

Aids and the Changing Political Economy of Sex in South Africa: From Apartheid to Neo-liberalism

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Note: This is a draft version of an article that is aimed at a quite general health and social science audience. Some of the themes have already been raised in previous papers given to this seminar but I have tried here to bring them together in a more consistent way and with a specific focus on national dynamics that propel informal settlements in South Africa—areas, according to recent studies, where very high HIV infection rates exist. To do so, I have sacrificed ethnographic and historical detail from Mandeni, my research site. However, at the beginning of the talk I am going to try and illustrate my key arguments through a brief photographic essay on the informal settlement in which I work. As an endnote, the paper does not specifically discuss Minister Mabuyakhulu’s recent announcement that the KZN government intends to clear slums by 2010, including through coercive means. But what follows does suggest that the economic and demographic trends driving the growth in informal settlements are deeply embedded in post-apartheid South Africa—and this also, I would argue, has implications for the trajectory of the Aids pandemic.

Abstract

In the 1990s and 2000s, HIV prevalence rates in South Africa increased at a rapid rate. Political economy approaches have been preeminent in challenging stereotypes that blamed the Aids pandemic on the peculiarity of “African sexual culture”. Social historians in particular have highlighted the dramatic effect of apartheid on sexuality; they point to how circular male-migration has long fuelled sexually transmitted infections among black South Africans denied permanent urban residence. But while scholars have

successfully noted the deep-rooted antecedents of Aids, less attention has been given to more recent changes in the political economy of sex, including those resulting from the post-apartheid government's adoption of broadly neo-liberal policies. As an unintentional consequence, segregation and apartheid can be seen as almost inevitably resulting in Aids, a view that can disconnect the pandemic from contemporary social and economic debates. Combining ethnographic, historical, and demographic approaches, and focusing on sexuality in the late apartheid and early post-apartheid periods, this article outlines three interlinked dynamics critical to understanding Aids: rising unemployment and social inequalities that leave some groups, especially poor women, extremely vulnerable; greatly reduced marital rates and the subsequent increase of one person households; and rising levels of women's migration, especially through circular movements between rural areas and informal settlements/urban areas. As a window into these changes, the article gives primary attention to the country's burgeoning informal settlements—spaces in which HIV rates are reported to be twice the national average-- and to connections between poverty and money/sex exchanges.

Introduction and the argument

Between 1990 and 2005, HIV prevalence rates in South Africa jumped from less than 1% to around 29%. Combining ethnographic, demographic and historical insights, this article addresses the important question posed recently by prominent South Africanist scholars:

Was Aids in South Africa “an epidemic waiting to happen?”¹ To date, responses to this question have forefronted the legacy of apartheid and in doing so challenged cultural models that reify an “African system of sexuality” supposedly characterized by sexual permissiveness (for instance as contained in Caldwell, Caldwell and Quiggin, 1989, for a direct critique see Heald, 1995). In particular, the work of social historians has brought to attention the ways in which racial segregation and male migration fuelled an earlier epidemic of syphilis only partially quelled by the introduction of penicillin in the 1950s; moreover, they note how the forces of urbanization, industrialization, and Christianization have long been argued to have destabilized African family structures (for instance Jochelson, Mthibeli, & Leger, 1991; Horwitz, 2001; Delius & Glaser, 2002; Marks, 2002; Phillips, 2004). These accounts of the social origins of Aids built on earlier groundbreaking work on the political economy of health in South Africa (for instance Andersson & Marks, 1988; Packard, 1989).

But while these political economy approaches destabilize the “culture” thesis in vital ways, there is a danger that they too may be interpreted as evidence that the scale of the Aids pandemic is almost inevitable—this time not because of culture but apartheid and industrialization. In this article I do not question the inextricable link between apartheid and Aids. I do, however, draw attention to recent changes in South Africa’s political economy of sex that can help to explain the severity of the pandemic. This leads us beyond the well-studied political economy and geography of male-migrancy which, since the 1940s, has become something of a cliché in explaining sexually transmitted diseases and in framing scholars’ understandings of the political economy of sex—albeit with

much merit. Instead, this article emphasizes the ways in which economic marginalization interacts with vastly understudied changes in South African households. Specifically, it gives attention to a series of interconnected trends, namely rising unemployment and social inequalities, dramatically reduced marital rates, and the extensive geographical movement of women as well as men in contemporary South Africa. These social forces are perhaps materialized most vividly in the country's burgeoning informal settlements where HIV rates are reported to be almost twice as high as they are in rural and urban areas, attracting surprising little comment (HSRC, 2002, 2005; Pettifor, Rees, Stefenson, Hlongwa-Madikizela, MacPhail, & Vermaak et. al, 2004). Characterized by one roomed shacks or *imijondolos* that are typically occupied by unmarried and unemployed men and women, informal settlements are testimony not only to the failure of the state to create viable jobs and housing, but to a set of dynamics that have been largely neglected in the study of the Aids pandemic.²

