



## Analysing the economies of transactional sex amongst young people: Case study of Madagascar



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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the social and economic determinants of transactional sexual (TS) relationships in Madagascar, to explain the normalisation of this type of relationship amongst young women, and the increasing involvement of young men. We aim to contribute to existing research on TS by showing the complexities of the meanings and pathways into TS which are not limited to economic necessity, and the blurred boundaries between TS and other forms of sexual exchange. We will argue that for young women in Madagascar engaging in TS is a choice which is constrained by structures of poverty and wider gender inequality, structures which lead to the transformation of traditional gender norms within a wider globalised economy of sexual exchange. These highly unequal structures can further be argued to perpetuate and reproduce various forms of violence both through the modification of traditions and customs, and within newer forms of TS relationships such as those with foreign men. Whilst it might seem an impossible task to address all these determinants of TS relationships in Madagascar in order to reduce the constraints and violence exercised against these young women, their situation could be improved through better programmes and services addressing their needs, and particularly their sexual and reproductive health needs.

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### 1. Introduction

This article aims to explore the social and economic determinants of transactional sexual relationships in Madagascar, to explain the normalisation of this type of relationship amongst young women, and the increasing involvement of young men. Frequently, transactional sex (TS) has become a policy issue because of the health consequences such as HIV infection (Decker et al., 2015; Jewkes, Morrell, Sikweyiya, Dunkle, & Penn-Kekana, 2012; Stoebenau et al., 2011). This health focused approach has led to the creation of some significant programmes and activities targeting TS and sex work in Madagascar as elsewhere in Africa. However, we will argue that in Madagascar whilst there are various programmes targeting organised and identified “commercial” sex workers, the generalisation of TS relationships amongst young people, which provides a serious challenge, not only to health, but to the rights and well-being of those involved, has not been sufficiently considered in national or international policies or programmes. This is often due to the difficulties and complexities of identifying and understanding the phenomenon of TS, and

subsequent under-estimations of the prevalence and different forms of TS amongst young people.

Further, TS is sometimes portrayed as simply the outcome of economic necessity on the part of those involved, although some research has pointed to other and more complex determinants (Bene and Merten, 2008). Our research on TS aims to contribute to this body of research which complexifies the causes of TS through an analysis of the complexities of gendered economic, social and cultural systems and structures which lead to young people’s (and especially young women’s) involvement in TS. We will argue that although engagement in TS exposes young people to situations of vulnerability in terms of their sexual and reproductive health and rights, they should not be considered merely as “victims” of forced choices and that their agencies and strategies must be recognised. We conclude that Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) programmes and services for young people involved in TS, need to look beyond interventions targeting the most visible sex workers, and to address the structural drivers of TS which poses a real risk to young people’s health and well-being in Madagascar.

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## 2. Conceptualising transactional sex

The field of TS and commercial sex work has always been a contested one with debates over the definitions and meanings of TS (Formson and Hilhorst 2016; Mcmillan et al., 2018), the causes of TS practices, and of the best means of protecting the rights and of improving the health and welfare of those involved in various forms of sexual-economic exchange. These debates are not restricted to the African context but situated within globalised systems of sexual-economic exchanges (Ahmed, 2011; Richter, 2012). Indeed, feminist theorists such as Tabet have described a continuum of “sexual-economic exchange” (Tabet, 2004, 2012) ranging from sexual exchanges situated within marriage to paid sexual encounters with “professional” sex workers, all articulated within systems of gender inequalities and unequal access to and distribution of resources.

In some recent research and policy settings, particularly those revolving around HIV and SRH, a clear distinction has been established between commercial sex work and TS relationships. TS has thus been defined in recent scholarship on Africa, as non-commercial, and conceptually distinct from commercial sex work (Hunter, 2002; Dunkle et al., 2004; Jewkes et al., 2012). A recent and widely employed definition suggests that transactional sex should be defined as ‘a sexual relationship or act(s), outside of marriage or sex work, motivated primarily by the expectation of material gain, where love and trust are also sometimes present (involved/concerned/at play)’ (Stoebenau et al., 2016). Wamoyi et al. (2011, p. 8) argue that the difference lies in the fact that “women engaged in transactional sex will choose a lover, whereas women in prostitution will sell their bodies”. We found that this distinction was not so clear cut. Our empirical research carried with young women involved in TS relationships showed the continuum and fluidity of experiences of TS, and the difficulties of establishing categorical divisions between TS and commercial sex work. We will argue that in the Madagascan case, TS and commercial sex work might be seen as part of the same continuum of sexual-economic exchange which is shaped by social, political and economic structures of inequality and gendered hierarchies of power. These structures, we argue, are located within a globalised economy which transforms and, in some cases, exacerbates existing forms of gender inequality. As McMillan et al. (2018) have argued, the use of the term TS has sometimes been advocated in research and policy on various forms of paid for sex in order to avoid the stigma of the term “sex worker” and they argue this works to “bestow cultural legitimacy on some locally specific forms of paid sex” and to position these as part of local cultures rather than within economic structures. We argue that it is important not to reify local cultures and the forms of sexual-economic exchange which might occur within these, but to seek to understand how local cultures and economies interact with wider global economic structures as determinants of TS.

