.* (2011) found that in Liberia girls in particular were pressured into this practice by parents. While encouraging girls to engage in transactional sexual relationships with affluent men in society, parents at the same time advocated discretion in order to preserve the family's social status as well as ensure that their daughters would be able to secure decent marriages in the future. Although many factors determined whether young people engaged in transactional sex, including material gain and peer status, they often felt powerless to decline this type of relationship. Muhwezi *et al.* (2011) and Maclin *et al.* (2011) report similar stories in Uganda and the DRC, respectively.

In countries with peacekeeping forces, a more complex dynamic exists. Over the last two decades there have been allegations of peacekeeping troops engaging in transactional sex with refugees and internally displaced women and children (Hynes, 2004; Beber, 2015a). According to WHO *et al.* (2012), 'sexual exploitation (including sexual coercion for protection and/or basic necessities such as food' constitutes forms of sexual violence. Though sparse, the literature suggests that in different situations the same women would not be engaging in such relationships. In earthquake-ravished Haiti,⁸ UNHCR (2011) suggests that while there is an absence of quantitative data, it is generally accepted that SGBV against women and girls in IDP camps is widespread in Haiti due to the increased economic and social vulnerabilities of those living in camps. Among a sample of 150 women in IDP camps in Port-au-Prince in 2011, every one of them had either been directly involved in or had witnessed transactional sex as a coping mechanism (UNHCR, 2011).

According to United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services (UN OIOS, 2015), 'transactional sex is quite common but underreported in peacekeeping missions'. UN OIOS (2015) cites hunger and poverty, lifestyle and skill improvement and upward mobility as women's motivations for engaging in transactional sex. In interviews conducted in the first quarter of 2014 in Haiti, 231 individuals admitted to engaging in transactional sex with peacekeeping personnel for various reasons, including enabling the women and their families to continue schooling and improving their future prospects:

For rural women, hunger, lack of shelter, baby care items, medication and household items were frequently cited as the 'triggering need'. Urban and suburban women received (separate forms of payment) jewellery, 'church' shoes, dresses, fancy underwear, perfume, cell phones, radios, televisions and, in a few cases, laptops. (UN OIOS, 2015)

In post-conflict Liberia, which has had a peacekeeping mission in place since 2003 when the civil war ended, Beber *et al.* (2015b), found that among a sample of 1,381 randomly selected households,

⁸ As a low-income country with dismal human development indicators, the country's development challenges have been exacerbated by the 2010 earthquake. An estimated three million people were affected by the quake (IFRC, 2010; Hynes, 2004).

including 475 women aged 18-30 years, more than 75% of the women engaged in transactional sex with peacekeeping personnel. Based on their findings, Beber *et al.* (2015b) estimated that 'each additional battalion of UN peacekeepers caused a significant increase in a woman's probability of engaging in her first transactional sex.' Beber *et al.* (2015b) further suggest that the demand for transactional sex by UN personnel has led to an expansion of the transactional sex market in Monrovia. Amidst the health risks and exposure to sexual violence that such relationships promote, the study finds that the phenomenon has fundamentally transformed the Liberian economy to the extent that large percentages of young women sell sex 'for their livelihood or at least to enhance their livelihood'. Allegations of similar acts around transactional sex and sexual exploitation by peacekeeping forces and aid workers have been reported for the Central African Republic, DRC and South Sudan.

The classification of survival sex as sexual violence recognises the limited choices women have in some conditions in refusing or opting out of transactional sex. On the other hand, this may cloud some of the dynamics of transactional sex. While there are strong indications that a humanitarian crisis can be a driver of transactional sex, the wider literature suggests it is likely to be one driver among others. Survival sex in these conditions does not preclude women engaging in transactional sex for strategic reasons.

