

# The Materiality of Everyday Sex: thinking beyond 'prostitution'

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"My father, even *he*, is a sugar daddy," said Bongani glancing towards my surprised face.

"He tells you this?" I asked.

"Yes, we are both men."

During the six months that I had stayed at Isithebe Informal Settlement, many people had told me about "sugar daddies", although it was mostly from the perspective of youth and not the "sugar daddies" themselves. Soon after our conversation, however, the twenty-year-old Bongani arrived with notes from a discussion that he had held with his father. The man was happy to talk about "sugar daddies" for an American-based researcher, Bongani said. We read through the notes.

"Sugar daddies work at firms that pay a lot. The girls can never stay without *qomaing* (choosing a lover) them, because if they don't *qoma* they won't get things like money, cell-phones and clothes."

"Sugar daddies don't like their families to know, but they want their friends to know. They say that they are *isoka* (successful man with girls), they are successful."

"It is easier to get a girl in the township [than in the informal settlement]. There are laws *emakhaya* (in the rural areas, where the informal settlement is situated) not like in the location. In the township the children say whatever. No one knows where they go. They return at any time."

"And Township girls like fashion too much," Bongani added to his father's comments.

These "sugar daddy" relationships, as discussed by Bongani and his father, are an example of the widespread link between gifts and sex that this article examines. These type of relations fall outside of both local and Western definitions of "prostitution" — the usual focus of studies on the materiality of

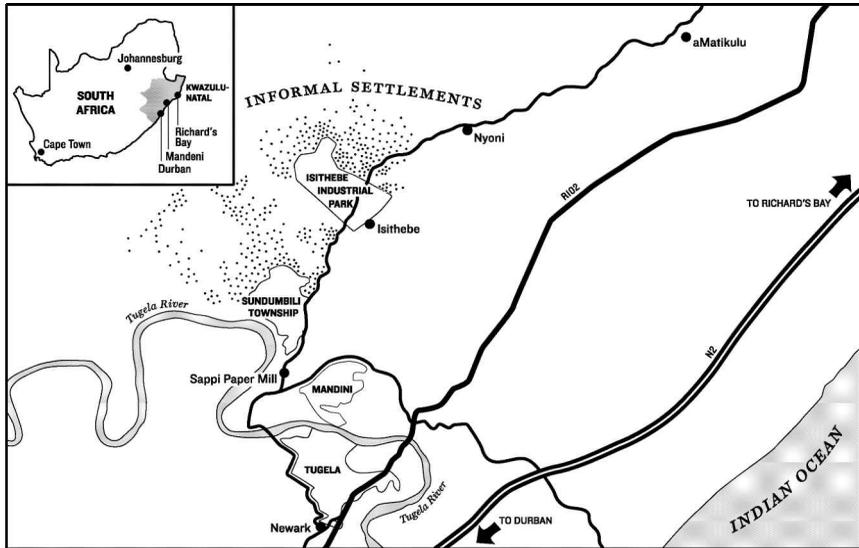
non-marital sex and a frequent explanatory factor for the rapid spread of AIDS. (See White (1990) and Truong (1990) for excellent materialist studies of “prostitution” in Kenya and Southeast Asia respectively. See Jochelson *et al.* (1991) for one of the first articles warning that prostitution linked to migrant labour could have devastating consequences for HIV infection in South Africa.) Indeed, while prostitution is one important factor driving HIV infection, it cannot explain the tremendous speed and persistence with which the virus has spread in South Africa. Prostitution may well have propelled HIV quickly through the major migrancy and transport routes in its early stages, but today — with an estimated 25 per cent of South Africans HIV positive — most people clearly acquire HIV from other types of relations.<sup>2</sup>

Seeking to move beyond prostitution, this article builds on research that highlights the vital role that gifts play in fuelling everyday sexual relations between men and women. (On the relationship between sex and gifts in Mali see Castle and Konate (1999), in KwaZulu-Natal see Stavrou and Kaufman (2000) and LeClerc-Madlala (2001), and more broadly in sub-Saharan Africa see Standing (1992). Standing (1992) also provides an excellent critique of the often inappropriate application of the concept of prostitution to the study of non-marital sexual relations in Africa.) Shocking patterns of HIV prevalence support such a link. One voluntary testing study in KwaZulu-Natal found that nearly three times as many fifteen to nineteen-year-old girls (43 per cent) were HIV positive than boys (17 per cent), and that while female prevalence rates peaked between twenty-five and twenty-nine years of age, male prevalence rates peaked ten years later. (Figures from the Department of Virology, University of Natal, and reported in Desmond 2000). Such figures must be seen in light of qualitative accounts describing the high occurrence of relations between young women and older, better off, men. The article considers this *materiality of everyday sex* through a historically rooted, place-based ethnography in one of the worse affected areas for HIV in the world. It draws from six months of preliminary fieldwork conducted in Mandeni, 100 km north of Durban whose biggest township, Sundumbili, was described in 1997 by *Drum* (1997) magazine as “Death City ... The AIDS capital of KwaZulu-Natal.”<sup>3</sup> From the 1970s, when Isithebe Industrial Park was built, Mandeni became a magnet for migrants from northern KwaZulu-Natal. Most of these migrants now live at either the informal settlements on former tribal land, of which the most densely populated areas are the ones that surround Isithebe Industrial park, or at Sundumbili Township, located a few kilometres south of the industrial park (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

