

‘Public Prostitutes and Private Prostitutes’: A Study of Transactional Sex in Yaoundé, Cameroon

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1. Introduction

Although AIDS-related deaths continue to decline, there are more people living with HIV (39 million; UNAIDS 2023) than ever before. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) remains disproportionately affected by the epidemic, with women aged 15–24 being over three times as likely to acquire HIV than their male counterparts (*ibid.*). Women may face greater HIV risks, i.e. an increased likelihood of acquiring or transmitting HIV due to factors such as inconsistent condom use, multiple sexual partners, and limited access to healthcare services. This has led to the suggestion that current efforts are insufficient, especially because certain risky health behaviours remain unaddressed (Ngade 2018). Of these, ‘transactional sex’ contributes significantly to young women’s disproportionate risk of HIV infection (Stoebenau et al. 2018). In their review, Wamoyi et al. (2016) found that women engaging in transactional sex are up to twice as likely to be HIV-positive as women from the general population. This suggests an association between transactional sex and risky sexual behaviours, as supported by several studies (e.g., Cust et al. 2021, 199; Low et al. 2019; Stobenau et al. 2018). On the one hand, ‘sugar daddies’¹ are often older and more likely to be infected with HIV, given their longer period of sexual activity and multiple concurrent sexual partners, sometimes including their wives (Cust et al. 2021, 199; Meekers and Calvès 1997, 371–2; Rao et al. 2003, 600). Power imbalances in transactional sex can still lead to exploitation and violence, increasing women’s HIV risk (Stoebenau et al., 2021). Some researchers also argue that women and girls involved in transactional sex may face a higher risk of HIV and other health-related issues due to its implicit nature. Unlike female sex workers, who can negotiate prices and condom use with clients upfront, women engaging in transactional

¹ In line with Stoebenau et al. (2016), sugar daddies are described as older men who provide financial support, gifts, or other material benefits to younger individuals, often women, in exchange for companionship or sexual relations.

sex often do so with men they consider to be boyfriends, making such negotiations less direct and harder to enforce (Parker et al., 2013). The consequence is that transactional sex affects not only those engaging in it but also the general population (Robinson and Yeh 2011, 37), making it a public health concern.

This is major concern considering that there are a lot of women engaging in transactional sex (Stobeneau et al. 2018). While such prevalence has not been documented for Cameroon, the number of sex workers from South Africa ranges from 0.8–1% of adult women, while 3–20% engage in transactional sex (ibid., 6). The broad range of estimates for South Africa (3-20%) highlights the difficulties in defining and measuring transactional sex, often complicated by social desirability bias. In Cameroon, the lack of a specific prevalence estimate is largely due to limited behavioural and epidemiological research on transactional sex in the country.

Stoebenau et al. (2016, 187;) define transactional sex as '*noncommercial, non-marital sexual relationships motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits.*' This definition is used in a UNAIDS reference document on transactional sex (Stobenau et al. 2018). It comes from a review of 339 studies that exclude those of sex work, which is problematic because transactional sex is sometimes considered a form of sex work, albeit an 'informal' one in the economics literature (Robinson and Yeh 2011).

The motivations for women to engage in transactional sex are complex and often rooted in economic necessity, power dynamics and social expectations. Economic survival is a primary driver, with many women using transactional sex to meet basic needs or to improve their social standing in contexts of poverty (Hunter, 2002). Stoebenau et al. (2016, 187) identify three paradigms of transactional sex: 'sex for basic needs; sex for improved social status; and sex and material expressions of love.' Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explain why women engage in transactional sex, a significant proportion are motivated by economic need and betterment. However, recent research on transactional sex in Africa highlights that it is influenced by complex socio-cultural and economic factors, not just poverty (Norris et al., 2020). Social exchange theory explains this as a rational exchange where women trade sexual access for material or financial resources in a context of resource scarcity and gendered power imbalances (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). In addition, cultural norm theory suggests that social norms and peer influence play a role, as transactional sex may be seen as a socially acceptable way to gain economic advantage or secure relationships (Stoebenau et al., 2016). Some women also engage in transactional sex to gain emotional benefits or social mobility, although these motivations are less frequently highlighted (Chatterji et al., 2005). The complex interplay of financial, social and emotional motivations highlights the need for nuanced approaches to addressing the phenomenon.