4 Transactional sex and women's agency

Kabeer (1999) defines power as the ability to make choices and the ability to define one's goals and act upon them (agency). As such, agency relates to the ability to make effective choices both in the household and society at large, and encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose (power within) in the actions undertaken. Choices in turn imply the possibility of alternatives and the ability to have chosen otherwise. Kabeer further states that where individuals have insufficient means to meet basic needs, then the ability to exercise choice is ruled out:

The ability to exercise choice incorporates three inter-related dimensions: resources (defined broadly to include not only access, but also future claims, to both material and human and social resources); agency (including processes of decision making, as well as less measurable manifestations of agency such as negotiation, deception and manipulation); and achievements (well-being outcomes). (Kabeer, 1999)

In the SSA context, some authors argue that women's engagement in transactional sex provides women with a certain level of control over their lives and as such is suggestive of women's agency. Along this line of thinking, Hunter (2002) argues that 'women approach transactional relations not as passive victims, but in order to access power and resources in ways that can both challenge and reproduce patriarchal structures.' In Mandeni, South Africa, Hunter (2002) found that women viewed having multiple partners as a way to gain control over their lives, and this was reflected in the choice of language used: 'The very vocabulary of sex centred, for women, around the verb *qoma* (to choose a man)'.

In humanitarian crisis settings, however, the literature mainly suggests a lack of choice. For many women in such contexts, one of the only means to meet basic needs is to engage in transactional sex relationships. As discussed in Section 3, the literature suggests that women's access to employment is tied to their willingness to engage in sexual relationships with men able to facilitate employment opportunities. On the other hand, in an analysis of transactional sex in post-conflict Monrovia, Beber *et al.* (2015b) argue that women stand to gain considerable income and status from such relationships. From this perspective, women in post-conflict contexts 'are not only victims but also survivors who have agency to make consensual decisions' (Maclin *et al.*, 2015). In the context of post-conflict Liberia, Atwood *et al.* (2011) found that transactional sex 'appeared to provide adolescent females with a type of social agency, within the confines of their difficult economic circumstances, which enabled them to participate in the post-conflict economy without feeling left behind.' While these findings are inconclusive, they point to the complexity of the issue in the context of gendered political, socio-economic and cultural dynamics.

Irrespective of the setting, women engaging in sex for material gain in various contexts have limited bargaining and negotiation power; this remains fundamentally with men, who hold the economic upper hand. In transactional sex relationships, sex becomes a commodity that, once purchased, results in the male partner maintaining power over the sexual encounter (Chatterji *et al.*, 2005; Bledsoe, 1990; Castle and Konaté, 1999; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). Evidence suggests that the higher the material assistance, the lower the negotiation power (Blommaert, 2014; Chatterji *et al.*, 2005). In the context of Dakar, Foley and Drame (2012), argue that 'while *mbaraan* is in part an expression of women's agency and a transgression of dominant gender norms, it also reflects women's social and economic subordination and their inability to achieve self-sufficiency independent of men's financial support' (Foley and Drame, 2012). Consequently, they suggest that *mbaraan* 'is the outcome of contradictory opportunities and constraints that women face as they grapple with material insecurity and marital disappointments'.

In a study by Wamoyi *et al.* (2011) on transactional sex in Tanzania, the authors found that at some level women felt they exercised choice with regard to the partners they engaged with in transactional sex. In the same study, Wamoyi *et al.* (2011) found that even when women engaged in multiple concurrent partnerships, they still considered themselves to have freedom of choice in the selection of their partners. In making the distinction between transactional sex and prostitution, drawing from Hunter (2002), Wamoyi *et al.* (2011) finds that 'women engaged in transactional sex will choose a lover, whereas women in prostitution will sell their bodies.' Wojcicki (2002a) and various others contend that transactional sex relationships operate on a system of implied consent between two parties.

Some sources argue that it is not exclusively a matter of women being exploited in transactional sex relationships, but that women also exploit such relationships to further socio-economic aspirations. For example, based on research conducted on South Africa, Leclerc-Madlala (2003) suggests that women exercise agency and exert power by exploiting sexual relationships in an effort to fulfil their need to acquire modern commodities. A key determining factor in whether this is an expression of women's agency or whether it even extends to manipulation is whether the choice in question is of *transformatory* significance. That is, does the choice to engage in transactional sexual relationships have the potential to challenge and destabilise social inequities? Or does it in fact 'merely express and reproduce those inequities' (Kabeer, 1999)?