This article’s central argument is that the close association between sex and gifts—resulting in what has been called “transactional sex”—is a central factor driving multiple-partnered sexual relationships, the principal cause of HIV infection in Mandeni. Transactional sex has a number of similarities to prostitution. In both cases, non-marital sexual relationships, often with multiple partners, are underscored by the giving of gifts or cash. Transactional sex, however, differs in important ways: participants are constructed as “girlfriends”

and “boyfriends” and not “prostitutes” and “clients”, and the exchange of gifts for sex is part of a broader set of obligations that might not involve a predetermined payment. The use of the concept “transactional sex” is intended neither to maintain inflexible distinctions between the categories of “prostitution”/“transactional sex”/“non-transactional sex” (indeed, sex, like all embodied practices, is always simultaneously material and meaningful in complex ways), nor to naturalize heterosexual sex, the principal focus of this article. Although with its own obvious limitations, the concept is nevertheless especially useful in informing AIDS policy interventions such as “education” campaigns that can often neglect underlying social relations such as those reflected and constituted by gifts. The article gives analytical priority to three factors that it argues come together to 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. These inequalities provide a material basis for transactional sex. A second factor is masculine discourses that place a high value on men having multiple sexual partners. Instead of seeing these masculinities as demonstrating some kind of innate African “promiscuity,” as some accounts on AIDS imply, this article argues that sexualities are unstable and are produced through men and women’s practical engagement with shifting economic, cultural and spatial conditions and relations. A final factor is the agency of women themselves. A central argument of this paper is 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.

To sharpen the focus of the study, and to try to disentangle the socio-spatial processes through which transactional sex operates, the article compares different forms of transactional sex in Isithebe Informal Settlement and Sundumbili Township, two localities only a few kilometres apart in Mandeni. In particular it notes how *sex linked to subsistence* is more prominent in the informal settlement while *sex linked to consumption* is more prominent in the township. It argues that this distinction — although not clear-cut — can be attributed to both the different structural positions of women and the varied social meanings associated with the two areas. On the former, the processes of industrialisation, de-industrialisation, and migration, discussed in the next section, created acute gendered inequalities, producing an extremely vulnerable group of low paid or unemployed female migrants, the majority of whom live in the informal settlements. The marginalisation of these women comes together with masculine discourses discussed in section three to fuel transactional sex, often for subsistence needs. In the township, different dynamics operate. Here, most of the large youth population is able to secure subsistence from its parents or guardians. In the urban spaces of the township, though, fashion is highly valued and young women invoke discourses of “rights” to justify their freedom of movement, thus facilitating relations with men that include sugar daddies. Typically it is gifts of cash, or consumption goods such as cellphones, that sustain these, as section four discusses.



**Figure 1.** Central Mandeni, showing the two areas of comparison, Isithebe Informal Settlement, surrounding the Industrial Park, and Sundumbili Township.

## 1. Historicising Material Inequalities: Rural Industrialisation

### a. Pre 1990: Sugar, Paper and Industrial Decentralisation

In the first half of the twentieth century, men from Mandeni, like those living in other parts of the sugar belt of the former Zululand: “went to the [sugar] farms as employers of the last resort” (Jeeves 1997:117). The mines of the Witwatersrand and employers in Durban offered considerably better pay and conditions. Women, however, with fewer options for migration, often found work locally as maids or weeders on the sugar plantations. The labour intensive sugar mills of Matikulu and Darnall generated the first *industrial* employment for men in the area. Even more significant, however, was the establishment of the SAPPi paper mill in Mandini in 1954, which greatly expanded employment opportunities in the area. Men became employed in the paper mill while women found work as maids in the company town of Mandini (still called today by local African people “*amakwarters*” — the quarters).<sup>5</sup>

Had it not been for the establishment in 1971 of Isithebe Industrial Park as an “industrial decentralisation” zone — part of the apartheid government’s strategy to reduce the migration of black people to large towns — the area would have retained only a small industrial workforce. Once the Industrial Park was opened, though, a classic gendered industrial division of labour ensued: women entered the clothing and textile factories while men were hired in the metal and other “male” sectors. During the 1970s the park grew steadily and by 1983 6,000 workers were employed in its factories. By 1990, employment levels had soared to around 23,000, with women making up around half of the workforce



Figure 2. 1981.



Figure 3. 1989.



Figure 4. 1999.

Isithebe Industrial Park and Informal Settlement. Between 1989 and 1999, in particular, the informal settlement surrounding the park grew tremendously, despite the shedding of thousands of jobs.

(Community Services Physical Planning Directorate (CSPPD) 1992).<sup>6</sup> This impressive growth, and the park's diverse spread of industries, made Isithebe the most successful of all of South Africa's forty industrial decentralisation points.<sup>7</sup>

Industrial growth, then, went hand in hand with growing gendered social divisions in Mandeni. But the sphere of reproduction — particularly the chronic shortage of housing — created further important social divides. Built in 1964, Sundumbili Township was never able to provide sufficient accommodation for Mandeni's rapidly growing industrial workforce. As a result, informal settlements grew quickly on tribal land surrounding the industrial park. People staying at the informal settlements were not squatters — this would never have been allowed by the Chief, *izinduna* (chiefs assistants) or *izakamizi* (the "locals" or "original" families) — but were subject to market forces that rapidly pushed up the cost of housing. Migrants secured accommodation in two ways. First, for those with a reliable income, land could be bought from *izakamizi* and a house built on this plot. Second, for those who were less well off, *imijondolo* (single roomed dwellings) could be rented. The building of *imijondolo* by *izakamizi* and other entrepreneurs, including relatively prosperous township people and others from outside the area, soon developed into a lucrative business for those with the means to take advantage of these opportunities. This housing market, however, together with industrial growth described earlier, created extensive new inequalities in the area. As long ago as the early 1980s, Ardington (1983) noted that inequalities were large within Sundumbili and Isithebe compared to those within surrounding areas. These inequalities produced a class of landlords, a class of residents with access to a small plot of land, and, crucially, a class that owned nothing — the last group to be greatly expanded in the 1990s.