In any case, the above definition of transactional sex is clearly distinguished from 'commercial sex.' The term is derived from non-Western understandings of sexual exchange, which differ in form and content Wamoyi et al. (2016). Standing (1992) was an early voice in prompting discussion of this difference, critiquing the term 'prostitute' and emphasising broader social

relations in SSA. It could also be argued that some transactional sex is commercial, in the sense of being ‘viewed with regard to profit’.² Not all benefits take the form of material support, however. Examples range from emotional support to social status (Meekers and Calvès 1997, 367; Potgieter et al. 2012, 196–7, Parikh, 2021), although some relationships include neither. There is also agreement that those engaging in transactional sex view themselves as boyfriends and girlfriends to each other rather than buyers and sellers (Hunter 2002, 100–101), but even self-identification is a clear dividing line. These relationships are often framed by broader social norms of love, care and exchange, which complicate the negotiation of condom use (Platt et al., 2020).

For women, poverty and economic shocks are thought to be motivations behind entry into commercial or transactional sex (e.g., Pemunta 2011, 174). The idea is that ‘women need money whereas men have it’ (Swidler and Watkins 2007, 150), reflecting the feminization of poverty due to gender economic inequalities. Although men also exchange sex for material support, such ‘sugar mummy’ relationships are less common (Meekers and Calvès 1997, 366). This involves an older person paying for sex with someone younger, both of whom may have additional sexual partners. There is thus a ‘main’ partner and one or more others, the ‘main’ being a person one intends to marry (ibid.). This finding emerged from a study of men and women aged 17–25; in Yaoundé, young people engage in transactional sex to increase their social and economic status (ibid., 371).

Recent research shows how courtship has changed with the introduction of mobile phones, beginning with Ngade’s (2018) study of sexuality. Using interviews with university students in Yaoundé, he argues that phones facilitate sexual encounters and therefore put participants at risk of HIV (ibid.). This includes encounters with sugar daddies/mummies (*mbomas*), with phones being a popular gift for young people. Because they cannot afford such devices themselves, young people rely on *mbomas* to pay for them (ibid., 92). Similarly, Majczak (2023, 397) argues that ‘young women use fashion to enter sexual economies and patronage networks with men,’ sharing photos of themselves. Both authors thus show how technology shapes HIV risk, with the women in our sample also using phones to manage relationships. As we will see, this allows them to confine their activities to the private sphere.

If transactional sex varies according to context, then it is important to understand that of this study. The literature on transactional sex in Cameroon emphasizes its prevalence, particularly among young women, and highlights poverty, gender inequality, and cultural norms as key drivers (Ndonko et al., 2012; Tchumtchoua et al., 2021). While these studies often focus on policy solutions, such as prevention strategies and economic empowerment, they do not offer a clear understanding of the phenomenon itself or how it differs from sex work. The risks of HIV and sexually transmitted infections are commonly cited, but the nuanced motivations and distinctions between transactional sex and formalized sex work remain underexplored in current research

² *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “commercial,” accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/commercial>.

(Laanani et al., 2014). This gap leaves room for misinterpretations in both policy and public health interventions (Mbu et al., 2016).

We conducted semi-structured interviews with eighteen women engaging in transactional sex as well as four focus group discussions to better understand the context of the study that make up the basis in this study. The aim of this qualitative phase was to elucidate the difference between transactional and commercial sex. Our primary research question was to understand perceptions of differences and similarities between transactional sex and sex work from women engaging in transactional sex.

We interpret our findings considering the current evidence linking transactional sex to HIV risks.

The paper is outlined as follows. The next section describes the methods. Section three shows the results of interviews with eighteen women engaging in transactional sex. In section four, we then we present and interpret our results before concluding.

2. Methods

2.1. Contextual elements

Cameroon is a lower-middle-income country with a population of thirty million (CIA 2023). Its life expectancy is low and poverty rate high, partly because of the HIV epidemic (ibid.). The data were collected in the context of a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to investigate the effect of health insurance to reduce the incentive to engage in risky sexual behaviours (Cust et al. 2021, 186). This study recruited 1,506 women that were stratified depending on whether they engage in commercial sex or transactional sex, (Lépine et al. 2024).