Previous research in Africa has highlighted the tensions which exist between understandings of TS as a form of “constraint” or “coercion”, and explanations which prefer to highlight women’s agency and strategic use of TS for various purposes (Swidler and Watkins, 2007). Much of this research has pointed to young women’s poverty, economic vulnerability and basic material need as the main determinant of TS practices (Wamoyi et al. 2010). But what Béné and Merten (2008, p.885) name these “miserabilist narratives”, have also been complemented and enriched by research which show other motivations for young women engaging in TS, such as increasing their life chances through education or accumulating business capital (Wamoyi et al., 2010), pursuit of a fashionable images and modern commodities (Masvawure, 2010; Zembe et al., 2013), or symbolic recognition of their worth

and value (Ranganathan et al., 2017). Our research results point to the complexities of reasons for young people engaging in TS, and reinforce these previous findings on the multiplicity and fluidity of reasons for engaging in TS, although we will argue that despite this complexity, there is a strong predominance of economic necessity as a cause of TS in the Madagascan context.

We hope that our findings contribute to this debate on structure versus agency in TS, and on the multiple determinants of TS practices, by providing a nuanced view of both the structural factors that “push” or constrain young people (and especially young women to engage in TS) and these young people’s strategies for engaging in TS to help to improve their opportunities, achieve goals etc. The structural constraints that push young people into TS include not only poverty, but also cultural and gender norms, family and community expectations. Wamoyi et al. (2011) note that some studies on TS tend to ignore or under-estimate the wider social context and role of the family in young people’s decisions and choices on engaging in TS. We hope to highlight the ways in which these familial and collective contexts interact with individual strategy and agency to inform decisions regarding TS. We argue that in terms of policies and programmes aimed at improving SRH of young people involved in TS, it is important to recognise these constraints but also the young people’s agency, and to gain a greater understanding of what has been described as a system of “asymmetrical interdependence” (Swidler and Watkins, 2007). Ties of dependence and inequality found in our research also echo the findings of Matsue et al. (2014) and other researchers who have described women’s disempowered negotiations of transactional sex in fishing industries in Africa (Merten and Haller, 2007; Bene and Merten, 2008; MacPherson et al., 2012). These relations of unequal dependency have been shown to have a negative impact on young women’s abilities to negotiate safe sexual behaviours in all types of relationships (Maganja et al., 2007), and thus to put their SRH at risk.

A more detailed and comprehensive understanding of how and why young people engage in TS, and of what it means for them, is necessary to provide them with better services and programmes to improve their health and well-being. Our research highlights the interaction of various social determinants of TS and we argue, points to the need to take into account all forms of sexual-economic exchange including the less visible forms of TS which are becoming more and more frequent in Madagascar, and to plan policy responses which target the very large numbers of young women who are engaged in TS, and who may become vulnerable through this.

### 2.1. The Madagascan context

The economic and political situation in Madagascar, marked by political instability and crisis and widespread poverty, provides a structural context which has generally negative impacts on the health and well-being of the population and may be seen to particularly impact on young people. The country has undergone a series of political crises since independence, and these political crises have led to a massive fall in public investment and for a time to a suspension of foreign aid. The country is also beset by widespread corruption and ranks 152 out of 180 countries in Transparency International’s corruption index (Transparency International, 2019). Public services, including health and education, lack resources and are often reliant on external donors for funding for essential services. Poverty affects a significant proportion of the population and is particularly marked in rural areas of Madagascar where 78% of the population live. According to World Bank estimates, levels of poverty in rural areas are twice those in urban areas (World Bank, 2015). Recent estimates indicate that 90% of the population live on less than \$2 per day (Burke et al.,

2017), and that extreme poverty impacts 56.5% of the population (IMF, 2017). The context of poverty creates specific risks and vulnerabilities for young people, who constitute a majority of the Madagascan population. The impact of economic determinants of health is evident for example in rates of adolescent pregnancy which are four times higher for girls in the poorest quintile of the population than for those in the richest quintile (INSTAT, 2014).

Madagascar's annual per capita spending on health (14\$) is one of the lowest in the world (Bonds et al., 2018). Health services in Madagascar suffer from a lack of resources, and limited capacities. Public health centres provide many services, including sexual and reproductive health services, but for much of the population access to these services remains limited. A major barrier is the cost of health services, although the Government is attempting to increase health coverage by instituting an insurance-based service to reduce or remove point of service charges (Garchitorena et al., 2017). However, even where charges are removed or reduced many people still do not access health services because they live too far away from the nearest health centre – most of the population lives more than 5 km from the nearest health facility and travel distances of over 10 km to the nearest health facility are not uncommon (Marks et al., 2016).

Recent statistics suggest that 46% of the Madagascan population are under the age of 25 years old (UNFPA, 2014). These young people face problems of poverty and of unemployment, as a World Bank Report states, poverty in Madagascar has a 'predominantly young face' (World Bank, 2014). Young people aged 15–24 face immense difficulties in entering the labour market, and 75% of the unemployed in the country are under 30 years old (ILO, 2014). Lack of formal employment means that many young people are pushed into informal sectors, principally in agriculture (ILO, 2014) but also in small business, domestic work or sex work. The latest figures suggest that 69% of young people are involved in informal employment and 55% in domestic employment (mainly young women) (ILO, 2017). A qualitative study carried out by PSI which explored the reasons that young women become involved in sex work, found that the vast majority of the women interviewed engaged in sex work to be able to buy basic necessities for themselves or their families. Many also had other forms of employment, but these were not by themselves sufficient for economic survival (PSI, 2017).

