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Transactional Sex as a Response to Risk in Western Kenya

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Though formal and informal sex work has long been identified as crucial for the spread of HIV/AIDS, the nature of the sex-for-money market remains poorly understood. Using a unique panel dataset constructed from 192 self-reported diaries, we find that women who engage in transactional sex substantially increase their supply of risky, better compensated sex to cope with unexpected health shocks, particularly the illness of another household member. These behavioral responses entail significant health risks for these women and their partners, and suggest that these women are unable to cope with risk through other consumption smoothing mechanisms. (JEL: I12, J16, O15)

Exchanging sex for money, goods, or services is a way of life for many poor women in developing countries, yet little is understood about the way that the transactional sex market functions. While sex workers have long been identified as critical in affecting the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (UNAIDS 2002; M. Hawken et al. 2002; Christopher P. Hudson 1996; E. A. Plummer et al. 1991), comparatively little work has gone beyond characterizing transactional sex as a high-risk activity.

This paper focuses on sub-Saharan Africa, a region in which transactional sex is prevalent. In fact, transactional sex is present within many types of sexual relationships, including long-term partnerships and even marriage (Ann Swidler and Susan Cotts Watkins 2007; Nancy Luke 2006; Brooke Grundfest Schoepf 2004; Mark Hunter 2002; Janet Maia Wojcicki 2002a; John C. Caldwell, Pat Caldwell, and Pat Quiggin 1989). In this context, commercial sex work might be thought of as

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