We collaborated with a nongovernmental organisation called RENATA, which is an acronym for National Network of Aunties' Associations (*Réseau National des Associations de Tantines*). According to a spokesperson, 'an auntie is usually the person a young person can seek help and advice from on issues they can't talk to their parents about' (Lazareva 2017). This includes sexual and reproductive health, with RENATA educating women about the risks of HIV (*The New Humanitarian* 2006). There are over 21,000 aunties in Cameroon, who work with women engaging in commercial and transactional sex. This makes them ideal for reaching the target population.

2.2. Sampling

Participants were recruited by RENATA community leaders or by peers using snowball sampling. Women engaging in transactional sex were paid 3000 francs for participating in an interview or focus group to cover for their transport and time, and a further 500 francs for recruiting their peers (Magnani et al. 2005, S71). A second issue is 'masking', where participants do not recruit peers due to privacy concerns (Heckathorn 1997, 175). This corresponds to the second difference, in that snowball methodology obviates the need for identity disclosure. As a result, women engaging

in transactional sex contacted RENATA rather than the other way around.³ Following Heckathorn (1997, 179), participants were limited in the number of peers they could nominate. This was done to avoid oversampling those with larger networks, as do other methods. To be eligible participants needed to be engaged in transactional sex and be between 15 and 24 years old. None of the participant had experience with sex work.

2.3. Interviews

The data collection phase was conducted in March 2021 and involved eighteen face-to-face in-depth interviews (IDI) at which point we had a saturation in what was said by participants. We then confronted the results we obtained from IDI in one focus group that was conducted with other participants. Interviews and focus group were recorded using voice recorders with permission from participants. Interviews and focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide developed by the research team. Interviews were conducted in French by the Cameroonian anthropologist researchers of the POWER study. Interviews and focus groups lasted roughly 45 minutes each and took place at the NGO premises.

2.4. Ethics

This study is part of POWER trial which was approved by the National Ethics Committee (CNERS) in Cameroon, as well as the ethics committee of the principal investigator's higher education institution. The scientific advisory committee for POWER comprises members from research organisations, UNAIDS, the National AIDS Control Committee (CNLS) in Cameroon, and the HIV/AIDS Division of the Ministry of Public Health in Cameroon. Participants were provided with an explanation of the research purpose and processes prior to giving their consent. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who signed a form agreeing to take part in the study. Respondents were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without affecting the intervention package they would receive. Information sheets and consent forms were available in English and French. All interviews were conducted in private rooms and strict confidentiality was maintained. The personal information of the respondents was not linked to the recorded interviews in any way. Once the audio recordings were transcribed, they were stored on the principal investigator' organisation external server in accordance with the study data management plan.

2.5. Thematic Analysis

Transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 for analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006). We adopted a mixed approach to coding, which involves both inductive and deductive elements

³ As Magnani et al. (2005, S70) explain, 'Staff never need the names or contact information of potential participants.'

(Braun and Clarke 2023, 69). This allowed us to remain open to emerging themes from the data while also considering theoretical concepts.

We began by familiarising ourselves with the data, the first of six phases in thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019; Byrne 2022). During this phase, we noted initial ideas without imposing any structure. In the second phase, we generated codes. An inductive approach was primarily employed, meaning that codes were derived directly from the data itself (Corbin and Strauss 2008). For example, the term ‘public prostitutes and private prostitutes’ came from a participant (transactional sex-1910-01). However, we also used a deductive approach when identifying theoretical concepts, such as ‘formality,’ which was drawn from relevant literature to help interpret specific aspects of the data. This flexibility reflects the iterative nature of thematic analysis (Tuckett 2005, 78), as we continually moved between data and theory. In the third phase, codes were categorised into three central themes: choice, discretion, and formality. These themes represent broader patterns in the data and were identified through a combination of inductive coding and theoretical deduction. The fourth phase involved constructing a thematic map (see fig. 1) to visually represent the relationships between these themes. This was followed by the fifth phase, where we refined the themes, ensuring each captured the essence of the data and answered the research questions (Byrne 2022, 1397). Finally, the sixth phase was dedicated to writing up the results, which included the careful selection of data extracts. These extracts ‘tell a particular story about the data’ and help ground our analysis in the participants’ voices (Braun and Clarke 2023, 74).