## **b. Post-1990: Continued labour migration and industrial decline**

In the early 1990s, while ANC/IFP political violence wreaked havoc in the township and informal settlements, industrial restructuring steadily eroded employment in the industrial park.<sup>8</sup> A number of factors drove this: the slow growth of the South African economy, the phasing out of incentives for decentralised areas, and the rapid unionisation of the 1980s. By the time the ANC government took power in 1994 the park was already in a state of decline. In the post-apartheid period, trade liberalisation, which followed the government's embrace of free-market principles, dramatically accelerated this restructuring. Unable to compete with foreign competition, many of the South African owned clothing firms — the mainstay of womens' employment in the 1980s — closed or relocated. Women became increasingly dependent on the growing number of Taiwanese-owned clothing and textile firms that had begun to invest in the industrial park during the 1980s and were better linked to global markets. Today, workers in these (now rarely unionised) firms can earn as little as R65 per week (less than a dollar and a half a day), although salaries are more typically R100.

Retrenchments had disastrous consequences for women. Compensation was frequently extremely small, giving laid-off women only a tiny amount of capital with which to start informal enterprises. Economic restructuring had a more uneven effect on men. Hit particularly hard by the withdrawal of "decentralisation" subsidies, metal firms shed a substantial number of jobs, probably a higher number those in "women's" sectors. Nevertheless, for men lucky enough to remain employed, pay remained stable and the plants solidly unionised. Today, men can still earn R1,000 per week working at either the SAPPI paper mill or several large metal firms — more than ten times the earnings of many women. Moreover, retrenched men often secure comparatively large packages that can be used to kick-start spazas (small informal shops) or other micro-businesses.

Aside from industrial restructuring, two further factors have accentuated gender inequalities in the Mandeni area. The first is the continued rapid in-migration, despite an erosion of jobs and working conditions. Aerial photos of Isithebe informal settlement suggest a tremendous increase in its population during the 1990s (see figures 2, 3 & 4). Migrants still continue to tread the same paths from Northern KwaZulu-Natal that their relatives and friends have taken for the last three decades, although this time there is a crucial difference — there is often no work at the end of the road. Consequently, every weekday, hundreds of unemployed people move from factory to factory to *fesa* (seek work). Some have done so for more than two years without finding employment. The second factor is that rent and land prices have continued to rise. In the informal settlement the typical rent for an *umjondolo* is R20–R80 per month while in Sundumbili, a single room can cost up to R150 per month.<sup>9</sup> What's more, unlike in the boom period, when a reasonably secure income was attainable, new arrivals are usually unable to buy their own plot of land, especially at the current inflated prices.

Facing these harsh economic conditions, some unemployed men use odd jobs such as building or repairing *imijondolo*, or even crime, to scrape a living. For women, as this paper argues, the sexual economy has become an important source of survival.

## 2. Masculinity and Money in Mandeni

Gendered material inequalities, highlighted in the previous section, are not enough on their own to explain “transactional sex”. This section discusses how economic processes come together with masculinities to fuel transactions linked to sex. Robert Connell (1995:84) defines masculinity as “a configuration of practice within a system of gender relations”. Rooting masculinities in changing material practices, as Connell does, contrasts sharply with the approach of some AIDS scholars who see practices such as transactional sex as part of a longstanding “distinct and internally coherent African system of sexuality” (Caldwell *et al.* 1989:187). While helpful in highlighting how the link between sex and gifts is not new, this work can at times suggest that culture has its own inertia outside of the material world and, in doing so, downplay the processes through which meanings and practices are produced and contested. More materialist accounts show how Christianity, colonialism, urbanisation and migration have reshaped masculinities and sexual practices in fundamental ways in Southern Africa. (For a general overview of the literature on masculinities in Southern Africa see Morrell 1998, 2001. Accounts of changing masculinities and sexual practices are also discussed within the following themes: migrant labour and mine employment, see Moodie 1994 and Harries 1994; generational conflict at the turn of the twentieth century, see Carton 2000; the gendered process of homeland construction in the 1940s and 1950s, see Mager 1999; urbanisation in the Eastern Cape in the 1950s, see Mayer 1971; the ANC/IFP political violence of the 1980s and 1990s, see Campbell 1992; contemporary sexual violence in the Eastern Cape, see Wood & Jewkes 2000.) Linking material changes to masculine discourses, albeit in a somewhat exploratory fashion, this section focuses on an examination of the changing meanings of the word *isoka* — an important element in discourses on sexuality. Analysis is then extended into the broader relationship between masculinities and gendered practices, including transactional sex.

There are roughly two meanings to the word *isoka*: a woman’s boyfriend and a man who is successful with women. The second meaning of *isoka* forms part of a discourse that celebrates some aspects of manliness, but also sets certain limits on men’s actions. While a man who had more than one girlfriend could be celebrated as *isoka*, testimonies from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century indicate that, until fairly recently, men were typically discouraged from engaging in penetrative sexual intercourse. In the Stuart Archive, a collection of two hundred oral testimonies taken by the Natal colonial official James Stuart and edited by Webb, C. and Wright, J., for instance, the testimonies of Kumalo (Vol. 1), Mkando

(Vol. 3) and Ndukwana (Vol. 4) describe how the practice of non-penetrative thigh sex, *ukuhlobonga* or *ukusoma*, was central to the control of sexuality and prevention of illicit pregnancies. (For accounts of *ukuhlobonga* by an anthropologist, see Krige (1936). For further historical analysis of the changing regulation of sexualities, see the article by Delius and Glaser *Sexual Socialisation in South Africa: a Historical Perspective*, in this issue.) Supporting this, oral histories in Mandeni suggest that non-penetrative thigh-sex, *ukusoma*, was still common (although increasingly being seen as “old fashioned”) during the youth of many residents who are now over sixty years old. It is, of course, important to recognise that a certain nostalgia often underscores oral histories.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, even taking this into consideration, it is significant that many older residents claim that, when they were young, while pregnancies before marriage did occur “by mistake”, most men were discouraged from penetrative intercourse. Pregnancies were punished by the payment of *ihlawulo* (damages) and a man was also expected to marry any girlfriend who might become pregnant. Mr Ntuli recalls the social pressures that led people to conform to these rules:

People were scared [to break the law and cause pregnancy]. You hurt the name of your father and the girl’s family.