Previous research has shown that commercial sex work is widespread across Madagascar. The National Strategic Plan against HIV estimated a total of around 63,000 sex workers in the country (CNLS, 2013) but this figure includes only those sex workers who are working in bars, nightclubs, hotels etc and does not take account of sex workers in other venues, or of the wider forms of TS which remain invisible in public spaces. A more recent study noted a large increase in the number of sex workers between 2012 and 2016, probably due to the worsening economic situation in the country (CNLS, 2017). Many of these sex workers are young. The majority of young sex workers (15–24 years old) had their first sexual relations before the age of 18, and 45% of them had their first sexual relations before the age of 15. In the city of Toamasina, 71% of young sex workers surveyed had their first sexual relationship before the age of 15 (CNLS, 2017). HIV prevalence rates are estimated at 5.6% for sex workers, with rates of 4.9% for those aged 15–19 and 6.4% in the 20–24 age group (CNLS, 2017). Sex workers surveyed were also revealed to have high levels of syphilis and other STIs (CNLS, 2017) which confirms previous research in Antananarivo linking sex work to high levels of STIs (Harijaona et al., 2009).

Sex tourism has also been noted as a growing problem in Madagascar and affects mainly girls and young women, although boys and young men are also being affected in greater numbers in recent years (ECPAT, 2014). There is a national legal framework

in place which criminalises sex tourism and the sexual exploitation of children, but these laws are extremely rarely applied. In fact, there seems to be a de facto acceptance by political leaders and by the population more generally that with the economic crisis ongoing in the country, transactional sex is a necessity for the survival of many people (Blanchon, 2015). Further, successive Madagascan governments have promoted tourism as one of the major potential sources of economic development for the country (Dewailly, 2008). There is little research on sexual tourism especially amongst children under the age of 18, because of the highly sensitive nature of the issue and of the ethical complexities of carrying out research with children under 18 years of age. But one study found that children get involved in sex tourism at an average age of 13 and that this is usually their first sexual experience. Further, the research found that parents are often aware of and may encourage children's sex work (Rakatomamonjy, 2015). The increasing presence of sex tourism in Madagascar again encourages us to interrogate the spatialized, racialised and gendered relations of power which underlie continuum of sexual-economic exchange in the country.

### 3. Methodology

The article is based on qualitative research carried out in four regions of Madagascar in 2018 and 2019, including focus group discussions (n = 32), semi-structured interviews (n = 460) and in-depth interviews (n = 38) with young people aged 15–24. The use of qualitative research was privileged to get a deeper insight into the determinants of TS relationships, and young people's understandings and interpretations of these. We wanted to explore the range of ways in which young people engage in TS, and the ways that they feel about these practices and meanings they attach to it. Following an initial baseline review of existing data and academic and grey literature on TS/sex work in Madagascar, the research team carried out stakeholder interviews with representatives of relevant government ministries (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Youth and Sport, Ministry of Education), international organisations (UNDP, UNAIDS, UNFPA) and international and national NGOs in order to gain understanding of what these organisations understood of the situation regarding TS in the country, and what if any programmes/policies were in place to address this issue.

The team then undertook empirical data collection with young people (women and men aged 15–24) in four regions of the country. The regions chosen, namely, Antsiranana, Antananarivo, Toliara, Toamasina were selected by the research team in consultation with local experts, for their varying socio-economic, cultural and political situations. Data collection in each of the four regions was carried out in both urban centres and in rural areas to ensure that the data collected was not biased towards an urban or rural population. The locations for data collection were also selected to provide a variety of socio-economic categories (including wealthier areas and the poorer "quartiers bas", and enrolling young people at schools and universities, and out of school youth). We carried out a total of 32 focus group discussions, 8 in each region, with young people of between 15 and 24 years of age (four in rural and four in urban areas per region). Half of the FGDs were organised in single sex, and half in mixed sex groups, and there were 8 to 12 participants per group. These FGDs were organised both with young people currently in secondary or higher education in a range of educational institutions, and with out of school youth in order to gather a range of opinions and experiences from young people in differing socio-economic situations. The purpose of the FGDs was to explore these young people's knowledge, attitudes and experiences with regard to sexual relationships and behaviours, sexual

and reproductive health and rights. Although this is a sensitive subject, the atmosphere in the groups, which were led by young researchers of the same age group, allowed participants to share opinions, and in some cases experience of TS, freely. Young people were recruited for FGDs after obtaining the permission of either the school or university heads, or with the local leaders (*chef fokotany*) in the case of FGDs carried out with out of school young people.

In addition, around one hundred and fifteen semi-structured interviews, and ten in-depth narrative interviews were conducted in each region, divided equally between urban and rural areas. 460 semi-structured interviews were carried out in total, 230 in urban and 230 in rural areas. 324 of these interviews were with young women and 136 with young men. We chose to interview a majority of young women because previous research had pointed to the higher frequency of TS relationships amongst young women. Recruitment for the semi-structured interviews was carried out in the same way as for the FGDs, and participants were selected in a variety of locations and social situations in order to gain data from a range of socio-economic and cultural situations. These interviews aimed to gather further in-depth information on the personal experiences and understandings of the young people with respect to TS. A selection of young people who had talked about their involvement in TS either in FGDs or in semi-structured interviews were then asked to take part in in-depth interviews where we sought to probe more deeply their experiences of TS and the meanings and interpretations that they attached to these practices.