In line with this approach, we adopted an experiential orientation to the data. We emphasise participants’ own experiences (Byrne 2022, 1396), providing a surface-level description of the transcripts rather than imposing our own views on them. Although we relate this to the broader literature in the discussion section, what follows is but one interpretation of how women engaging in transactional sex perceive it.

3. Results

Three themes were identified – choice, discretion and formality.

1. Choice: Participants highlighted differences in decision-making between sex workers and those engaged in transactional sex. While sex workers are described as willing to engage with almost any client, participants in transactional sex exercise more selectivity, as seen in their ability to end relationships when they no longer serve their needs (transactional sex-1810-02).
2. Discretion: Those involved in transactional sex were said to avoid drawing attention to their activities, by steering clear of red-light districts and avoiding revealing clothing. This

theme emerged inductively, as participants consistently noted a greater emphasis on secrecy and discretion compared to formal sex workers.

3. Formality: Unlike transactional sex, where there are no fixed expectations of direct exchanges between money and services, sex work is described as more formalized. Payments may occur without an immediate expectation of sex, demonstrating the fluidity of transactional arrangements. This theme reflects a theoretical understanding of informal versus formal economic exchanges, indicating a deductive influence during the analysis.

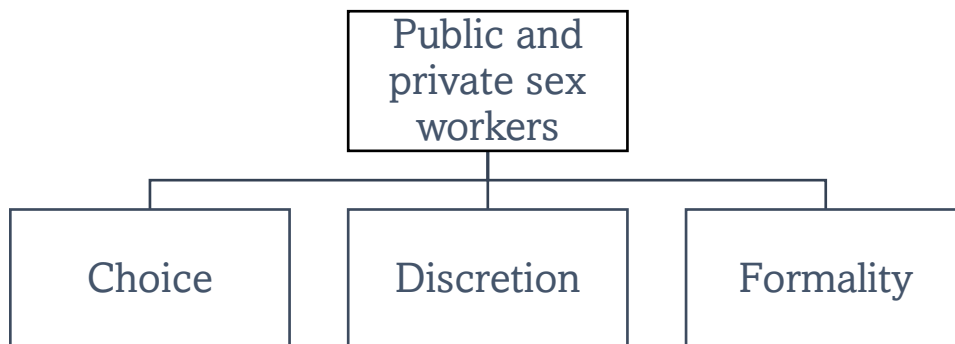


Figure 1. Thematic map.

3.1. 'Public' and 'Private' Sex Workers

I often say that there are private prostitutes and public prostitutes. Public prostitutes are those who stand up there on the poles [a meeting place]. Now. . . as soon as you've . . . had two men, you're already a prostitute. . . So prostitution is just when you have sex and they give you money. (transactional sex-1910-01)

The above quote suggests that anyone who exchanges sex for money is a prostitute, whether or not they identify as such. Nevertheless, there are several differences between those in public and private spaces, beginning with the ability to choose. Participants receive advances from men, while female sex workers make them. The former are more selective in their partner choice than the latter, who are said to sleep with anyone (transactional sex-1910-02). Similarly, women engaging in transactional sex are less reliant on this activity and can therefore end relationships if necessary (transactional sex-1810-02). This leads us to the second difference between them and female sex workers, which is that they are more discreet. They avoid red-light districts and do not wear revealing clothing, suggesting a degree of secrecy. Finally, sex work is more formal than transactional sex.⁴ In the latter, neither men nor women expect that by giving one thing they will

⁴ Sex work is illegal in Cameroon and therefore part of the informal economy (Pemunta 2011, 183), but even then it is more formal than transactional sex.

receive another. Participants can be paid without having sex at the time of the payment, and they can also not be paid at the time of the sex act for having sex.