A few caveats are necessary before approaching such an exploratory discussion. First, the complex interactions between race, class, and geography belie a single political economy of sex. It is important to state up front therefore that in this article I am mainly considering poor South Africans and specifically those classified as "African" under apartheid--the primary occupants of informal settlements on which I focus my attention.³ Second, I consider in greatest detail the spatial movements and livelihoods of women (on related changes in masculinities see Hunter, 2005b). Third, although these arguments evolve out of extensive ethnography in an informal settlement, I do not detail the myriad forms of survival and expressions of intimacy in these areas.⁴ The article, mostly drawing

from secondary data, is aimed at a broader level of analysis. Even so, a final caveat must be made—this article does not make a quantitative claim as to the importance of changing sexual relationships to HIV infection. Starting with Packard and Epstein's (1991) important piece it has long been argued that racist assumptions exaggerate the importance of sex to the spread of Aids and exoticize sexuality in problematic ways (see also Vaughan, 1991 and McClintock, 1995 on racial tropes on African sexuality).⁵ In this vein, Stillwaggon (2006) has recently argued that the prevalence in Africa of malnutrition, parasites, and other infectious diseases -- all cofactors of HIV infection -- better explains the pandemic than sexual behaviour. One must add in the case of South Africa the continued importance of race, albeit crosscut now by class in new ways, to treatment access (on health inequalities see HST, 2004). This article does not intervene directly in this debate; to do so would require more sophisticated epidemiological data than is currently available. But it does argue that there is strong evidence for a changing political economy of sex relevant to the way we conceive of the social dynamics linking sex to HIV transmission. It is clear that most women today are no longer waiting in rural areas to be infected by their migrant partners, the pattern of infection described convincingly in the 1940s for syphilis and often evoked uncritically in the contemporary period (for the classic enunciation of this view see Kark, 1949).⁶ If President Mbeki's blaming of Aids on poverty and yet questioning of the relevance of sex to the disease has to be seen in part as a reaction to longstanding racialized representations of Africans as inherently diseased and promiscuous, it has not surprisingly been widely criticized as inadequate (on the South African government and Aids see Robins, 2004). This article argues that recognizing the shifting intersections and spatiality of race, class, gender and

sexuality might go some way towards reconfiguring debates on Aids in South Africa around a more politically enabling agenda—one that conceives of Aids as a symptom of “structural violence” but does not foreclose sex as a mechanism for the transfer of HIV (for a broader overview of structural violence and health in sub-Saharan Africa see Schoepf, Schoepf, & Millen, 2000).

In considering the contemporary political economy of sex, this article gives particular attention to the connection between economic crisis and the exchange of sex for money or gifts. Women’s exchange of sex for money in a variety of locations is intricately associated with gendered economic inequalities; recent ethnographies from the “Third World” source women’s marginalization in the collapse of formal work and expansion of the informal sector, processes accentuated in many cases by World Bank/IMF sponsored structural adjustment programmes (Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998; Schoepf, Schoepf, & Millen, 2000; Brennan, 2004). Ethnographic research on Aids in South Africa has argued that these sex/money exchanges can fuel multiple-sexual-partners, sometimes across large age gaps (LeClerc-Madlala, 2004; Hunter, 2002; Selikow, Zulu, & Cedras, 2002; for a review of the broader sub-Saharan literature see Luke, 2003). Quantitative data seems to suggest that this may play a part in fuelling Aids: one recent study in South Africa found that nearly four times as many women as men aged 20-24 were HIV positive (23.9% compared to 6%), and that many young women had older partners (HSRC, 2005).⁷ These sex-money exchanges should not be mistaken for “prostitution.” Rather than short term market exchanges, they can endure over time and stretch over space in important ways. Moreover, they involve exchanges of obligations that can

incorporate money, love, sex, and emotion, and can be played out through idioms of men as “providers” that are rooted in marriage.⁸ Through remittances, they can also foster links between migrants and their rural “homes.”

Migrant labor was one of the most brutal consequences of colonialism; it restricted Africans from settling in urban areas and forced men to be absent for long periods from their rural homes. It also reconfigured the sexual economy. In urban South Africa, some migrant men, separated from their wives, engaged in sexual relationships with a relatively small number of female “prostitutes” (Bonner, 1990; Walker, 1990). These kind of relationships helped to fuel the syphilis epidemic of the first half of the century. During the course of the 20th century, however, several major shifts took place that reconfigured connections between wage labor, the rural household, and the sexual economy (I look elsewhere at urban areas, see Hunter 2005a). First, the economic situation of rural South Africa deteriorated and the rural economy moved from subsidizing low wages to becoming dependent on urban areas and wage labor (Wolpe, 1972). Men became the providers of rural households. But a second change was a dramatic rise in unemployment from the mid-1970s that undermined the ability of men to act as reliable providers (on the weakening of the marital bond see Niehaus, 1994). One noted consequence for the sexual economy was the redistribution of the wages of male migrants still in employment, now an elite, through liaisons with women based in rural areas (Spiegel, 1981). But it is to the greater movement of women, especially to informal settlements, that I give attention. Instead of men setting up a rural marital home overseen by a wife, many women

themselves are moving to informal settlements to live in *imijondolo* (shacks); in these spaces the sexual economy plays a much greater role in everyday subsistence.