FGDs and interviews were conducted by a research team led by the authors and including professors and post-graduate students from the Department of Sociology at the University of Antananarivo. The focus group discussions were generally led by post-graduate students who were closer in age to the participants, and who were selected from the same regions of origin as participants so that they understood the local linguistic expressions and cultural references. All members of the team followed a comprehensive training in qualitative research methods provided by the project leaders in order to ensure full understanding of the project and the methods used for data collection and thus to guarantee the uniformity of data collection methods. FGDs and interviews were carried out in Malagasy, and subsequent transcripts were translated into French for analysis by local researchers and the principal investigator (the translations into English for this article were undertaken by the first author). Coding and analysis were carried out jointly by the three authors supervised by the PI.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Comité d'éthique de la recherche biomédicale, Ministère de la santé publique, Madagascar. Each participant in the FGDs and interviews gave full written consent after having been informed of the purpose and the content of the research.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Prevalence of transactional sex

In all four regions where research was carried out, we found evidence of the frequency and widespread nature of transactional sexual relationships amongst young women. Data from the semi-structured interviews showed that 33% of young women interviewed in Antananarivo, 46.4% in Antsiranana, 50.7% in Toliara and 57.4% in Toamasina regions, said that they had regularly received money or gifts in exchange for sexual relationships (see [Table 1](#) below for details). The particularly high rates in Toamasina might be explained due to the geographic and economic situation of the region. Toamasina is Madagascar's major port city, where large commercial and fishing vessels from a variety of origins reg-

**Table 1**  
% of young women interviewed engaging in transactional sexual relationships.

Region	Urban	Rural
Antsiranana	31.0%	63.0%
Antananarivo	33.3%	25.7%
Toliara	36.7%	62.2%
Toamasina	54.8%	60.9%

ularly dock implying an influx of foreign sailors and crew. Further, one of the world's largest nickel mines has been constructed nearby at Ambatovy, creating another influx of foreign workers, as well as attracting internal migration from other regions in Madagascar to find work in the mine. When discussing the situation of Toamasina, informants regularly invoked the practice of "ambassad" (a shortened form of "ambassadeurs" or ambassadors) whereby young women who are employed during the week as domestic workers would come in groups to the beach on their days off on Sundays to look for partners for TS. This practice was not identified as sex work either by the young women who said that they participated in this, who described it as a way to pass their days off by looking for boyfriends. One young woman who participated in the ambassad, explained, for example, that: "I benefit from my days off to go to the beach and find boyfriends. I meet them and then they buy me a drink and we talk, and then we might meet up a few times" (Interview, Toamasina). She explained that she would expect these boyfriends to provide money in exchange for sexual relationships.

In Antsiranana, Toliara and Toamasina rates of TS were higher in rural than in urban areas (see [Table 1](#)) which can be attributed to rural poverty and to the more severe lack of employment opportunities for young women in these areas. In Antananarivo region, rates of TS were higher in urban areas, reflecting the existence of highly deprived areas within the city, often populated by migrants from other regions of the country who have come to the capital to try and find work.

During the focus group discussions, the frequency and normality of TS relationships were widely acknowledged. When the question of TS was raised by the moderator, participants were unsurprised by the question and often remarked that "nearly all girls do it" (FGD, Antananarivo region). Both the interviews and FGDs thus pointed to a very high prevalence of TS and an acceptance that this was part of normality and everyday life for young people, and especially young women who had to engage in transactional sexual practices primarily for economic reasons.

### 4.2. The primacy of economic determinants

Our research found that the primary reason that young women engage in TS was severe economic deprivation and necessity. Young women explained that they engaged in TS relationships because of economic necessity, needing money to support themselves and to buy food, pay for housing, healthcare or education, or to contribute to their family's budget. Whilst some studies have pointed to a need to understand TS as a route for young women to engage in forms of globalized "consumerism" such as the purchase of fashionable clothes, make-up, jewellery etc ([Leclerc-Madlala, 2003](#); [Stoebenau et al., 2011](#); [Groes-Green, 2013](#)), our studies showed that TS was predominantly an economic necessity for many of these women to ensure their survival and that of their families (parents, children or siblings).

As one young woman explained: "Girls do it because of poverty! There are men that you don't like, but you have to go with them" (FGD, Antsiranana region).

And another made the same point: "We don't do it (TS) because we want to! We need money because our parents can't provide for

us, so we have no other choice. And sometimes when girls get pregnant they have to look after their own children because the father of the child won't do it. So then they need the money even more." (FGD, Toliara region).

In some cases, a specific incident or economic shock such as illness and need for medical treatment triggered this economic need. As one interviewee explained: "When my mother got ill, we didn't have enough money to pay for medical treatment for her. So a friend of my mother's took me to Tsaralalana. It's there that you can get the most money (for sex)." (Interview, Antananarivo region).

And another participant even explained that her sister had resorted to TS to pay for an abortion when she found herself pregnant by her teacher, who had refused to acknowledge that he was the father, and had refused to give her money for an abortion (Interview, Antsiranana Region).

TS relationships were common not only amongst the out of school young women who might be expected to be the most economically deprived, but also amongst girls and young women who were still studying at high school or at university. For these young women, the ambition to finish education and to create a "better future" for themselves was advanced as a primary reason for engaging in TS, and they explained that they and their families did not have the money to support their continuing education, reflecting the impacts of severe and widespread poverty in Madagascar.

As one young woman recounted: "My first sexual relationship was when I was fifteen and it was more or less forced because I had to do it to have money to pay for my school studies. My parents don't have enough money to pay for that and I want to prepare for a better future" (Interview, Toliara region).

And another explained: "There are lots of girls whose parents can't pay for their studies but they really want to carry on studying. So, they go out with older men who can pay for their studies." (FGD, Toamasina region).