There are other examples of how men were both empowered and restricted by dominant rules and norms. While it was desirable to have many girlfriends to become an *isoka*, a man who refused to marry could be positioned as *isoka lamanyala* (literally, a dirty *isoka*). Mr Buthelezi, aged forty-two, comments on how, during his youth, marriage was a critical criterion for this distinction:

*Amasoka* (pl. *isoka*) ... some of them were real *amasoka*, were good *amasoka*. If they fall in love with a girl they would have plans with her ... maybe she would be my woman of the future, my wife. But some of them were *isoka lamanyala* ... they weren’t good ... the second they took women, then they left ... it was easy to transfer diseases ...

Later, this section will argue that marriage now plays a diminished role in setting the boundaries for acceptable manly behaviour. To understand this change, and to situate the comments above, we must investigate the long-standing association between the economy and marriage, and this necessitates a brief historical diversion. This begins in the pre-colonial period, a time when the patriarch at the head of the homestead played a pivotal role in sustaining the institution of marriage through allocating livestock for his son’s *ilobolo* (bridewealth) payments. The 19<sup>th</sup> century minerals revolution shook this system fundamentally. Mining employment provided young men with an independent means to pay bridewealth and this triggered intense generational conflicts between men and their fathers (Carton 2000). Though the minerals revolution produced new rural-urban and generational divisions, most miners nevertheless still sought manhood through returning to their rural homes, taking a wife, and building an *umuzi* (homestead). Despite this, the new urban economy reshaped sexual practices in fundamental ways. In particular, non-marital sexual relationships became much more common in both urban and rural areas, a development

demonstrated by the high rates of sexually transmitted diseases at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

As the rural economy continued to weaken during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and as secondary industry expanded, marriage became increasingly detached from the homestead economy and increasingly dependent on wage labour. The market economy replaced the homestead patriarch as the gatekeeper to manhood through marriage. Economic decline, however, now jeopardises this path to manhood. The stagnation of the formal economy in the last three decades, accentuated by South Africa's increased integration into the world economy in the post-apartheid period, has led to unemployment rates of over 40 per cent in some areas. Today, many men in KwaZulu-Natal simply cannot afford the roughly eleven cows or R15,000–R25,000 necessary to pay *ilobolo*. Although families seek creative ways to make *ilobolo* manageable, notably setting generous exchange rates between cattle and their cash equivalents, symbolically eleven cows generally remains the stated figure necessary to ensure wedlock. Consequently, while funerals are a regular occurrence in a place like Mandeni, weddings are extremely rare.

Although causality is difficult to prove, the decline in marriages, and women's increased dependence on men, are arguably critical factors that now make it much more acceptable for men to "maintain" a handful of girlfriends, even father their children, with little intention of marrying them. Ironically, though, these more informal relations, while very different from those of the past, are often justified through "custom." Some men seize on the symbolic status of the homestead, especially that of the polygamous patriarch who heads it, to claim that multiple sexual partners are all part of a seamless Zulu "tradition". Zandi, a twenty-two-year-old township woman, describes how men conflate polygamy with multiple sexual partners, to justify the latter:

They say it is their culture to have more than one girl. They say my grandfather had six wives, I want to be like him.

Subtle reworkings of the meanings of *isoka* and *isoka lamanyala* both constitute, and are constituted by, these changing discourses and practices. As Mr Buthelezi suggested earlier, older people typically define *isoka* as a man who was "successful" with women but who intended to marry at least one of them. Some of the oldest of these men say that *isoka* may not necessarily have even engaged in penetrative sexual relations. Furthermore, for Mr Buthelezi and other older men, *isoka lamanyala* was a "playboy" figure — a man who spread sexually transmitted diseases and was unwilling to marry. Nhlanhla, a sixteen-year-old boy, uses *isoka* in different ways. For him, an *isoka* is a still a successful man with women, but success is defined as having sexual relations with many girlfriends, even if there is no intention of marriage. An *isoka lamanyala* is a man who has more than the acceptable number of sexual partners, which Nhlanhla thought was somewhere between four and ten. Nhlanhla said:

If you have four girlfriends then you are *isoka* because you have a lot of

*amaCherries* (girls) ... [An *isoka lamanyala* is to have] ten *amaCherries* to yourself ... it is to be like a fool to have ten *amaCherries*.

This casualisation of male/female relationships (which to some extent reflects the casualisation of the formal economy) transforms the flow of resources between families, individuals and sexes. With marriage unaffordable for many men and women, men's gifts to multiple-girlfriends have increasingly replaced *ilobolo* payments to parents. Thirty-six-year-old Siphso who lives in an informal settlement near Sundumbili, describes this change, although perhaps with a hint of nostalgia:

Now, you see a beautiful girl on the road, you are going to give her money you go with her and sleep. Before, that didn't happen, they liked to save the money before ... they saved for cattle [for *ilobolo*] ...

Indeed, today it is virtually taken for granted that sexual relationships will be cemented with gifts from men. As a consequence, in Mandeni young boys without an income find that when one tries to *shela* (propose love to) a woman, she may ridicule him by asking:

What are you going to give me, *amaChappies*?" (sweets costing fifteen cents).

Even if they are described predominantly in material terms, these relationships are virtually never seen as prostitution: men are constructed as "boyfriends" and women as "girlfriends". Women will *qoma* (choose) a lover, whereas a prostitute will *dayisa umzimba* (sell her body). Though it is true that *isifebe* is a word used to describe both a prostitute and a woman who has an excessive amount of boyfriends, there are a number of distinct words for a prostitute, such as *umdayisi* (a seller) and *umqwayizi* (a winker). The two are further set apart because prostitutes are seen as scarce in Mandeni and, indeed, are positioned as "outsiders". Showing this, and the difference between prostitution and having multiple boyfriends for material ends, Zama an *isakamuzi* (local, from one of the original families) of thirty-one years, said:

A prostitute it is her job. She goes and sells her body. Those with a lot of boyfriends they *qoma*, they are not selling their bodies ... Prostitutes are not here in Mandeni ... well, sometimes they are here but we don't know them, they hide.

