

# Sex that Gives and Takes

## Sexuality in older age in rural Malawi

LSE

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### 1 Why this study is important

- Investigation of ideas & practices concerning sex among older adults is part of a larger study on **ageing & HIV infection** in rural Malawi
- Findings challenge demography's preoccupation with fertility & chronological age in the collection of sexual health data** in Africa by showing that sexual desire & activity do not decline in a linear pattern
- The study highlights some sexual behaviours & understandings that **challenge the relevance of dominant HIV & STI prevention messages** in Malawi
- Study identifies a set of complex competing discourses that **highlight the importance of qualitative approaches** to the collection of data on sexual behaviour

### 2 Setting

- Subsistence farming
- Familial safety net for dependants
- High rate of marriage & divorce
- HIV prevalence among women & men aged 50-64 is 3.9% & 5.8%

### 3 Methods

- Inductive & highly iterative approach using a grounded theory framework
- Conducted under auspices of Malawi Longitudinal Study of Families & Health
- Dependent multiple in-depth interviews with 45 men & women aged 50 to ~90 (n=135)



### 4 Results

#### The Ageing Body

- Central discourse of bodily decline over the life course
- Underpins understanding of a **trajectory of ageing & declining sexuality**
- Older men & women positioned themselves on the trajectory at **different points concurrently**
- Reflects the **complexity & contradictions** involved in negotiating older age

#### Sex takes strength from old bodies

- 'Good' sex involves procreation. Potency of semen & fecundity of a woman important markers for the "sweetness" of sex
- With declining fecundity sex is less "sweet" & desire declines
- Good, productive sex understood to be physically demanding & to take strength from men & women in old age

#### Sex gives strength to old bodies

- Semen understood to give vitamins & energy to a woman
- Strength & health-giving properties of semen compensate for that lost due to ageing

#### Sex takes respect from the elder

- Understanding of an enlightened older age focused on the ascendance of the mind over the failed aged body
- The enlightened elder should display sexual restraint to be respected

#### Sex gives validation of the capable adult identity

- Unproductive & sexually-unable bodies were associated with feared 'child-like' identity
- Older men & women discursively managed their preferred identities as 'adults' by emphasising their continued ability to contribute to their relationships or potential relationships through sex