Informal settlements have long been part of South Africa's divided landscape but they are given attention here because of the way they capture these important trends. These areas have very high HIV prevalence rates (the proportion of people who are HIV positive) and, furthermore, new data on HIV incidence (the rate of new infections) finds that a disproportionate amount of HIV infection takes place within these spaces (HSRC, 2005).⁹ Researchers estimate annual incidence rates in urban informal areas of 7% as compared to 1.8% in urban formal areas, 2.7% in rural formal areas, and 2.7% in rural informal areas. This recent study, as well as an earlier one from the same institution (HSRC, 2002), also found the highest reported rates of sexual partners in urban informal areas. If sex can only partly explain such large geographical variation in HIV incidence, the relative absence in informal settlements of co-factors such as malaria and bilharzia also challenges ecological explanations (although higher infection rates in informal settlements compared to suburbs are clearly in part a consequence of inadequate water, nutrition, and sanitation). Certainly, very few residents in my research site, Isithebe informal settlement, have any doubt that the dependence of a newer generation of single migrant women on men is a major factor driving the Aids pandemic—indeed, in some rural parts of KwaZulu-Natal Isithebe is known as a place where people come to find work and a place from where they return to die.¹⁰ The rest of the paper considers in more detail these themes.

Beyond the Male Migrant: Towards A New Political Economy of Sex

The archetypal infection route for syphilis in the 1940s, outlined brilliantly by Sydney Kark, was the male miner who became infected through an urban prostitute and returned to pass on the disease to his rural wife. I relay below very briefly and therefore with limited detail the case of Fikile (a pseudonym) that captures the quite different political economy of sex outlined in this paper. Fikile is 26 years old and grew up in Melmoth, in Northern KwaZulu-Natal. She has two children from two different men. One of these children has now died while the other stays with her grandmother in her rural home. Throughout the 20th century a growing number of women gave birth out of wedlock. But Fikile, like most young women today, has a very low prospect of marrying the biological father of a child. Fikile has not therefore moved into a husband's *umuzi* (homestead), as most women of her parents' generation would have done. Instead, Fikile left the Melmoth area in April 2003. Like many rural women, an informal settlement is the first point of entry into an urban area; in her case she moved to Isithebe Informal Settlement that surrounds a large industrial park on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal. Now, she says that she has two boyfriends in Isithebe who both give her money and are working. Her main boyfriend/partner supports her with food and money, some of which she sends home. She is thus reversing the longstanding pattern of men acting as "providers" for rural households. The other, an *umakhwapeni* (secret lover, literally "under the armpit"), gives her 50 or 100 Rands irregularly. Her main boyfriend does not want to use condoms and she says that she trusts him but she uses condoms with the other. Typical of the way that sexual relationships can be stretched from rural to urban areas by women's as well as

men’s movement, Fikile also sleeps with a boyfriend from home and doesn’t use condoms in part because he claims to be her “*indoda yami ngempela ngempela*” (my man, for real, for real) although he is not working and can’t support her. She does washing and ironing one day a week, earning R50 (\$8). Under apartheid, many women moved to towns and survived through the informal sector and sometimes the sexual economy; but today what is noteworthy is the sheer scale of women’s movement, the absence of marriage as a rural alternative, and the very poor opportunities for income generation in the informal sector.

Table 1 draws out in a somewhat crude fashion distinctions between social dynamics that can fuel Aids and those that fuelled STIs in the 1940s/1950s.

Social Context	1940s/1950s	Today
Economic	A heavy demand for the labor of African men, some demand for the labor of African women. Very low wages.	Chronic unemployment, especially among Africans. Rising class divisions.
Household	Marriage is increasingly unstable but still common in rural and urban areas. Rural households are increasingly dependent on male remittances.	Growth in the number of households, many of which are one-person households. Rural areas dependent on state pension and remittances from men and women.
Geography	Men in circular migration patterns, some women moving to urban areas. Many informal settlements “removed” by apartheid planners.	Men and women in multiple migration patterns including circular migration. Growth of informal settlements typified by one roomed <i>imijondolo</i> .
Sexuality	Some migrant men with multiple partners. Some women dependent on men in extra-marital relationships. Pre-marital relationships not, on the whole, characterized by exchanges of sex for money.	Many women dependent on men, sometimes multiple men, outside of marriage. Pre-marital relations typified by sex/money exchanges.

Table 1: Summary of the changing political economy of sex affecting sexually transmitted diseases.

The following section tentatively sketches out three dimensions to the contemporary political economy of sex, giving attention to significant changes that occurred since roughly the 1970s. Despite the election of a new non-racial government, the dominance

of neo-liberal economic policies has accentuated, and not diminished, the thrust of these trends. Neo-liberalism, then, is not the sole cause of what I am seeking to describe, and South Africa has by no means undertaken orthodox neo-liberal policies; yet the term does capture the unwillingness of the state to intervene more directly to redistribute wealth, create employment, and provide basic services. I argue that three dimensions of the contemporary political economy of sex are important to understand: 1) rising unemployment and the marginalization of women; 2) rapidly declining marital rates; 3) the growth in women's movement often in circular migration patterns that pivot around a rural "home".