5 The risk factors

Risk and vulnerability are present throughout the course of life and are influenced by interlinked lifecycle, intergenerational and social exclusion factors. Risk refers to the occurrence of uncertain socio-economic events that impact negatively on the income or welfare of households; they can be idiosyncratic (at the individual level) or covariate (at the community level) and for vulnerable groups they result in cumulative disadvantage (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). Vulnerability, in turn, is the inability to cope with exposure to high socio-economic risks that have negative livelihood effects (Chambers, 2006). In many societies women and girls remain the most marginalised and vulnerable in society, a situation exacerbated in conflict/post-conflict settings and other humanitarian contexts.

The literature (Farley and Barkan, 1998; Dunkle *et al.*, 2004; Chatterji *et al.*, 2005; Luke, 2003) reveals that engaging in transactional sex irrespective of socio-economic factors leaves women vulnerable to health, physical and emotional risks. Existing literature documents that transactional sex, in conflict, post-conflict and other settings, exposes women to health risks arising from unsafe sex practices (Atwood *et al.*, 2011). There are clear indications in the literature that transactional sex 'often coexists with other risky sexual behaviours like an early sexual debut, multiple concurrent sexual partnerships, and inconsistent condom use. Irrespective of the context, evidence links transactional sex to undesirable sexual and reproductive health outcomes including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions' (Choudhry *et al.*, 2014; Dunkle *et al.*, 2004; Hunter, 2002). In particular women's biological susceptibility to infection and their inability to negotiate for safe sex in transactional sex relationships places women at higher risk of contracting HIV particularly in the context of multiple concurrent partnerships (see Higgins *et al.*, 2010 as quoted in Blommaert, 2014; Foley and Drame, 2013).

The literature reviewed indicates that while women and girls in some SSA settings may have considerable negotiating power over certain aspects of sexual relationships, they have little control over the sexual practices within the relationship, including condom use. The higher the material assistance, the less negotiation and bargaining power women have, giving rise to high-risk situations (Chatterji *et al.*, 2005; Luke, 2003; Atwood *et al.*, 2011). Dunkle *et al.*, (2004) found that in Soweto, South Africa, men believed that 'when you put your money up, you must get a good thing', the implication being that money buys unprotected sex. Atwood *et al.* (2011) found that in post-conflict Liberia, requesting a partner use a condom was seen as accusing them of prostitution. These findings touch on the underlying psychosocial and cultural dimensions at play.

While some sources suggest a correlation between transactional sex and violence, the precise causal relationship is unclear. Exposure to sexual violence would appear to tend to result in social and cultural rejection and psychological trauma, predisposing engagement in transactional sex. For example, Dunkle *et al.* (2004), found that in Soweto transactional sex was more likely to be reported by women who also reported violence by male intimate partners. Other factors include childhood abuse and problematic alcohol or drug use. In a review of transactional sex practices in displacement camps in Haiti, UNHCR (2011) found that research 'conducted in other emergency contexts has found that aggravated conditions of poverty may increase sexual violence (although SGBV in itself is obviously not a 'low-class' phenomenon)' (UNHCR, 2011).

Armed conflict has been identified with increased risks and vulnerability for women and girls. Amidst the trauma of war, displacement and food insecurity, women also experience SGBV (Farley and Barkan, 1998; Hynes, 2004). Several studies reveal that violence against women who engage in transactional sex is common: the practice is associated with increased risk of rape and physical violence (Dunkle *et al.*, 2004). In post-conflict Liberia, Atwood *et al.* (2011) found that girls faced rape during transactional sex if they refused sex or insisted on condom use, highlighting women's limited negotiation power in sexual relationships and male expression of power through sexual violence (Atwood *et al.*, 2011).

6 Conclusion

Transactional sex is a complex phenomenon. To date much of the research on transactional sex is in the context of SSA and is focused predominantly on the youth and the health implications of such interactions. The literature reviewed indicates that transactional sex is a common aspect of everyday relationships in SSA (see Hunter, 2002 in the context of Mandeni, South Africa; Chatterji *et al.*, 2005 in the context of 12 countries in SSA; Kaufman and Stavrou, 2004 in the context of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa). Research suggests that in SSA, transactional sex is common among the youth but also takes place among older age groups and that transactional sex relations in SSA have an intergenerational nature (Chatterji *et al.*, 2005). The norm in these settings is young women engaging in transactional sex relationships with older men who have the means to provide the material goods needed or desired. There is limited research undertaken on transactional sex in humanitarian contexts, so the findings above are at best indicative.