The discourses described above, which value men's sexual conquests (he is *isoka*) but censure women with multiple boyfriends (she is *isifebe*), also legitimise men's sometimes brutal attempts to "discipline" women who are "unfaithful". At times, a man will do so with the help of the very same boyfriend(s) with whom his girlfriend is being "unfaithful", as this twenty-year-old woman from Sundumbili, Zinhle, describes:

They come together they say lets hit this bitch. Others they will sleep with her, all of them. Others they will get all of the soaps — OMO, SURF, sunlight — and will tell her to wash her vagina.

This violence, underwritten by men's privileged economic position, allows men considerable control over women's bodies, including the use of contraception, as described below. Women, though, also face additional dilemmas over using birth control. On the one hand, childbirth is closely linked to womanhood. But on the other hand, there is the threat of contracting AIDS from unprotected sex. (Rutenberg 2000 highlights this dilemma in her paper "Falling pregnant or falling positive".)

For many men, as this schoolboy explained to me, condoms represent "bad sex":

It is not a Zulu thing to wear condoms.

Male coercion, however, is often mediated through subtle discourses of persuasion. Men will convince women that using a condom represents "unfaithfulness" and that true love is symbolised by *inyama enyameni* ("flesh to flesh" sex), as Xolani, age twenty-three, outlines:

Men say: "when you tell me that you want to use a condom it is because you don't trust me. I love you so much. Why use a condom when I am faithful to you ... You must be sleeping with another guy, that is why you want me to use a condom." They just trap you so that you feel guilty. You just say "OK".

Before ending this section on masculinities, it is necessary to point out that the meaning of *isoka* is deeply contested among men. These divisions complicate a simple materialist analysis of gender that rests on a belief that there are coherent "male" and "female" interests. As this section has shown, older men in particular sometimes try to reinforce a "respectable" masculinity that emphasises marriage. They look on in distaste at younger *isoka* who have many sexual partners. Mr Buthelezi is very critical of the practices of today's *isoka*:

I think that that [having multiple partners] is a destroyer of peoples lives. [In the past] it was good to be *isoka*, but *amasoka* would pay *lobola* for those girls. There was polygamy.

Nevertheless, alliances and fractures do not always follow generational lines. Sugar daddies have an ambivalent relationship towards "respectable" masculinity. On the one hand, they themselves may have already acquired partial manhood through marriage. But on the other, they seize on the increased acceptability of sexual relationships outside of marriage to maintain young girlfriends. Bongani's father's comments, at the beginning of this article, suggest that this ambivalence materialises when at times men show off about their young girlfriends and at other times they hide them.

Class differences are also important. In an increasingly winner-takes-all sexual economy — where wealth can secure many girlfriends and poverty none — those marginalised from the productive economy also face marginalisation from the sexual economy. Indeed, poor men frequently complain about the difficulties they have in attracting girlfriends. These men are extremely resentful of rich men, not simply because they consume expensive goods, but because they consume many of the women in the area. Class consciousness is thus constructed



**Figure 5.** A row of concrete *imijondolo* in the informal settlement. Each *umijondolo* is rented for R60 a month. Isithebe Industrial Park is visible behind.

in relation to the sexual and not simply the productive economy. A final important factor forcing some men to distance themselves from a masculinity that celebrates multiple partners is the threat of AIDS. One twenty-year-old man, Siphso, told me:

There are no longer *amasoka* now, people are scared to die of AIDS.

So while masculine discourses — as much of this section shows — can celebrate multiple partnered relationships, the meanings of manliness are highly unstable and contested.

### **3. Subsistence, Consumption and Transactional Sex**

Transactional sex takes place against the background of gendered economic inequalities and masculine discourses outlined earlier. This section looks at women's motivation for engaging in these relationships. It also emphasises how this transactional sex varies across space. Two groups are compared: migrant women in the informal settlement and young women in Sundumbili Township.<sup>12</sup>

#### **a. Isithebe Informal Settlement: Subsistence before Consumption**

Before Isithebe Industrial Park was built in 1971, Isithebe was a quiet but relatively prosperous settlement in KwaZulu-Natal, a place where male residents could hope for local employment in the SAPPI paper mill or the opportunity to farm sugar cane for sale at the nearby Matikulu sugar mill. Industrial growth

dramatically changed this situation. It attracted a massive intake of migrants to Mandeni, transformed the built environment from scattered kraals into densely packed *imijondolo* and brought new ideologies to the area, particularly after unionisation in the 1980s. Nevertheless, many residents, old and new, still retain a sense of “ruralness”. “Traditional” institutions continue to retain influence, particularly *izinduna* (chief’s assistants), who allocate land and resolve disputes. Isithebe is often seen by residents — usually with some pride — as more respectful of “traditional” institutions and customs than the neighbouring Sundumbili Township. Consequently, although new migrants have a certain anonymity and freedom, the small youth population can face important restraints on its movements.

In November 2000, I discussed the difficulties faced by women who arrive at Mandeni and are unable to find work with my research assistant, Nonhlanhla, and Mrs Ndlela, a migrant in her forties who has lived in the informal settlement for many years. Mrs Ndlela, answering Nonhlanhla’s questions, explained that women are now increasingly forced to rely on boyfriends in order to survive:

Mrs Ndlela: I don’t know how they survive ... younger women are living in a bad situation, many have children, when they don’t find work they end up ... er ...

Nonhlanhla: “Go on say it, selling their bodies.”

Mrs Ndlela: Before, people didn’t rely on anyone, they were having money, now they have to rely on other people ... some see this man today, this man tomorrow, and that man the following day ... some men are working in factories, some outside like taxi drivers ... Today the situation pushes them to this thing ... they are scared [of AIDS] but sometimes they just say that there is no such thing, they just ignore it ...