To elucidate these differences, we use excerpts from interviews with women engaging in transactional sex. Many of them knew female sex workers but none of the participants had experience in sex work. We discuss each theme, before considering their implications for HIV prevention efforts.

4.1.1 Choice

Some participants suggested that they engage in transactional sex out of choice, as opposed to female sex workers who do so out of necessity:

It's true that going out with several people at the same time isn't any different from going to the pole⁵. It's just that at one point it really allows you to make a choice about what you want. If, for example, I decide at one point to leave one of them, that'll be my choice, whereas the one who's at the pole doesn't have a choice. She just comes and sits at the pole and waits. (transactional sex-1810-02)

the person who stands at the pole does it every day that God has created. Every day that she is healthy; every day that she needs money she does it, whereas I can do without. (transactional sex-2010-03)

Others would disagree that they 'can do without' money and, in doing so, do not distinguish themselves from female sex workers. They also 'accept some relationships, not because you want [to] but because you have no choice' (transactional sex-2010-05). However, even this implies that women engaging in transactional sex are offered something. They accept men's advances, rather than making advances themselves. This takes the form of a catcall, usually occurring when women take a walk:

sometimes when I look at the life I lead, I say to myself that I'm not very different from the girls who stand at the side of the road there, so the only difference is that some of them show it publicly but for me it's not like that . . . They [men] just call me and I take it. (transactional sex-2010-04)

a prostitute is the one who goes along dressed in some kind of clothes, whereas I'm not the one who's looking. I can go along and they come, and then sometimes I feel like refusing but the situation I'm in means that I have to deal with it. (transactional sex-2010-08)

One participant described this as 'taking advantage of the situation' (transactional sex-2110-03), suggesting autonomy. It also recalls the idea that women engaging in transactional sex can leave

⁵ Place that identifies a street based female sex worker.

their partners if necessary, as does the fact that they 'don't have to go out every day to fetch people' (transactional sex-1810-01).

4.1.2 Discretion

Not only do participants not have to go out every day to fetch people, they also do not want to. This is in keeping with private sex work, given that to appear in public is to invite ridicule. They therefore warned us that it would be difficult to recruit women engaging in transactional sex, who tend to conceal their identity:

each one tries to preserve her image and . . . keep her respect [read: Saint Maria], in fact. So sometimes the others lie, even [say] that she's working even though she's not even working, so she'll perhaps say to herself that I'd like to expose her life . . . and then she'll be restricted. She won't want to let herself go, in fact (FGD RENATA 16 03 2021)

Rather than risking exposing their lives, participants prefer to use the phone. At least, that is how they see it:

the other girls put themselves in danger. They go out into the streets. They have their own corner where they wait for people, but I manage everything by phone. (FGD RENATA 16 03 2021)

I don't put myself anywhere. . . . like everyone else says, I have my phone on secret [sic]. (FGD RENATA 16 03 2021)

Another way to keep their activities secret is to dress modestly, as opposed to what female sex workers do. One participant described how an acquaintance tried to initiate her into sex work, highlighting her dress:

she said I'm going to take you to the Katios [a nightclub] and we're going to go dancing . . . I realised that when we first left, she was dressed like 'Oh my God!' She . . . had a transparent top on, all her breasts were outside, so the box is dark but . . . in the toilet you can see everything! I . . . said 'What do you do?' and she said . . . 'I'm a prostitute here . . . you can often come here, you come too. The men are nice. I have my clients. I can pass on my clients to you (FGD RENATA 16 03 2021)

It would not be wrong to say that private sex workers are less 'transparent' than public ones, both literally and figuratively. They are less open about their activity, they solicit men by phone rather than in the street. Nor do they wear revealing clothing, which also distinguishes them from female sex workers. A final difference is that women engaging in transactional sex have lower expectations than do female sex workers, given that the former is less formal than the latter.