Girls who were still in school recounted that men would regularly bring their cars outside the school gates and hoot their horns when the girls came out of lessons, so that those who were interested in making money could get into the cars with them: "They hoot and call tss, tss, and the girls who are interested approach them" (FGD, Antananarivo region).

Economic necessity was an evident driver of TS relationships even when young women also expressed feelings of "love" for a more long-term boyfriend or sexual partner. Young women interviewed who were involved in "steady" or long-term TS relationships with one partner explained that although they loved their boyfriends they would separate from them if they stopped giving them money for sexual relationships, because as one young woman explained, "we really need money, not love" (Interview, Toliara region). Several of those with long-term boyfriends/partners also said that they engaged in occasional TS relationships with other men: "I use my days off to go out with those men. I meet them where I work. But it's only occasional" (Interview, Toamasina region).

Whilst they did not self-identify as sex workers, several participants talked about how young were using their bodies to earn money, and doing what they referred to as "body work". In several of the FGDs, participants tried to identify the difference between girls involved in TS and what they called "prostitutes" (the term sex worker, or "professionnelle de sexe", a term employed in formal policy and programming documents in Madagascar, was notably absent from all interviews and discussions). However, there was much disagreement and inability to agree on what the differences might be, supporting the argument for a need to remove this categorical distinction in both research and policy-making/programming and to move towards a more flexible understanding

of a continuum of sexual-economic exchange. The most common point that participants made to try and distinguish between TS and "prostitution", was the fact that in their views "prostitutes" would always find their clients in fixed geographical locations and would aggressively approach their clients and solicit for business (making the definition closer to that of programmes which have targeted "hot spots" to find sex workers), whereas young women involved in TS could meet partners in a variety of locations or settings and would take a more "passive" approach, waiting for the men to approach them.

As one FGD participant explained: "You can tell the difference because real prostitutes stay in the standard places for soliciting" (FGD, Toamasina region).

And another added: "We don't go and talk to men, we just walk on the beach or sit in a bar and have a drink and wait to see if anyone comes to talk to us" (FGD, Antsiranana region).

"Those girls (involved in TS) don't go to the places where prostitutes are to find men, they just look for partners who will give them money" (FGD, Toliara region).

This distinction based on geographical location of commercial sex workers, can be argued to reflect the dominant pattern of programme interventions for sex workers which target sex work "hotspots". The idea that there was a different location for young women to find partners for TS relationships, also contradicted the frequent remarks that these young women went to bars and clubs when they wanted to find a partner, or that they could even meet men in the street. The absence of any other forms of distinction between TS and commercial sex work from our respondents seems to support the argument that this distinction is very blurred and not very useful either for research or programming, and that these programmes should move beyond these identified "hot spots" when seeking to reach young women involved in any form of TS.

In addition to the primary motivation of earning money through TS relationships, there was one other category of TS which was mentioned frequently, especially amongst young people still in education, namely that of sexual relationships with teachers or professors in exchange for better marks, or for passing into the next level of study. As one young woman in school explained: "I don't think that transactional sex is only about money. It can also happen in exchange for good marks, especially for girls. For example, if a teacher is attracted to a student then she will be obliged to go out with him, and afterwards he'll give her good marks" (Interview, Toamasina region).

And a university student told us that: At university there are lecturers and professors who are known to blackmail female students who don't agree to have sex with them. They say that they will give them a very bad mark and stop them from getting their degree" (FGD participant, Antsiranana Region).

#### 4.3. Gendered norms of sexuality and relationships

The economic necessity of TS for young women is also rooted in and moderated by unequal gender norms which limit women's economic opportunities, and which prescribe particular roles for women and men within sexual relationships. Early marriages and demonstrating fertility to fulfil their roles as women are strong norms for women within Madagascan society, and often young women are pressured to prove their fertility before marriage (Binet et al., 2009). As a result, pre-marital sex and single parenthood are easily accepted (Ravalolomanga, 1992). The positive value attributed to heterosexual sexual relations within these traditional gender norms may push young women into early sexual relationships within which they have little power or choice. Our research suggested that young women generally have their first sexual

relationship at around 13 or 14 years, although it is not that rare for girls to start having sex at the age of ten.

Early entry into sexual relationships is the result of pressure from families and communities as one respondent explained: "In some regions of Madagascar there are customs which oblige young people to have sex very early. If you don't agree you will get thrown out of your village. But the men who you have sex with won't necessarily become your husband. Unless you fall pregnant that it is" (FGD, Antananarivo region). And this norm of early sexual relationships for girls even extended to the practice of some fathers taking their own daughter's virginity: "Often when a girl is growing up the father will say to himself why should it be up to other men to 'open the champagne'. That was the practice before and there are still a lot of fathers who carry on doing it" (Interview, Antananarivo region).

Whilst pressure to have sexual relationships might apply to both young men and women, the pressure to monetarise this, and to engage in TS relationships is gendered, with young women being far more concerned, according to many of those we spoke to: "It's the young women who are concerned by that, and incited to do it (TS)" (FGD, Toliara region)

The pressures to engage in TS for young women are reinforced by a gendered segregation of employment, which means that although unemployment is high amongst all young people as mentioned above, economic opportunities are even more limited for young women. This gendered segregation of labour is linked to norms concerning women's and men's physical capabilities and the suitability of certain jobs. As one young man explained: "It's girls who are much more involved with TS because boys find work much more easily as they have much more physical strength" (FGD, Antananarivo region).

