

**Doctoral Dissertation Research: Strategizing AIDS Prevention: The Exercise of Sexual  
Autonomy among Adolescent Girls in Rural Malawi**  
Boston University, Department of Sociology

**ABSTRACT** The overall aim of the proposed research is to identify the factors and conditions that enable adolescent girls to develop and implement successful strategies of HIV prevention. In the context of the AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa, the unequal position of women in relation to men is widely considered a major contributor to the spread of the disease. Social scientists thus frequently place gender inequality at the center of their research efforts, constructing men as dominant and women and girls as vulnerable to infection and death because they are poorer and less powerful than men, and therefore dependent on the exchange of risky sex for basic survival needs (e.g., Stavrou and Kaufman, 2000). While important, the construction of young women as devoid of control or autonomy over their sexual lives diverts attention from other important considerations. For example, the majority of adolescent girls are not infected, even in rural Malawi, the country with the eighth highest HIV prevalence in the world, and one of the poorest countries in the world. It is essential, then, that researchers direct their attention to the ways in which young women and girls exercise autonomy and control over their sexual lives. What are the characteristics of girls who avoid risky sex? What are the aspects of their social and cultural context that encourage them to make safer sexual behavioral decisions, despite their poverty? And, what are the identifiable entry points that can be incorporated into effective interventions and strengthen their capacity to avoid risk?

The proposed study will employ a mixed-methods approach via the following: 1) Conduct in-depth interviews with approximately 80 unmarried young women and men selected from a larger survey sample stratified by region of the country, age and infection status. From these data I will be able to describe the development of strategies of prevention, the sexual autonomy exercised to implement these strategies in premarital relationships, and the contextual differences in both their development and implementation and 2) Analyze survey data for approximately 1200 young men and women (age 15-24) in order to understand a) what characteristics distinguish those who have successfully avoided infection from those who have not, and b) which social conditions and situations young women are able to protect themselves from HIV and STI infection. This research will be conducted in two different locales in Malawi, selected because they are expected to be quite different in many respects: the northern Tumbukas are patrilineal, more educated and Protestant, and the southern Yaos, on the other hand, are less educated, Muslim, and follow a matrilineal system of inheritance and matrilocal residence pattern following marriage.

The new information gathered from this study will be the first of its kind in Malawi, and in all likelihood, sub-Saharan Africa, especially with its unique approach to how young females protect themselves from infection, its attention to improving the accuracy of sensitive behavioral data, and its grounding of analyses in new ways of thinking about female autonomy in the realm of sexuality. Just as the academic literature is limited in scope, so too, is the research on which prevention programs are based. Typically and understandably, research on women rests on a construction of women as poor and powerless, and thus at particularly high risk of AIDS; it also focuses on females who are known to be at high risk (e.g. commercial sex workers). While some of these studies are based on careful analysis (e.g., Rutenberg et al. 2000; Setel 1999), others are not (Seidel 1993; Ulin 1992). The focus of this project, in contrast, is on women who provide examples of success at avoiding infection, and thus may influence programs to provide support to those who are struggling to survive an epidemic. These findings are expected to contribute to the field of sociology of health in important ways: sociological inquiries on gender and health overwhelmingly do so in contexts outside of the developing world; this project will therefore contribute add to the newly-emerging investigations that examine the role of social processes in AIDS-related outcomes.