4.1.3 Formality

I know that prostitutes . . . give the price either by the hour or by the night, but with the sponsor there's no price. You just have . . . sex, just to have sex. You don't expect that because it's one hour

you're going to pay me this, because it's two hours you're going to pay me that. (transactional sex-1910-01)

Although 'sponsor' can refer to a sugar daddy (Meekers and Calvès 1997, 365), some participants distinguished between them. Both pay for sex, but only sugar daddies are older than the payee. In other words, 'it depends on age. At a certain age . . . they demand to be called daddy, to show respect' (transactional sex-2110-04). It is rare for sugar daddies to make demands of their 'sugar babies', however. One participant described how her mother needed money, which she borrowed from a sponsor (transactional sex-2110-03). This did not directly depend on having sex, as it would have if she were a sex worker. Nor does having sex guarantee that a woman will be paid: 'if I go with the guy and I have sex with him, he's not obliged to give me the money' (transactional sex-1910-03).

Of course, if neither person ever exchanged anything then they would not have a transactional relationship. The point is that they do not have to request something to receive it, whether money or sex. Imagine a female sex worker who never requested that her clients pay her. All other things being equal, she would probably earn less than a woman engaging in transactional sex. Because exchange is implicit in transactional sex, women can get away with not asking for money in a way that female sex workers cannot. The following quote is useful here:

if we're walking and I see a shoe I like, I'm going to tell you that I like this shoe. If you're a bit thoughtful, you're going to record it in your head and you're going to offer it to me as a present, but I'm not putting pressure on you to say that I want this shoe. No, I don't do things like that. (transactional sex-2010-03)

3.2. Risk

In terms of risky sexual behaviours, women engaging in transactional sex do things like female sex workers. Although this is detrimental to their health, participants were divided about the level of risk associated with transactional sex. Some saw it as less risky than sex work, while others saw it as more so. Starting with the former, participants said they had fewer sexual partners than female sex workers and therefore a lower risk of contracting HIV. As one woman put it:

I think that sleeping with several people, sometimes without protecting yourself, makes you more vulnerable than sleeping with the same people several times. (transactional sex-1810-01)

Another said 'with the clients you don't know his balance sheet,' meaning whether they have a sexually transmitted infection (STI) (transactional sex-1910-01). By contrast, men engaging in transactional sex take it upon themselves to get tested for STIs. Some even use condoms for the same reason: 'Because most of them are men of principle and it's not good for their image if it gets out that they go out with little girls [sic]' (transactional sex-2010-08). It is therefore in men's interest to keep transactional sex private, just as it is in women's. However, some use this as an excuse to have unprotected sex:

They ask you to go and do some tests beforehand and, as soon as you've had them done, you come and show them the results. And after three months, they'll ask you to do it again. So now that's why he often prefers to go without a condom, because I'm his person. (transactional sex-2010-04)

Participants also prefer transactional sex to sex work because they perceive it as less risky in terms of experiencing violence. They trust their sponsors, but this poses its own challenges. It leads us to the reasons why private sex work is riskier than public sex work, as suggested above. First, women engaging in transactional sex use condoms less consistently than female sex workers:

there are prostitutes who always protect themselves, (transactional sex-1910-02)

INTERVIEWER: *Between the two of you, who is more exposed to the risk of illness?*

RESPONDENT: *I think both because even the prostitute protects her, sometimes even more than the rest of us.* (transactional sex-2010-03)

One participant also questioned whether women engaging in transactional sex really had fewer partners than female sex workers: 'when you've already got two or three men [it] means that you're no different from the girls on the road there' (transactional sex-2010-07). Following this line of thought, we discuss the similarities between them.

3.3. Similarities

We have already mentioned three similarities between commercial sex and transactional sex, as both involve the exchange of sex for money. They involve multiple partnerships, condomless sex and therefore risky sexual behaviours, but this varies from person to person. It does not preclude comparison, however:

INTERVIEWER: *Is there a difference between sex between you and your sponsors and sex between the chili sellers⁶?*

RESPONDENT: *There's no difference. Let's say it's the same thing.*

INTERVIEWER: *Why do you think it's the same thing?*

RESPONDENT: *They do it publicly. They don't hide, but I do it by hiding, so that's where I say it's the same thing.* (transactional sex-2010-07)

If participants 'do' commercial sex by hiding, then it supports the idea of public and private sex workers. These results challenge the idea that transactional sex is noncommercial given that participants are profit-oriented:

⁶ a local expression for sex workers

I don't really have a serious relationship with him [a sponsor]. It's as if I'm only with him for profit.
(transactional sex-2010-03)

This led others to conflate transactional sex with sex work:

INTERVIEWER: *Do you think you're a prostitute?*

RESPONDENT: *It's always prostitution.*

INTERVIEWER: *Why. . . do you think like that? Explain a little.*

RESPONDENT: *Because it's always the exchange between sex and money. That's the same thing.*
(transactional sex-2110-03)

This indicates that while transactional sex shares certain similarities with sex work, it is not identical to it. Sex workers are out on the street, for all the world to see. Women engaging in transactional sex would rather not be seen.