Other FGD participants reinforced this point: "Most of the jobs where you can earn a bit of money, they always involve lifting heavy things. That's why young girls have to do TS" (FGD, Antananarivo region).

"Young people round here don't really have many opportunities to work. But us young men can do some building work" (FGD, Antsiranana region).

Boys and young men were portrayed by participants not only as physically stronger and thus more able to find work, but also as more resourceful ("débrouillard"): "Young boys here from very young know how to manage to find money. At ten years old they're already making charcoal to sell during their school holidays" (FGD, Antsiranana region).

Young men were thus seen to have greater economic opportunities outside of TS, but our research found that as well as a normalisation of TS relationships for young women, young men were also becoming increasingly involved in TS. However, the reasons given for engaging in TS and the social and cultural meanings attached to TS for young men are different from those for young women, echoing the entrenched gender norms discussed above. Whilst for young women TS was believed to be an economic necessity, young men talked about their TS relationships as a way of obtaining "luxury" items that they would not otherwise have been able to afford. Named "jombilos" ("gigolos"), they boasted about being given expensive shoes, watches, or in one instance, even a car, by the women with whom they were having TS relationships. FGD participants talked about the gendered differences in TS by arguing that for young women it was a necessity whilst for young men it was a choice: "The boys who do it (TS), do it from their own free will but the girls are often forced" (FGD, Antananarivo region).

#### 4.4. Family economies of TS

In addition to the broader structural determinants of TS, we need to take into account the more proximate determinants pro-

vided by family structures and peer networks which influence women's choices and decisions. Our research showed that much of the economy of TS was centred around the family, rather than around individual choices or strategies. This family involvement reflects a broader socio-cultural phenomenon of the involvement of family in organising and regulating sexual and marital relationships for their children, and particularly for daughters in Madagascar, and can be seen as a modern iteration of more traditional socio-cultural practices. Traditionally, families would choose partners for their daughters and would encourage them to marry and have children at an early age (Binet and Gastineau, 2008). There was often a bride price (money or cattle) involved in the arrangement of marriages (Mutti, 2014), and children – especially girls – had little or no choice of a partner. These traditional practices have evolved over time, but it appears from our research that parents still expect some kind of financial gain or compensation for bringing up a daughter. The involvement of the family also supports the idea that TS is not a practice which is widely stigmatised socially, a finding which contradicts the assertion sometimes made in research or policy that stigma might be a major barrier to adequate health care for those involved in TS.

Family involvement stems from a what seems to be a widely accepted idea that parents cannot be expected to materially support their daughters above the age of 14 or 15, and these girls should then earn their own upkeep, and frequently also contribute to the subsistence of the rest of the family. In some cases, we were told, family are directly responsible for finding and arranging sexual transactions for their daughters. Participants in all focus group discussions talked about examples when an older man would offer to build a house or pay a monthly fee to a family in exchange for sexual relations with their daughter.

One FGD participant explained for example: "There are lots of parents who don't have any money, but they have several children. The more or less older girls are encouraged to go out with rich men to help support the younger children and all of the family. There is a lot of pressure on them, and they don't really have a choice because the parents tell them that these men will give them zébus (cattle) or will build them a house. So, the girls end up agreeing to go out with these men to stop all the pressure" (FGD, Toamasina region).

Or as another recounted: "There are lots of married men who go out with young girls. There are even cases of men 'reserving' girls for themselves when these girls are still very young. They tell the girl's parents that they will pay them lots of money to help support the girl as long as it is they who get to take the girl's virginity! So, the parents are really careful to make sure that their daughter stays a virgin until then, if not they will have to reimburse all the money that the man has paid them. And as soon as the girl has her first period, at around twelve years old, they tell her to go out with the man in question". (FGD, Antsiranana region)

Some respondents described this clearly as parents "selling" their daughters: "They only think of getting money and don't hesitate to 'sell' their daughter" (FGD, Toamasina region).

And others explained that baby girls were welcomed in families as they were seen as a future way of making money: "As soon as girls come into the world, people say 'oh the family has had a prostitute!' because they know that a man will buy that girl from her parents or from her brother before she leaves the family house. So, you can say that girls are condemned to this from birth" (FGD, Toamasina region).

And "selling" daughters is not only a metaphor, as in some regions "women's markets" still exist. "Parents take their daughters to the markets to find partners for them. It's really a tradition for the Bara in the South. It's even an honour for those parents. It's an honour for them to have sold their daughter to a man" (FGD, Antananarivo region)

Whilst some participants did not question the role of families or the continuation of these traditions, others remarked on the way that the modern economy had transformed what had been seen as harmless or beneficial traditions into a more negative phenomenon: "This custom of giving money used to be considered as a way of compensating parents for having looked after a daughter until she grew up. But now, that custom has been corrupted and it's just become another way of earning money" (FGD, Toamasina region). And whilst for many this type of TS was a normal part of Malgache culture, some did recognize it as a form of violence against women: "For me, sexual violence is not just rape, it can also be when parents force their daughters to go out with a rich man against their will" (FGD, Toliara region).

Families are not always directly involved in bringing their daughters into relation with paying sexual partners, but even more frequently, will encourage their daughters to engage in these transactional relationships by explaining that they can no longer support them financially, and that these daughters should thus seek to earn money for themselves. There was a general agreement amongst participants in FGDs and interview respondents that there is an expectation for girls to support themselves financially and to contribute to the household economy from the age of fourteen or fifteen. One young woman explained: "My parents know what I'm doing and how I earn money. I give them some of the money to buy food for the family. My older sister also gets money from her boyfriends for the family" (Interview, Antsiranana Region).