1. Unemployment, new social inequalities and the marginalization of poor women

The demise of rural areas in the 20th century undermined African women's longstanding role as agricultural producers. South Africa's racial capitalism left rural areas, and wives, more and more dependent on migrating men, at the same time leaving most African men dependent on the white-dominated urban economy. But a very strong force shaping the structure of poverty in contemporary South Africa was the economic crisis rooted in the mid-1970s that heralded the end of several decades of rapid growth. From this point, positive per capita growth drifted into negative growth and unemployment increased rapidly. The first casualties of economic crisis were African men; women continued a recent trend of moving into paid employment. A new class of men who had never been formally employed came into existence. At the same time, migrant men who were lucky

enough to hold secure work became a rural elite as they benefited from unionization and the stabilization of mining employment through the 1970s (Spiegel, 1981; Sharp, 1994).

Many argue that market-led economic policy in the post-apartheid period have accentuated social inequalities. A recent UNDP (2003) concluded that “Income distribution remains highly unequal and has deteriorated in recent years”.¹¹ Seemingly shell-shocked by the perceived power of “globalization,” the government retreated from an interventionist economic and social strategy to one that stressed growth through the market. Rapid trade liberalization, one element of this broadly neoliberal program, dramatically increased wage competition and placed sectors such as clothing under great pressure, helping to nudge unemployment up to over 40% (Nattrass, 2003; Kenney & Webster, 1998). As the formal economy failed to create jobs in the 1990s, women joined men in the ranks of the unemployed. Between 1995 and 1999 the number of economically active women (searching for or securing informal or formal work within the labor market) increased by 2 millions, twice the increase in the female population of working age (Casale & Posel, 2002). It was no longer an increased demand for labor that was pulling women into the labor market; their entry therefore mostly translated into poorly remunerated and highly unstable informal work. Consequently, women’s median income fell sharply in the post-apartheid period (Casale, 2004). In my research site, Isithebe, a massive gender gap in earnings arose; some men in well-paid union jobs could earn ten times the wage of women working mostly in clothing factories (Hunter, 2002). But has post-apartheid social spending reversed these negative trends? As the government is quick to point out, the state has substantially increased the value of the

pension and introduced a child support grant that now provides support for children up to the age of 14. In many cases, the state pension in particular now serves as a vital, if inadequate, replacement for the income of a male “breadwinner”, continuing a trend that was already in evidence before 1994.¹² But seen against the collapse of formal employment in the last three decades these interventions must surely be seen as inadequate. Moreover, the political economy of sex is about more than simply tracing women’s increasing poverty; as I show sexuality works through and is moulded by the changing structure of households and different patterns of movement.

2. An unprecedented decline in Marriage

The system of male migrant labour, rooted in segregation and apartheid, rested on the wives of migrants remaining in increasingly impoverished rural areas. This has now changed fundamentally as a consequence of a dramatic recent decline in marital rates. The transformation, however, has gone largely unnoticed, including in the Aids literature. In part this is a consequence of a lack of reliable statistics. But it also reflects the broad brush strokes with which African marriage has been painted. Going back to the 1930s a number of remarkable ethnographies noted the negative effects of “cultural contact” on the African family (Krige, 1934; Hellman, 1948; Longmore, 1959). Brilliant in their detail, and undoubtedly capturing a sense of change, they fed perceptions that African families were in slow but steady decline. Yet more recently, scholars have questioned teleological narratives of “family breakdown” (Moore and Vaughan, 1994; Ferguson, 1999, & Thomas, 2003; Hunter, 2005a). Certainly, data collected in urban and rural areas

suggested the continued centrality of the institution of marriage as late as the early 1980s (Mayer, 1980; De Haas, 1984; Ardington, 1988). And as Figure 1 demonstrates, in South Africa as a whole, marital rates appear to have fallen only from the 1960s--despite numerous accounts of a “family breakdown” prior to this period. Recognizing that there was no straightforward causal link between apartheid and family breakdown focuses our attention, instead, on the seismic changes heralded by the deterioration of formal employment. What is significant about the present young generation is that they are experiencing a simultaneous collapse of agrarian and wage livelihoods with very important consequences for marriage, household formation and sexuality.

Many ethnographic studies today reveal extremely low marital rates among Africans, especially from the 1980s.¹³ Statistics on African marriage are more difficult to interpret: African marriage is a process and not an event, systems of civil and customary marriage co-existed (with different regional administrations), and apartheid statistics are notoriously unreliable. Nevertheless, census data support the claim that there has been a quite dramatic decline over the last four decades.¹⁴ The factors behind this decline are complex; they include (until recently) women’s increased work prospects throughout the 20th century, and thus their growing economic independence from men. But particularly from the mid-1970s, when unemployment rose sharply, men’s inability to secure *ilobolo* (bridewealth) or act as dependable “providers” became additional reasons for reduced marriage.