Although some migrants live in the township, most prefer to stay in the informal settlement where accommodation is cheaper. When migrants first arrive, they will usually receive support from relatives or friends. While a few will eventually find work, many will rely on men to provide them with subsistence including, at times, the payment of rent. A comment often made in Isithebe, reflecting the concern with subsistence, is that women *qoma* (choose a man) “one for rent, one for food, one for clothes”. In addition to the needs mentioned here, women might also be expected to remit money to rural homes, perhaps to contribute to the upkeep of their children. It is important to recognise that these relationships can extend for a very long time and some couples will cohabit and even raise children together. Men also seek from women not just sex but, as Luise White (1990) noted in the case of colonial Nairobi, someone to cook for them and provide other “comforts of home”.

There has been a steady flow of people and information between Mandeni and rural KwaZulu-Natal over the last three decades. As a result, interviews suggest that some women who arrive in the area already know that they may have to rely

on boyfriends for survival. One young woman in her early twenties from Hlabisa district, Kheti, said:

They hear that there are people [in Mandeni] who stay with their boyfriends and that it is nice. They too want to stay well. They tell their parents that they want to find work, but they know that they want a man.

Indeed, women typically see multiple-boyfriends as a means to gaining control over their lives, rather than as simply acts of desperation — although the two of course are linked. The very vocabulary of sex — centred, for women, around the verb *qoma* (to choose a man) — is suggestive of women's agency. Certainly, unlike the *lobola* system that is based on male-to-male transactions, transactional sex does grant resources directly to women themselves. That women see themselves as having some sense of choice, although within often brutal and economically coercive relationships, is shown by the comments of Zandi, a twenty-four-year-old woman from Isithebe:

Sometimes she is loving someone who treats her badly, maybe he abuses her by hitting her or something. So she says let me try another. But then she finds that he is also going to treat her badly. [Then] she will *qoma* another one, maybe she is looking for money. Others they come from far, they want work, they end up having to *qoma* a lot of boyfriends because they can't find work. The men give them money for rent, food and clothes.

Although sex linked to subsistence is essential for the survival of many structurally marginalised women in the informal settlement, it coexists with sex linked to consumption in intricate ways. Indeed, sometimes consumption itself is seen as a prerequisite for subsistence. Some boyfriends' presents, such as clothes and new hair-dos, for instance, are used to make women more desirable in the eyes of other men. These points are demonstrated by the following comments from a twenty-three-year-old woman, Thandi, born in the informal settlement on tribal land immediately adjacent to Sundumbili Township. Because her mother works, Thandi has some form of subsistence, unlike many new arrivals to the area. However, since her mother's salary is low (she is employed in a poorly paying clothing firm that recently cut salaries), Thandi's sexual partners function both to support the household economy and to provide consumption goods. She spoke with Nonhlanhla:

Nonhlanhla: How many boyfriends do you have?

Thandi: Three.

Nonhlanhla: Why do you have three boyfriends?

Thandi: Because I have many needs.

Philliswe: What needs?

Thandi: To dress, I don't work, a cellphone ... doing my hair so that I am beautiful for my boyfriends, they won't love an ugly person.

Nonhlanhla: What do they give you?

Thandi: One money... another Checkers groceries ... another buys me clothes.

Nonhlanhla: Does your mother know where the groceries come from?

Thandi: She knows, she doesn't say anything because of the situation of hunger at home.



**Figure 6.** “Matchbox” houses in Sundumbili that were secured through men’s employment in one of the large factories such as SAPPI.

- Nonhlanhla: Do other people know that you have many boyfriends?  
Thandi: Yes they know, my neighbours they criticise me, but not in front of me, they gossip about me, they say that I am *isifebe*. But my friends they understand the situation, they say nothing ...
- Nonhlanhla: Do you use condoms?  
Thandi: With one, but two don’t agree. These two say that they want *inyama enyameni, abafuni ukudla uswidi usephepheni* (flesh to flesh sex, they don’t want to eat a sweet still in its wrapper) ...
- Nonhlanhla: What do your friends think about the future?  
Thandi: They wish ... like me one day, I wish to get the right person, who is going to love me and do everything for me and we marry.

## **b. Sundumbili Township: Fashion and Sugar Daddies**

Built in the early 1960s to house SAPPI’s black workers and their families, Sundumbili Township was extended in the early 1970s to accommodate workers from Isithebe’s growing number of factories. Access to township housing was critical to the development of a middle-class in the Mandeni area. Not only did owning one of the township’s four-roomed “matchbox” houses provide relatively cheap lodgings, but it gave men a secure base from which to launch investments in taxis, spaza shops, or *imijondolo*. Those who did so became among the first group of Mandeni’s residents to profit from the growing migrant population.

Roads, water and electricity service many of Sundumbili’s brick houses, clearly distinguishing the township from the surrounding informal areas. Today, residents still view the township as *phucukile* (civilised) in comparison with the informal settlements that are seen as *emakhaya* or *emafamu* (“at the farms”).

These two schoolchildren give other indications of why the township is seen as “modern”:

People in the farms don't care about clothes, while township people follow style.

The youth here in the Township, they go to *ibheshi* (street bashes/parties) on Saturdays and Sundays, but at Isithebe there are no *ibheshi*, it is like the life of the farms.

Fashion, as the first comment suggests, is an important part of everyday life in the township. One young woman from Sundumbili, Thembi, told me:

You are nothing if you do not have fashion. I am scared to even leave the house, if you don't have something to wear people they laugh at you, they point at you and say “look what is she wearing”.

The tremendous growth in the sale of cellphones — items owned by a handful in 1994, but by over eight million South Africans today — is played out today on the fashionable streets of Sundumbili in telling ways. Describing the association between owning the right cellphone and the ability to attract potential partners, Thulani, a twenty-year-old schoolboy, said (while looking dismissively at my Alcatel cellphone):

With your Alcatel you will not get the *amaCherries* [women] most of the time. If you come with an Alcatel, it is the thing of the child ... They want an expensive one, like a T28 or 6110. If you come with this little Nokia, they are going to respect you. If you come with the small Siemens, the C2, they respect you, they can see that you are the boss, you have money ...