If parents do not explicitly push their daughters into TS, then it is clear that in the large majority of families they are aware of how the girls are earning money, and may provide advice as to how they can do this safely, and how to get the most money from their sexual partners. Families were described as being particularly keen for their daughters to have relationships with foreign men or "vahaza" who were all perceived as being very rich. This favourable response by families and encouragement of their daughters' TS relationships echoes findings by Wamoyi et al. (2011) in Tanzania who report that parents were generally in favour of the practice of TS because of what they saw as the increasing commodification of sexual relationships and the increase in the money supplied for TS compared to when they were younger. However, in contrast they found that parents in Tanzania felt that young women had gained power through their involvement in TS, whereas in Madagascar it was very much the parents who were still perceived as being in power and controlling their daughters' sexual relationships, and parents were also believed to be in control of the money that their daughters' earned in this way.

## 5. Peer pressure and networks

Peer networks were also highlighted as an important determinant of the prevalence of TS relationships, with peers providing pressure to push young people into their first TS relationship in line with the prevalent gender and sexual norms described above. Many of our respondents, both in FGDs and in interviews, pointed to the role of peers in both encouraging them to engage in transactional sex, and in arranging sexual relationships for them. Previous studies have noted the role of peer pressure and peer networks in pushing young women into relationships with "sugar daddies" (Van der Heijden and Swartz, 2014), but our findings show an even wider involvement of peers, who may encourage young women to start sexual relationships and facilitate meeting and negotiating of payment or recompense for these relationships. The fact that their friends are involved in the same kind of TS as them seems to act as a support mechanism for these girls and women who find that peers are a source of information and help in setting up their relationships. As one young woman explained: "For my first boyfriend,

it was my friends who encouraged me to have sex with him. They told me to have sex with him because he had money. My friends were doing the same thing. They were having sex with boys to get money" (Interview, Toliara region).

## 6. Creating globalised "Chains of TS"

As argued above, the phenomenon of TS in Madagascar is not limited to the national context but inscribed in a globalised economy within which sexual relationships have become increasingly a monetarised good for exchange, and where the relative poverty of Madagascar and thus the low cost of TS for foreigners creates a strong "market" for TS. This is evident in the growth of sexual tourism in Madagascar, and in the pursuit of relationships with foreigners which was evident from our research. The foreign men who they hoped to meet came from a range of countries including France, Italy and other European countries, as well as South Africa and the United States and were generally on holiday, rather than living/working in Madagascar.

The family pressures on girls to earn money through TS have been modified by the modern economy as described above, and this modern economy privileges relationships with foreigners who are perceived as (and generally are) far richer than Madagascar men. Whilst some work on sex tourism has described the ways in which these "sexual-affective" economies can offer "escapism, a glimpse of another world, cultural exchange" (Daigle, 2019: 20), none of the interviewees or FGD participants mentioned anything other than a strictly economic motivation for or gain from these kind of TS relationships. As one young woman explained:

"Lots of parents incite their daughters to find a "vahaza" (foreign) partner to get more money. It's really become part of the mentality of this country" (FGD, Toamasina region).

"It's really become an obsession for some families that their daughter should go out with a "vahaza" to help them get out of poverty. It's not a bad intention from the family that they do that, it's above all an economic problem" (FGD, Antsiranana region).

"Transactional sex is really frequent here! As soon as you're in a touristy region, for example there's the ocean here, well then TS is really frequent and present. As soon as there are foreigners. Here in Tulear you see them with young girls who are 15 years old at most. You even see young girls of 13. There's a common phrase around here which says 'May God bless my daughter and let her marry a vahaza!' (FGD, Toliara region).

The young women who went out looking for foreign partners did not in any of the interviews describe what they were doing as sex work or prostitution. They described how they were looking for foreign "boyfriends" and would go to places where they knew these men would be to meet them and hope to talk to them and eventually get into a TS relationship. One female student explains for example how she met a foreign "boyfriend" on holiday:

"Once I went on holiday to Nosy Be Hellville and in the evenings lots of young people went out to the beach and there were a lot of tourists. I went out with a foreign man and we had sex twice. The first time he gave me 60 000 Ariary (approx 15\$) and the second time 40 000 ariary. And just before he left, he gave me a mobile phone. I really didn't think of going out with him for money, but because I always wanted to marry a foreigner" (Interview, Antananarivo).

One of the emerging features of TS which we noted from our research, was the creation of economic "chains" of TS relationships (which might be compared to global care chains described by sociologists) forming part of a wider globalised economy of TS. These "chains" were a particular feature of the increasing recruitment of young men into TS. FGD participants explained that young men were often recruited for TS by older Madagascan women with

a large disposable income. These women, they noted, gained their money through TS relationships with foreign men. When these foreign boyfriends were away, they would use some of this money to give directly to young Madagascan men, or to buy them expensive presents to reward them for sex. There was much hilarity in some of the FGDs as they discussed the “ideal” type of young man who would be in favour with these older women. And one of the FGD participants revealed that he was currently involved in a TS relationship with one of his mother’s friends who had become rich through her involvement with a foreign boyfriend. The mother had facilitated the relationship between her friend and her son, and both received regular presents and large sums of money from this older woman. He explained: “When boys like me go out with sugar mummies (mama saosy) we get clothes, a 4x4 car, and lots of money, in millions” (FGD, Toliara region).