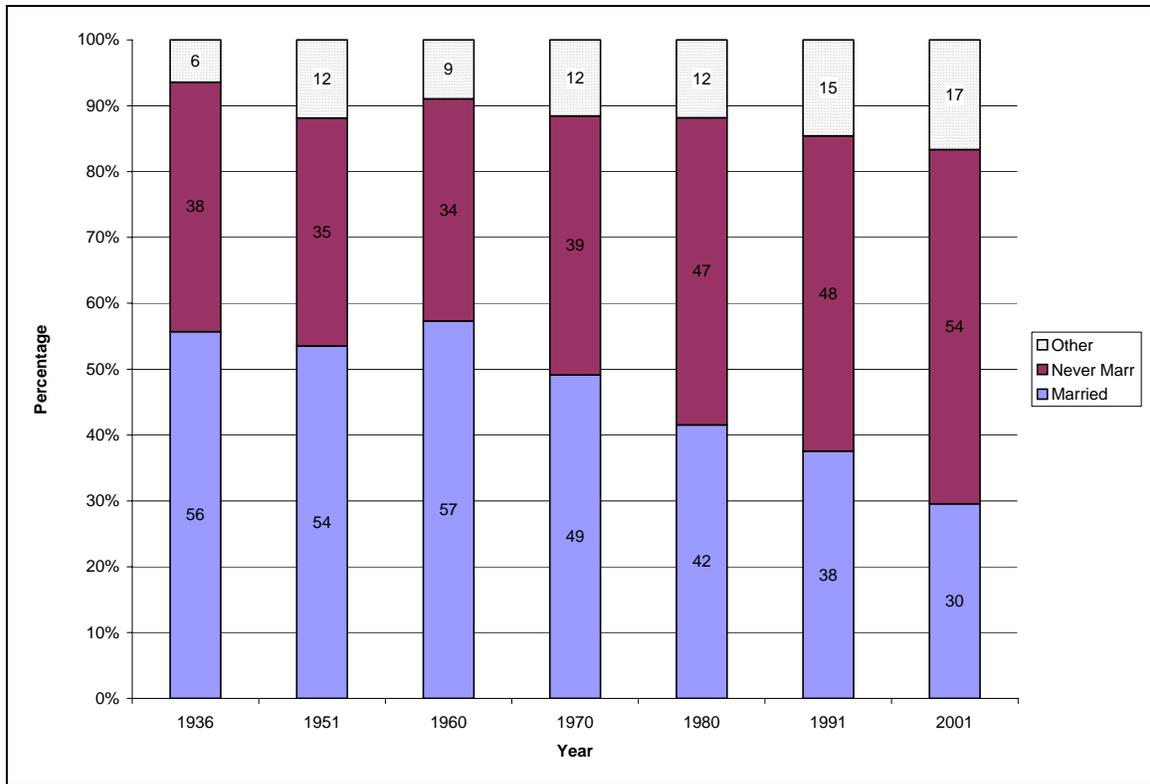


Figure 1: Marital Status for Africans over 15 years of age, 1936-2001

Source: various census statistics. For more details see Hunter (2005a).

It is important to consider interconnections between unemployment and low marital rates, especially among the young. Seekings and Natrass's (2002) analysis of income stratification, while excluding state benefits, captures the growing gap between an increasingly non-racial middle-class and a mostly African underclass. If adjusted by age, however, the figures seem even more alarming. Under apartheid there were firm racial ceilings that stifled the growth of an African middle-class. African men typically depended on core working-class jobs, for example factory or mining work (putting them in what Seekings and Natrass call the intermediate class). Young people today, however,

are not, on the whole, entering these intermediate classes but are either becoming part of a marginal class or, if they secure good education, an emerging upper-class. Today, young South Africans can live side by side but in ways that belie the optimistic rhetoric of the “new South Africa”: the poor can be crammed into informal settlements that might be located adjacent to posh suburbs in which the nouveau rich enjoy the consumer trappings that characterise post-apartheid success. The first two columns of the following table are taken from Seekings and Natrass, the latter are added by the author to illustrate the connections between class structure and household formation. I give attention to the declining social position of African men whose income was central to “building a home”—a powerful Zulu metaphor (*ukwakha umuzi*) that captures the processual nature of courting and marriage. What is clear today is that most young African men and women find it difficult to establish a marital home with any degree of geographical and economical stability.

Class	% of all households	% of all income	Young African men under apartheid	Young African men post-apartheid
Upper-class	12	45	None	Some
Intermediate (Semi-professional, core working class, petty traders)	48	45	Most	Some
Marginal (working class and underclass)	40	10	Some	Most

Table 2: Percentage of household income by upper, intermediate, and marginal classes. Source: Seekings and Natrass (2002)

3. Women's increased movement: from migrating men to moving women?

Male migrant labor is so dominant an institution in South Africa that it overwhelms almost all discussions surrounding migration. Yet for over a century Southern African women have moved to towns, informal settlements, and white owned farms (Bonner, 1990; Walker, 1990). Brutal spatial interventions by the apartheid state, especially “forced removals” and “rural industrialization,” fostered a complex set of gendered migration patterns (Platzky & Walker, 1985). The ending of influx controls in 1986 and the continued decline of rural production have also been noted as driving women's greater movement today. But I want to suggest that these trends interact with a relatively new set of dynamics: the reorganization of rural households into more geographically flexible institutions with an expectation that women as well as men will migrate in circular patterns to urban/informal areas. The extent of these new patterns of movement has not been captured by national statistics (although represented for some time in micro-level accounts by anthropologists (Spiegel, 1995; James, 1999)) in part because of a male bias in migration data, outlined below.