4. Discussion

Using qualitative data from a randomised controlled trial (RCT), this paper argues that transactional sex is best understood as another form of sex work – ‘private’ sex work – which has implications for HIV prevention efforts. Although there is a danger in conflating transactional sex with sex work (ibid., 2; Stobenau et al. 2016, 187; Wamoyi et al. 2016), evidence suggests that women engaging in the former face the same risks and therefore should require equal attention in HIV prevention programmes (Lépine et al. 2024). Specifically, interviews revealed that women engaging in transactional sex in Yaoundé, Cameroon, often consider transactional sex to be similar to sex work but use condoms less consistently than their more professional and more ‘public’ counterparts. Given the ‘private’ nature of transactional sex, women engaging in it are also less likely to benefit from targeted interventions to prevent HIV infection afforded to women in commercial sex. Therefore, there is a public health need to consider women in transactional sex a ‘key population’,

From the point of view of women in transactional sex it is not so different from commercial sex. Again, they both involve the exchange of sex for money and this presents similar problems. We acknowledge that non-financial benefits exist in transactional sex but this was not reflected in our sample. Among them are multiple sexual partners and unprotected sex, both of which are risk factors for HIV. It could be that they view transactional sex as a first step towards commercial sex work. However, it bears repeating that some participants see transactional sex as less risky than sex work, despite indicating they engage in high HIV-risk behaviours. They have fewer partners than sex workers, believing most are getting tested for STIs. While some use this as an excuse to have unprotected sex, others do not. It is therefore unclear whether transactional sex is riskier than sex work, but this is to be expected. They are so similar as to be indistinguishable, as far as the risks are concerned (cf. Robinson and Yeh 2011, 38).

Where transactional sex and sex work differ is in their publicity. As one woman put it, ‘Sex workers are put in specific places where you know they’ll be’ (FGD RENATA 16 03 2021). By contrast, it is difficult to know where women engaging in transactional sex will be because they avoid such places. Nor do they wear revealing clothing, making it difficult to distinguish them from the general population. They choose to engage in transactional sex because it is private, in the sense intended by Jürgen Habermas: ‘the . . . sphere which by law, tact, and convention is shielded from intrusion’ (Burger 1992, xvi). Female sex workers are intruded upon because they are not private. They face stigma, prejudice and violence, which women engaging in transactional sex do not because it is more accepted (FGD RENATA 16 03 2021; Stoebenau et al. 2018, 4).

Women engaging in transactional sex are shielded from intrusion in another sense, albeit a negative one. They are less likely to benefit from targeted interventions, which is a function of their privateness and support givers’ view of women in transactional sex. This is not to say that women refuse help, but that they do not receive it in the first place. They are not considered a ‘key population’ in HIV prevention programmes, may perceive themselves less at risk, even though they engage in riskier sexual behaviours than female sex workers. Whether these women contribute more to HIV transmission is an empirical question, which cannot be answered here. This study blurs the boundaries between transactional sex and sex work. Previous studies have distinguished formal from informal sex workers, this being another term for those engaging in transactional sex (Robinson and Yeh 2011, 36; Wojcicki 2002, 268). What makes sex work formal is whether it is their main source of income, but this is problematic. Both sex work and transactional sex are part of the informal economy, the former being illegal in most countries (Ito, Lépine, and Treibich 2018, 1627).⁷ Sex work is illegal in Cameroon and therefore part of the informal economy (Pemunta 2011, 183), but there is no law regulating transactional sex in Cameroon. However, women engaged in transactional sex in Cameroon, like sex workers, face significant stigma, prejudice, and violence. Despite differences, we showed that both activities share similarities, exposing women to social discrimination, physical violence, and marginalization (Ndonko et al., 2012; Tchumtchoua et al., 2021). Studies show that women engaging in transactional sex are often treated as promiscuous and fear seeking help due to the stigma (Noumbissi et al., 2019).