In contrast to the vast amount of research on transactional sex in SSA, there is much less focused on the phenomenon in humanitarian crisis and conflict. While not exhaustive, this review has attempted to answer a number of pertinent questions regarding transactional sex practices in humanitarian crisis, and identifies the following:

(1) Practices and patterns: In SSA transactional sex is a common aspect of everyday relationships that takes place in various forms in response to the gendered socio-economic context in which it emerges. Men typically provide money and gifts to women in various sexual relationships of varying lengths, often in the context of multiple concurrent partnerships. In humanitarian contexts, the literature presents evidence of exploitative relationships with peacekeeping forces and aid workers, where exchange centres primarily on the provision of food and other material support to meet basic needs. Because of limits on women's ability to choose to disengage from transactional sex, it can be considered a form of sexual abuse. The question is whether the existing literature on humanitarian settings sufficiently takes into account the broader realities of transactional sex. As the literature on SSA testifies, humanitarian crises are not the only drivers of transactional sex, and other factors may also operate in humanitarian settings. This means that other, more 'strategic' forms of transactional sex may also occur during humanitarian crises.

(2) Vocabulary used and distinctions: Transactional sex is diverse and socio-culturally defined. In the context of SSA, a clear distinction is made between transactional sex and prostitution. This distinction comes across in individual and community perceptions and the language used in reference to the two practices. Transactional sex is often socially and culturally acceptable to some degree, while prostitution is more likely to be socially shunned.

(3) Women's motivation to engage: A range of factors influences women's decisions to engage in transactional sex. Many sources distinguish two key factors: the need for survival versus consumeristic purposes, but some sources indicate that transactional sex can also be seen as a vehicle for securing a more stable future through education or social mobility, which is a more strategic form of transactional sex than a neat needs-wants distinction allows. In humanitarian contexts, the motivation remains primarily meeting basic household needs. Even when women try to find other sources of livelihood, access to such opportunities are often linked to their willingness to engage in transactional sex relationships. On the other hand, other sources suggest that more strategic forms of transactional sex may also occur during humanitarian crises.

(4) The manner in which transactional sex relationships are undertaken: Regardless of the context (humanitarian or otherwise), transactional sex relationships are primarily between the individual men and women involved. However, there are indications that, particularly in post-conflict settings, familial

pressure in order to meet household basic needs may be a key motivator for women to engage in sexual relations for material gain.

(5) The role of violence: While engagement in transactional sex exposes women in all contexts to violence, the literature suggests that violence itself plays a role in bringing about transactional sex relationships. The direction of causation remains unclear. This remains a highly complex, multidimensional issue that warrants further in-depth analysis, including of the psychological effects.

(6) Women's agency: In both SSA and humanitarian contexts, authors observe that by engaging in transactional sex women access power and resources in a way that can both challenge and reproduce patriarchal structures (Hunter, 2002). Selected authors argue that within the confines of existing gendered economic and socio-cultural imbalances, transactional sex enables women to take control of their circumstances. In SSA the literature indicates while women have limited negotiation power, they are able to exercise choice when it comes to partner selection. Questions of women's agency where transactional sex is concerned are complex and deserve further research.

(7) Women's ability to negotiate for safe sex: The literature suggests that women engaging in transactional sex relationships are often unable to negotiate condom use and so face serious health risks. These findings apply in transactional sex relationships in both non-humanitarian and humanitarian contexts. They highlight the existing gender power imbalances and social inequities that contribute to women's continued vulnerability in the face of adverse risk.

Overall, this review highlights the need for further research on transactional sex as a phenomenon in humanitarian crisis and conflict. A better understanding of the multidimensional nature of transactional sex relationships is a prerequisite for being able to mitigate and respond to the multiple risks that women face.

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