Another FGD participant added: “Here in Tulear, there are lots of young men who go out with “sugar mummies” (“mama saosy”) who are the wives or girlfriends of foreigners. They have lots of money and want a young, good-looking malgache man” (FGD, Toliara region).

This global economy of TS also involves young Madagascan men being involved in TS relationships with foreign men. We have argued that gendered structures of inequality give different meanings to TS for young women and men, but inscribing the understanding of TS in a globalised economy shows how global structures of economic inequality may also shape the choices and strategies of young Madagascan men with regard to their engaging in TS and their choice of partners. Many of our participants pointed to the growing frequency of this phenomenon and the increasing enthusiasm of young men for engaging in such relationships because of the various types of material gains involved. It was also remarked by many that young men could earn significantly more than young women through TS relationships with foreigners, demonstrating how global economic systems also reinforce national structures of gender inequality. One FGD participant told us for example, “They get lots of money, up to a million ariary, when they go out with foreigners. Much more than girls” (FGD, Antsiranana). Young women reported getting around 20,000 to 40,000 Ariary for a sexual relationship which is a much lower sum than that reported by these young men.

Some believed that it was even the case that homosexuality was being “spread” in Madagascar because of the presence of foreign men with money: “I think it’s foreigners that are bring this phenomenon. They give lots of money to their partners, and that’s one of the reasons that homosexuality is spreading” (FGD, Toamasina region).

Homosexual relationships are not criminalised in Madagascar, and although there is certainly still stigma and discrimination attached to homosexuality in the country (Reddy and Sandfort, 2015), it appeared from our research that a growing tolerance might be attached to economic benefits of such TS relationships, and that men who became rich through these relationships could be more easily accepted by their community because of their economic contribution. As one participant explained: “In our village, there is a transvestite, he likes dressing up as a woman. People thought he was abnormal and a bit mad. But now he’s married to a very rich foreigner and he’s not discriminated” (FGD, Toamasina region). Similar stories were told by several other participants. One recounted a gay “marriage” in his community: “There were two homosexuals who got married here. One was malgache and the other was a rich foreigner. They did a kind of ceremony where they invited the family and all the community and friends. They had a huge party. And people didn’t say anything against it. They decided that it was good to bring money to the village. And that it was their choice” (FGD, Antsiranana region).

## 7. Conclusions

Our research points to the growing prevalence and also acceptance of TS relationships in Madagascar. As well as becoming a normalised form of sexual relationship for young women, more and more young men are also becoming involved in TS. For Madagascan young women in particular, engaging in TS is a choice which is constrained by structures of poverty and wider gender inequality, with gendered norms and structures attributing different meanings to TS for women and men. Arguing that TS is a constrained choice does not mean that we deny the agency of the young women involved in TS or the ways in which this might bring them economic benefits and be used as a strategy for a long-term life-plan – as shown for example by the many young women who told us that they were involved in TS relationships to pay for their education –, but merely that we wish to acknowledge that structures of poverty, economic inequality and strongly entrenched gender norms restrict the options available to them with regard to whether or not to engage in TS. We can therefore acknowledge at the same time the agency of these women and their victimisation and vulnerabilities (Mgbako and Smith, 2011), and add to the understanding of “asymmetrical interdependence” (Swidler and Watkins, 2007).

Our research has shown that whilst it would be reductionist merely to reproduce “miserabilist narratives” (Béné and Merten, 2008) of transactional sex, it is important to recognise that the highly unequal structures within which TS is situated, can further be argued to perpetuate and reproduce various forms of violence both through the modification of traditions and customs, and within newer forms of TS relationships such as those with foreign men. As previous research has showed (Wamoyi et al., 2010; Zembe et al., 2013; Ranganathan et al., 2017) there are multiple reasons for engaging in TS, and these reasons may all contribute separately or in combination to one individual’s decisions to engage in TS. Whilst our research pointed to the primacy of economic determinants of TS, it also underlined the need not to ignore gendered norms around sexual relationships, and the role of family expectations (Wamoyi et al., 2011) concerning young people’s sexual behaviour and economic status. Our research underlines this complexity and we argue that a better understanding of these situations would be useful for planning better policies to help improve their health and well-being. Understanding young women’s disempowered negotiating status in TS relationships (Merten and Haller, 2007; MacPherson et al., 2012) could lead to planning of policies or programmes to reinforce young women’s status both in economic terms, and through initiating discussions and transformations in sexual and gender norms.

The fact that TS and sex work have been primarily considered in HIV/AIDS focused policies in Madagascar (as elsewhere) has meant that existing policies which target so-called “key populations” for sexual and reproductive health (SRH) interventions, focus in general on what they identify as commercial sex workers, and so the situation of these many young people engaging in TS, and their vulnerabilities and risks have often been overlooked. We have sought to deconstruct this distinction between commercial sex work and other forms of TS, arguing that they all form part of a continuum of sexual-economic exchange which cannot be analysed in its separate parts. Considering the wider determinants of TS as a continuum allows us to understand all of the various structural and proximate factors which constrain young women’s sexual choices and which lead them to engage in TS relationships and also the vulnerabilities and risks which result and which should be considered in terms policy responses to improve the health and well-being of these young people. Planning broader programmes which consider TS in the wide context of young people’s sexual and reproductive health and rights might be a step in this direction.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Jane Freedman:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Mina Rakotoarindrasata:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Jean de Dieu Randrianasolorivo:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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