The most common source of data on women's migration comes from census or household surveys. Together these studies show a rise in women's migration from the seventies but indicate that men still migrate more than women (see Posel & Casale, 2003 and Kok, 2003). The limitation of this data is that it defines migration as “absence” from a home (household surveys) or as a long distance/long term changes in residence (census data). In contrast, data collected by the Africa Centre for Population and Health Studies

in rural KwaZulu-Natal, and drawn upon here, appears to show that women move more than men.¹⁵ The Africa Centre visits each household in a geographical area that it calls the Demographic Surveillance Areas (DSA) every four months and counts migration as a change of residence for longer than 3 months. Within the DSA's roughly 90, 000 population, the Africa Centre is therefore able to capture shorter term "movement" to and from a place, a pattern more followed by women, especially those who leave children in rural areas. Data shows that, at the peak age--when men and women are in their early 20s--roughly 6 out of 10 women and 4 ½ out of 10 men changed residency or "moved." We can see immediately that the emphasis on "movement" rather than "migration" forces us to challenge quite radically the way that we think about the gendered nature of migration/movement. Longstanding methods of measuring migration therefore tend to capture very well the movement of men for most of a year into an urban area; they describe less well, however, women's more frequent movements backwards and forwards from rural areas.

Informal settlements, the informal economy, and the sexual economy

If unmarried women are moving, and often not into work, where are they moving to, and how do they survive? This article gives attention to the spaces of informal settlements because they capture important dynamics surrounding the changing political economy of sex--women's movement, the rise of single person households, the decline in marriage, and the dependence of many women on informal sexual exchanges. There are many types

of informal settlements in contemporary South Africa, from squatter camps in urban areas to settlements on former “tribal” land but the most common housing in informal settlements is *imijondolo*, one roomed usually rented accommodation, sometimes translated into English as “shacks.” These structures are also widespread in formal townships, where they are sometimes called “backyard shacks.” Informal settlements have a long history in South Africa. Rooted in the uneven provision of formal housing for Africans under colonialism and apartheid, they mushroomed around urban areas from the mid-1980s following the relaxation of influx controls (that sought to restrict Africans from entering towns) and rising unemployment (see for example Harrison, 1992; Hindson & McCarthy, 1994). Since the beginning of the 20th century informal settlements have long been known as spaces of poverty and sex exchanges but also as places that allowed women a certain independence (for instance Bonner, 1990). The most lucrative informal activity associated with women is probably the brewing of traditional beer. But today the mass production of beer and other consumer items undermines many informal opportunities; what’s more the sheer number of women eking a living in the informal sector drives down earnings opportunities (see Rogerson, 1997).

The provision of housing, perhaps more than any other policy, was heralded by the ANC in 1994 as having the ability to jump start radical economic and social redistribution. Some scholars blame shortcomings in housing policy on the weakness of the chosen mechanism for delivery, namely a market-driven one off capital subsidy system (see Huchzermeyer, 2004). But Hempson and O’Donovan (2005) have argued that the ANC’s failure to meet its housing targets was partly due to significant increases in the overall

number of households– the ANC was thus dealing with a moving target. Evidence of the proliferation of smaller, single, households is strong: from 1995 – 2002 average household size reduced from 4.3 to 3.8, driven by a rising share of single households from 12.6% to 21% of all households (Pirouz, 2004). According to government figures, an average of 269 new shacks a day were built between 1996 and 2003, resulting in the presence of 2.14 million shacks in 2003 (Mail & Guardian, 2005). Informal settlements today therefore are not only testimony to high unemployment rates and an inadequate government housing strategy but to significant demographic trends, namely the rise of households not based around a marital bond.

In my research area, Isithebe Informal Settlement, on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal, the “tribal” land at the heart of Mandeni has been transformed into a large informal settlement. The apartheid state’s establishment in the area of Isithebe Industrial Park in 1971 initiated this change. But since the 1990s the informal settlement continued to mushroom despite a decline in formal work in the area from around 23 000 to 15 000 between 1990 and 2005. Put simply many people who migrated to Isithebe in the 1990s did not find work (see Hunter, 2005a). When I asked women and men why they came to an area in which it is difficult to find formal employment, I was told that the prospect for informal or formal work is still better than it is in rural areas. Women depend on a myriad of informal sector activities, from selling *dagga* (marijuana) to petty trading. But the sexual economy is also an increasingly important mechanism for the redistribution of formal and informal earnings. I have been told on a number of occasions that women are well aware that they will have to depend on men when they arrive in Isithebe but that this

does not necessarily deter them—with perhaps a child to support in a rural area there are few alternative forms of survival. The need to find a place to stay can also lead newer migrants to depend on men. Most women who arrive in Isithebe stay at first with elder sisters, other relatives, or friends. Living in a small one roomed *umjondolo* themselves, these earlier migrants—the most likely to be in formal employment--have told me that they often discourage relatives from staying with them for very long, an action that can force women to find alternative means of accommodation. These are trends repeated over hundreds of urban areas in South Africa where corrugated steel, wood, mud, and paper, provide shelter for those eking out a living in post-apartheid South Africa.