We also found that most women engaging in transactional sex considered it their main source of income (Lépine et al. 2024), contrary to the above definition. As mentioned, neither men nor women have to request something to receive it. They can be paid without having sex, and not paid for having sex. Sex workers also have nonpaying partners,⁸ and most women engaging in

⁷ Indeed, ‘Senegal is the only African country where sex work is legal and regulated by a health policy’ (Ito, Lépine, and Treibich 2018, 1627).

⁸ 2016 Integrated Biological and Behavioral Survey (IBBS) Report among Key Populations in Cameroon: Female Sex Workers and Men who Have Sex with Men. 2017.

transactional sex were also paid at the time of the sex act reminding us that the two have more in common than not.

Second, this study demonstrates the heterogeneity of women engaging in transactional sex. Again, previous studies have shown that women engaging in transactional sex do not see themselves as sex workers (e.g., Robinson and Yeh 2011, 39; Stoebenau et al. 2018, 5; Wojcicki 2002). Some – though by no means all – of the women in this study do see themselves that way, albeit as ‘prostitutes’. This calls for a more nuanced understanding of sex work, as something which occurs along a continuum (Crankshaw and Freedman 2023, 4). Such an understanding emphasises the differences between sex workers, which a monolithic conception of the practice does not (ibid.).

We have argued elsewhere that sex work ‘can be viewed as [a] sub-category of all transactional sex’ (Cust et al. 2021, 193), rather than a different category altogether. This requires a holistic approach. Following Crankshaw and Freedman (2023, 7), it requires policymakers to target women engaging in commercial sex *and* transactional sex for HIV prevention. The alternative risks benefitting one group at the expense of the other, and fragmenting efforts (ibid.) – a siloed approach. It is not a matter of deciding who is at greater risk of infection, given that this varies from person to person. Instead, it is about getting vulnerable people the health services they need.

This study has some limitations. Firstly, our main conclusion is context specific, and we acknowledge that our findings may not be valid in other settings where other forms of transactional sex may exist. It could be argued that our sample size is too small to draw conclusions about the whole population of women engaging in transactional sex. Although we lack information about the associated risks, this is not necessarily a bad thing (see above). Some information and nuance could have been lost in translation (Jagger et al. 2011, 152), given that interviews were conducted in French – the local language. There is a need for further research to assess the generalisability of our findings, given the contextual nature of sexual relationships (Wamoyi et al. 2016).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are striking similarities between female sex workers and women engaging in transactional sex. This makes it difficult to say whether one group is more exposed to HIV, but that is beside the point. Both engage in risky sexual behaviours and therefore require attention, hence the need for a holistic approach. However, only transactional sex is overlooked and this necessitates a change. It does not help that transactional sex is considered non-commercial, even though it is the main source of income for participants and is profit-driven. They are overlooked because they do not publicise their activities, which is why we consider them ‘private prostitutes’. It is also in their interest to do so, given that female sex workers face violence and prejudice. Women engaging in transactional sex are a ‘hidden population’, in the true sense of the word. They should have access to public health interventions comparable to those provided by the government for female sex workers.

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7. Appendix

7.1. Interview Guide

1. Self-definition of their work, what do you call it?
2. How does it differ from sex work?
3. Or do they usually go with sugar daddies for the deed?
4. Do they always receive only money from the people they see? What services or gifts do they receive other than money?
5. Ask about the reasons for engaging in transactional sex
6. Understanding the proportion of categories on the spectrum (basic needs, social status, romantic relationships, etc.)
7. Interactions between sex work and transactional sex: do they talk to each other, do they know each other?
8. What do they call the intermediate girls who present the "big fish"? How does it work?
9. Where do you meet your customers/papy? Leave several possible answers
10. Or do you have sex with your customers/papy?
11. How many girls can they recruit for the survey? Will it be easy to do so?.