Access to these consumer goods is dependent on one's economic standing, or that of one's partner. And if young girls are at the bottom of Mandeni's social structure, lacking almost any means of accumulation (including crime that some young boys can embrace), sugar daddies are at the apex. They operate taxis, work as teachers, or are employed in the large factories that pay good salaries. Residents say that sugar daddies became increasingly prominent from the 1980s onwards. Partly because the township is represented as a “civilised” place where the youth knows its “rights,” young women are able to engage in relations with these sugar daddies with relative freedom. This can be compared to Isithebe, where spaces are inscribed with “traditional” rules, especially for the young.

Just as at Isithebe, in Sundumbili there is a mixture of sex linked to subsistence and sex linked to consumption. In the township, though, the balance frequently leans towards the latter. Certainly, the large number of schoolgirls with cellphones given to them by boyfriends suggests that these relations are pervasive. Gifts from these relationships, however, can also contribute to the household economy and this is one reason why parents sometimes turn a blind eye to, or even support, their daughters' relationships with sugar daddies. One twenty-five-year-old resident, Thanjiwe, explains:

Sometimes the parents are involved, like those that have a tavern. They ask their daughters to serve a man who is rich, and eventually he proposes love to her and she accepts.

Sugar daddies also have other surprising allies. A schoolgirl in a relationship with a sugar daddy might also have relationships with boys of her age and, as Bongani's father explains, these young men might well know, and indeed approve of, their girlfriend's sugar daddy:

Sometimes he is happy that his girlfriend loves a sugar daddy because it is through him that she will get things like money. Maybe the boy doesn't work. The girl will share the money from the sugar daddy.

For some women, money is not the only advantage of sugar daddies, as this twenty-year-old Township girl, Fezile, outlined:

Sugar daddies are better. Why use a pencil when you can use a Bic? ... They are more experienced ... And they don't like to have sex all the time like the young men, and sometimes they have TLC (Tender Loving Care).

A final difference between Sundumbili and Isithebe is the importance of the English language dominated media to the construction of sexual identities in the township. Here, images from the TV, radio and magazines are part of an array of symbols that, albeit in complex ways, signify modernity. Talking about the influence of the soaps *The Bold and The Beautiful*, *Days of Our Lives*, and *Generations* — probably the three most popular programmes in Sundumbili, the first two American, and the third South African — two township females, both aged twenty-three, said:

Sometimes on the soapies, girls see that the way women attract men is to sleep with them. Sometimes he ends up marrying them. Girls then think that that is the way to get a man to marry them.

Sometimes they look at the way that the soapie people are dressing, sometimes they look at how women talk to men in a sexy way. The other day I heard Macy talk to Thorn [from *The Bold and the Beautiful*] after they argued and she said "shut up and kiss me" and he did. The next day I heard my friend say to her boyfriend after an argument, "shut up and kiss me," and he did.

These types of conversations are unlikely to be heard in Isithebe, where fewer residents understand English and the local Zulu radio station Ukhozi FM is a more common form of mass media than the television. In the context of limited alternative forms of income, transactional sex in the township may be illustrative of the way that young urban women are linking sex to power in bold and assertive new ways, with global images from the media one important part of this assemblage.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. Transactional Sex in Mandeni**

In Mandeni, as elsewhere in South Africa, there exists a huge paradox: while there are high levels of awareness about AIDS, unsafe sexual practices are still common. This article argues that it is the dominance, and indeed taken-for-

grantedness of transactional sex that is a crucial and little understood factor fuelling the HIV pandemic in the area. Gendered material inequalities provide a material basis for such transactions. Masculinities are also central, and these must be seen as being constructed through historically rooted practices and contestations and not, as some (racially grounded) discourses imply, as signifying some kind of innate African “promiscuity”. At fault here, and more broadly in many well-intentioned but often disappointingly ineffective AIDS “education” campaigns, is a fundamental conceptual weakness: *the abstraction of sexual relations from social relations and historically rooted dynamics and practices*.

Of course, many of the themes discussed here — women’s economic marginalisation, men’s dislike of condoms, masculinities that value men’s successes with women — are prominent in studies of gender worldwide. What is critical to the high rates of HIV infection in Mandeni, however, is the way that these come together at such a time and in such a way as to lead to transactional sex between multiple concurrent partners. This paper isolates three key dynamics that contribute to this. First is the creation of massive gendered material inequalities, constructed particularly through the labour and housing markets and worsened since the adoption of free-market policies in the post-apartheid period. This has left some men relatively wealthy, marginalised others and created a group of severely impoverished women. Second is the production of masculinities that place a high value on men having multiple sexual partners. Although many men invoke polygamy to justify these, this masks the complex material processes through which new masculinities are forged. These have only been briefly touched on here, but they include the demise of the homestead economy, the rise of migrant labour, and the crisis in the affordability of marriage. Third is the agency of women. Whether using sex for subsistence, more common in the informal settlement, or for consumption, more common in the township, women sew themselves into the very fabric of masculinity through their own agency. Women actively *qoma* (choose) men — while operating through patriarchal structures they rarely see themselves as “victims”.