Fikile's case shows quite clearly the ways in which migrant women can maintain strong links with their rural homes and engage in relationships with multiple partners often for money. Yet ethnographic data from Isithebe Informal Settlement suggests that informal settlements are not places of inherent HIV risk. Women with reasonably well paid work can sometimes secure housing independent of men and enter relationships on their own terms. New women migrants can look up to them as role models, seeing independent women as successfully challenging patriarchal models of “building a home.” Moreover, not all men are able to take part in the sexual economy. Many men are desperately poor and complain bitterly about richer men who are able to secure multiple girlfriends; in Isithebe, typically men with disposable income are those who still work in unionized factories or have invested redundancy payments in lucrative “male” informal activities such as running taxis. It is important, however, to distinguish the sex/money exchanges described here from “prostitution”—an activity that most residents say is rare in Isithebe.

These sexual networks, while widening women's ability to make claims on resources, are not simply instrumental and have a complex cultural dimension: gifts are often enacted in terms of men's "provider" role, claims can be made through evoking "love," and participants frequently discuss sexual pleasure and physical attraction. In addition to sex, women provide men with companionships and the "comforts of home" (White, 1990). It is frequent to hear stories of women having material relationships—"one for money, one for food, and one for clothes"—but also common to hear about love letters and signs of affection. A final important point to recognize is that these sexual networks operate alongside—and not in opposition to—social networks based on kinship, friendship groups, churches, and neighbors.

In many cases therefore sex exchanges do not cause family breakdown, a fact that questions the very long association between "prostitution" and "social degeneration". On the contrary, remittances from sexual networks can help to foster kinship ties. There is an expectation that money will be given by migrating women to a rural home, especially if a woman's child is looked after by other family members.¹⁶ Earlier scholarship showed how men's wages were distributed through sexual networks in rural Lesotho (Spiegel, 1981) and how rigid conjugal bonds in South Africa were being superseded by more flexible *sibling* bonds characterized by reciprocity (Niehaus, 1994). What is different today is the ways in which women's migration further reflects and affects this changing household structure. In a situation where marital bonds are no longer common, rural women tend to pivot multiple movements around their rural home (sometimes where a child is left), a fairly flexible arrangement allowing for women's frequent movement, the

transfer of resources through sexual liaisons, and the redistribution of state benefits, especially pensions, often through the presence of a rural grandparent, usually a *gogo* (granny). As unemployment bites deeper into society, sexual exchanges and the household have been interwoven in new ways. Indeed, without sexual exchanges, many of the women-headed *imijondolo* (roughly shack) households would simply not exist.

Conclusions

Informal settlements have risen enormously in many places around the world, prompting Mike Davis (2004) to talk of a “planet of slums”. In the case of South Africa, I have utilized them in this paper as a *window* into important recent changes in the political economy of sex and not as an attempt to uncover some kind of epicenter for the pandemic. It is important to emphasize that it is not simply low levels of marriage in these or other areas that creates a risk of HIV infection but the dependence of very poor single women on an informal sector that offers very limited means of livelihood. Indeed, single, economically independent, women may have a certain amount of social protection against HIV. What’s more, informal settlements are not given here as a single-stranded alternative explanation to male-migrancy for high HIV rates. If one is to consider high HIV rates in Southern Africa one has to begin with the way that male migrancy and apartheid fundamentally shaped patterns of migration and social inequalities. Yet rather than projecting forward old models, scholars must consider how contemporary movements, inequalities, and households emerge from layers of social change—ones

reconfigured in often unpredictable ways. Just as apartheid was contested so too has been post-apartheid economic policy; indeed in the last two years the state has been noticeably more skeptical of the market and has tempered some elements of its broadly neo-liberal policies, including by increasing social spending and giving greater attention to the unemployment crisis. But on the whole Aids has been largely delinked from debates over the economy. The dramatic success of the Treatment Action Campaign in forcing the state to introduce antiretrovirals has not been matched by a campaign that links housing, employment, and social equality to Aids—one that considers the pandemic as a symptom of “structural violence” with longstanding but also contemporary roots. This article has argued that although Aids is sourced in apartheid and migrant labor the scale of the impact of South Africa’s Aids pandemic was not inevitable; arguably its trajectory has been worsened by continued social and geographical divisions in the post-apartheid period.

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¹ The title of Shula Marks' (2002) article in a special edition of *African Studies* based on the "Aids in Context" conference and also a book ("Waiting To Happen") based on the same conference and written by Reid, Walker, & Cornell (2004). The conference, a watershed event in the study of Aids in South Africa, was held at the University of Witwatersrand in April 2001.

² In the last year, informal settlements have emerged as major areas of social protest, especially in Durban with the founding of the organization *abahlali basemjondolo* (shack dwellers). See Patel & Pithouse (2005).

³ Although the term “African” is problematic, without recourse to statistics that use the category it is very difficult to make arguments about social change. That Aids is not an essential African disease but rooted in socio-economic forces—although in more complex ways than has been previously accepted—is the main thrust of this article. It is possible that growing class divisions are making Aids less concentrated in one “race”, and much more work needs to be done in this area, but the recent HSRC (2005) study finds infection rates of 13% for “Africans,” 1.9% for “Coloureds,” 1.6% for “Indians,” and 0.5% for “Whites.” If this is broadly correct, what requires explaining is not only the historical reasons for this discrepancy but the socio-spatial dynamics that underpin it today. For a particularly important argument linking race, “premature death”, and geography at a more general level see Gilmore (2002).