There are significant though not absolute differences between the structural position of female residents in both areas. Women in the informal settlement, particularly the newer arrivals, generally have fewer resources with which to draw out a livelihood. There may also be expectations that they remit money to their rural homes. The township — with a middle class backbone of residents — contains a large youth population that generally does have some form of subsistence. These structural factors, with specific geographies, provide different bases from which transactional sex is approached. However, particular geographies of meanings also shape practices. In the township, women see themselves as having more “rights” and control over their movements and claim to be more fashion conscious than people in the rural areas. Spaces where fashion is performed — such as *ibheshi* (street bash) — are vital ones for youth. This

contrasts with Isithebe Informal Settlement that, built on tribal land, allows the youth less freedom, although this is not necessarily the case for more anonymous migrants. All of this goes to highlight not only the importance of disentangling the multiple processes that come together to drive HIV infection, but to see these as socio-spatial processes and hence operating through distinct and important geographies.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank the following people for comments on various versions of this article: Ben Carton, Zeynep Gürsel, Gillian Hart, Lora Lempert, Jabulani Sithole and African Studies' anonymous reviewers. I am immensely grateful to Nonhlanhla Zungu and Sizwe Nkosi for their research assistance in Mandeni. The following people and organizations also provided me with invaluable information and help: members of the ANC and IFP; Libby and Tony Ardington; Chief Mathonsi and his *izinduna*; Roger Ferguson, Mandeni's Town Clerk; and local union officials and managers that I spoke with. Research conducted in 2000 was assisted by an International Predissertation Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies with funds provided by the Ford Foundation. Research conducted in 2001 was assisted by a grant from the Human Rights Center, Berkeley. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, all of the names of residents mentioned in the text are pseudonyms.
2. Indeed, the common presumption that male miners acquire HIV through prostitutes and then pass on the virus to their partners in the rural areas was recently questioned by research conducted at Hlabisa, northern KwaZulu-Natal. This research found that in 40 per cent of relationships when only one person was HIV positive it was in fact the woman and not her mining partner who was infected (Lurie 2000).
3. KwaZulu-Natal is the province with the highest rate of HIV infection in South Africa. According to the 2000 antenatal survey, the prevalence rate among pregnant women in KwaZulu-Natal (widely felt to be a reliable estimation for overall prevalence rates among adults) was 36.2 per cent, compared to the nationwide average of 24.5 per cent. South Africa is the country with the largest amount of HIV positive people in the world — an estimated 4.7 million.
4. I first visited the Mandeni area in 1997 to conduct research for my Masters Dissertation on a firm in Isithebe Industrial Park. I returned twice thereafter, from September — December 2000 and June — August 2001, staying at Isithebe Informal Settlement close to the industrial estate with the Dlamini family. During these last two periods, I conducted formal interviews and life histories in isiZulu with the help of Nonhlanhla Zungu. The contradictions and tensions implicit in my own "location" as an outsider staying in Isithebe were intensified by the fact that I was a mere three minute drive away from the Industrial Park where I could easily be mistaken for a factory manager with power over hundreds of lives. Indeed, the research that I conducted — the people that I saw, the places that I visited, the way that I acted, the way that I was treated — was profoundly marked by my position as a white, relatively wealthy male from overseas. A final qualifier: since this paper is based on only an initial spell of PhD research, this analysis is preliminary and, at times, exploratory.
5. Mandini was name of the white company town built to service SAPPI, and from 1996–2000 the name of the Transitional Local Council (TLC) which controlled Mandini, Sundumbili Township, Isithebe Industrial Park (but not the informal settlement which was under Tribal control), Tugela, Mangete, as well as other former white, Indian and Coloured areas close to the Mandini/Isithebe industrial hub. Following the local government demarcation process and

- elections in December 2000 the municipality, with jurisdiction over an enlarged area that included extensive tribal land, was renamed Mandeni.
6. These figures, however, are likely to be inflated since employers received subsidies based on their stated number of employees. After incentives were phased out in the 1990s no reliable employment figures have been produced, although my very rough estimate — based on a small survey conducted by Standard 10 schoolchildren who went from factory to factory asking workers themselves about employment and wage figures — is that around 15,000 people are now employed in the Industrial Park.
  7. In 1990 textiles and clothing accounted for 33 per cent of employment, metal 22 per cent, plastic products 12 per cent, and paper 6 per cent. Source: CSPPD (1992).
  8. In 1993 and 1994 alone one hundred and twenty people died from political violence between the ANC and IFP in the Mandeni area, see de Haas (1994).
  9. Pudifin & Ward (1986) report that in the mid-1980s women's wages were typically R18 to R38 a week while accommodation ranged from R3.50 to R5 per month. Today, interviews suggest that many people spend a higher proportion of their wages on rent. This is largely because continued rapid in-migration has kept rents high, while job-losses and high unemployment has depressed wages.
  10. Indeed, one only has to look at the testimonies of James Stuart's 19<sup>th</sup> century informants to find early written examples of the complaint that: "Parents have practically lost control over their girls and women." Testimony by Kumalo, James Stuart Archive. Vol. I, p. 225.
  11. Kark (1949) summarises the results of a series of studies in rural and urban areas from 1921–1946 that found syphilis infection rates ranging from 2 per cent — 47.8 per cent.
  12. This is a difficult comparison to make for three reasons. First, the areas are very closely connected to each other. Both Isithebe and Sundumbili residents find work at Isithebe Industrial Park and, although it is uncommon, sometimes people have lived in both of these localities. Second, the comparison is simultaneously between different groups and different places. I could have chosen to keep one variable constant, for instance by looking at only recent migrant to both areas. Third, the distinction between *sex linked to consumption* and *sex linked to subsistence* is one between ideal types. It is not easy to assess when subsistence turns into consumption; clothing, for instance, always contains a bit of both. However, despite these qualifiers, the contrast between the two areas is striking and, I believe, makes such a comparison worthwhile. Isithebe's defining feature is its large migrant population. Sundumbili is given important meaning by its prominent youth population. Any attempt to understand the complexities of transactional sex has to consider how the prominent actors in these relations shape and are shaped by divergent geographies. Finally, although a clear distinction between subsistence and consumption is questionable, the categories do, I suggest, capture important differences in the character of sexual relations.
  13. McRobbie (1993) argues that in the UK a "hyper-sexual mode of femininity", promoted in part through TV and magazine images that link sex to power, is consistent with a bold and assertive contemporary feminist agenda. She is of course describing UK girls who, unlike township girls, usually have an alternative in the labour market to using their sexuality directly to access resources.

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