⁴ This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in Mandeni, KwaZulu-Natal, where I lived extensively with a family in Isithebe Informal Settlement between 2000-4, and on secondary and archival research. I have refrained from giving extensive background to the study because of space limitations, but see Hunter (2005a).

⁵ Aids research has been heavily biased towards studying heterosexual sex and, consequently, we know little about the extent to which same-sex relationships are associated with the spread of Aids (for an excellent recent history of same-sex relationships in Zimbabwe see Epprecht, 2004). Moreover, the themes in this article represent only a partial study of heterosexual sex; I do not for instance look at sexual violence (but for a recent piece addressing this from a perspective that gives weight to unemployment and the changing household see Niehaus, 2005).

⁶ Indeed, in addition to the movement of women, to which I point, studies show that in many cases rural based women infect their husbands, and not the other way around. One study of discordant couples (where only one partner is infected) in rural KwaZulu-Natal showed that in 4 out of 10 cases it was actually women and not their partners who were HIV positive (Lurie, Williams, Zuma, Mkaya-Mwamburi, Garnett, & Sweat et. al., 2000).

⁷ A study by Dunkle, Jewkes, Brown, Gray, James, & Harlow (2004) in Soweto also found a positive correlation between HIV status and the existence of “transactional sex” (although the nature of exchange means that they are rarely positioned as simply money/sex exchanges and therefore difficult to capture in quantitative studies). For the argument that the same number of overall partners within concurrent rather than serial relationships leads to a considerably more rapid advance of STIs see Morris & Kretzschmar (1997) and Halperin & Epstein (2004). This may be particularly important in the case of Aids because HIV positive people are most infectious shortly after being infected themselves (as well as at the latter stages of Aids). More generally, I am well aware of arguments that sex has either been always easily tradable in Africa or thrown into exchange relations as a consequence of the forces of modernity. I believe, however, that sex has become material in distinctive new ways over roughly the last three decades. See Hunter (2005a,c) for a further discussion. For an excellent review of the often inappropriate use of “prostitution” in Africa see Standing (1992).

⁸ I draw inspiration from economic anthropologists’ work on “the Gift” that stems from Marcel Mauss’ (1925) famous ethnography of Melanesia of the same title. This literature points to how exchanges of *gifts* produces *obligations* and *relations* between people, a form of ties usually contrasted to the exchange of *depersonalised commodities* (you exchange money for goods in a fruit market but do not consider from whom you bought the fruit, but gift exchange involves reciprocal obligations). For useful discussions on “The Gift”, see Gregory (1982) and Parry & Bloch (1989). For an excellent discussion of gift exchanges and intimacy in Brazil see Rebhun (1999). The nature of these relationships is important: while policy makers tend to see low condom use in narrow terms of “male power,” it is often in affairs between “boyfriends” and “girlfriends”—positioned as being about love—where men and women are least likely to use condoms and in the most commodified relationships, prostitution, where condoms are used the most (for example Preston-Whyte, Varga, Oosthuizen, Roberts, & Blose, 2000; Smith, 2004).

⁹ Although the accuracy of the test used to measure HIV incidence has been recently disputed. See http://www.unaids.org/en/HIV_data/Epidemiology/default.asp. Thanks to Hein Marais for this reference.

¹⁰ Suggestive of the greater risk attached to women’s migrancy, one of the few studies on women migrants to urban areas found a positive correlation between migrancy and HIV status (Zuma, Gouws, Williams, & Lurie, 2003).

¹¹ The Gini-coefficient rose from 0.596 in 1995 to 0.635 in 2001. p. xvi. Terreblanche (2002) too argues that social inequalities increased from the 1970s and were accentuated in the post-apartheid period. Important political economy accounts of South Africa’s transition include Marais (2001) and Bond (2000).

¹² Pensions in 2005 were raised to R780 a month (\$130). Their importance to rural homes, even at much lower rate, was noted by Ardington & Lund (1995). Child support grant was R 170 (\$28) a month in 2005. Both are vital to survival in rural areas, especially for women and, indeed, for the continued support of the ANC among the poor.

¹³ See Denis and Ntsimane (2004) and Hosegood and Preston-Whyte (2003). Family trees taken in rural Mandeni, and many interviews, suggest rapidly declining marriage especially from the 1980s, see Hunter (2005a).

¹⁴ The simplest way to track changes to marriage would be to scrutinize marital *rates*. But such figures were collected only for Whites, Indians and Coloured groups, leaving marital *status*, available from population census data, as the most reliable proxy when considering African marriage. For a discussion of South African data regarding marriage see Budlender, Chobokoane, & Simelane (2004). The above figures include civil and customary marriages.

¹⁵ I would like to acknowledge the extent that this section draws from my access to the Africa Centre's data and my interaction with Carol Camlin, Caterina Hill, Kobus Herbst, Vicky Hosegood, & Thembeke Mngomezulu. On the construction of the study see Africa Centre Population Studies Group (2003) and Hosegood and Timeaus (2005). Detailed exploration of this data, and the relationship between migration and HIV, will be published in due course.

¹⁶ The Agincourt Demographic Surveillance System based in the North East of South Africa found extremely strong links between migrants and their rural homes--60% of temporary migrants communicating with the rural home in the two weeks prior to one study (Collinson, Tollman, Kahn, & Clark, 2003).