

MSM contexts in Lahore

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To attempt to use the term men who have sex with men as a bounded framework in the context of Pakistan would not be valid. Nor should they be seen as an exclusive category of people, defined by a specific occupation or activity, unlike perhaps female sex workers and IDUs, or even truck drivers and slum dwellers, categories used in Pakistan by NGOs and others. To do so leads to a greater invisibility of differing contexts of male to male sexual behaviours, expressed in an often bewildering variety and range of personal identities, behaviours, gender identifications and practices, which defy such a simple categorisation.

What seems to exist are a range of masculinities and genders with differing contextualisation of a range of sexual behaviours, partner choices, perceived sexual needs, and desires.

While for some MSM there are frameworks of specific male to male desire (based on object choice), identities and visibility which may make it easier to access and quantify numbers, for others who sexually access these males and whose desires are around discharge rather than gender/sex roles, and who perceive themselves as 'manly' and 'normal men', it is almost impossible to quantify. Access would probably be easier through their *zenana* or *malishia* partners than directly.

Further, in the broader context perhaps we should be talking about male to male sexual behaviours rather than men who have sex with men (MSM) for the word "men" can be problematic.

Contemporary research on sexualities and genders have clearly shown that bipolar categories, such as 'man' or 'woman' or 'heterosexual' or 'homosexual', are not useful to describe the range of identities, desires and practices" (personal discussion with Carol Jenkins, Care Bangladesh, 1999) existing in Pakistan generally and Lahore specifically. The terms "gay" or "homosexual" are too contextualised by a specific history, geography, language, and culture to have any significant usefulness in a different culture from their source. In this we should be talking about sexualities, genders, and at the least, homosexualities and heterosexualities, and about behavioural constructions. Where UNAIDS and others speak of behaviourally homosexual, we can also talk about behaviourally heterosexual in the South Asian context.

Even the word bisexual, often used to label those who have sex with both men and women, is not a useful category in differing cultures. At the same time, the term "men who have sex with men" is also beginning to lose whatever usefulness it may have had once, as this too has become a bounded category. What does the word "men" mean in this context? What does the word "sex" mean? This was clearly seen in Lahore during a range of discussions, where some of those who do not identify as *zenana* are beginning to use this term to give expression to their personal desires and behaviours, while definitions of 'man' and 'sex' also varied considerably.

Whereas some of the male to male sexual acts could perhaps be called 'homosexual' (within the context of a local sexuality based upon a feminised gender identification - also self-labelled as *zenanas*) in that a sexual sense of self is operating within a framework of gendered sex roles and desires, a significant majority of the male sexual partners of these *zenanas* could be seen within a context of semen discharge. These sexual partners of *zenanas* are called *giryas* by them. But it should also be recognised that within a gendered construct of male to male sex and desire, there are *giryas* who form emotional and sexual relationships with *zenanas* (such *giryas* are called *pukka dost*). These *giryas* do not see themselves (nor are they perceived as such) as homosexuals, but rather as real men, defined by their supposedly exclusive penetrating role that they take in the sexual encounter with a *zenana*.

Self-identities amongst MSM in Lahore varied across a spectrum of divergent categories and masculinities, from *hijras* to *zenanas* to *chavas* (who are penetrated and also penetrate) to *giryas* (who supposedly only penetrate). Within this were also sub-categories, particularly among *zenanas*, indicating finer distinctions of behaviour, dress and mannerisms, whether they were castrated or not, and so on. For many *zenanas*, this is a socialising and socialised role, where they can recognise each other even though they maybe strangers, where ready friendships are easily facilitated, and where a "new" *zenana* with emergent desires (and often not so emergent) will be be-friended by an "older" *zenanas* and learn the characteristics, roles, behaviours (including sexual), mannerisms and language. It is this *zenana* framework which is the most visible framework among MSM in Lahore.

However, not all male to male sexual encounters in Lahore fall into the *zenana/giryas* framework, where gender sexual roles are acted out and define the self-identities of the sexual partners. Other constructs, desires, and patterns of sexual encounters exist, framing a complex, open-ended, and extremely porous 'group', or 'networks' of MSM. In fact the word 'group' is highly suspect, in that in term does not fully frame the actual behavioural practices of males across Lahore society. The word 'group' implies an exclusive practice of a number of men/males, but this is not the reality. While *hijras* and public *zenanas* may be considered a group in that their behavioural characteristics make them significantly visible, their partners are not, and can be defined as the general male population whose public behaviour is 'manly' according to the socio-cultural definitions in Pakistan. In fact, we should also recognise that the term men who have sex with men is highly problematic as well, since too often it is perceived as a term with identity connotations, rather than just a behavioural practice, i.e. prison populations, all male institutions, and so on can also be defined as men who have sex with men, since such behaviours are prevalent in such institutions.

In Western terminology, men are divided into oppositional categories: heterosexual **or** homosexual, terms that were invented in the 19th century within a lexical and reductionist framework where a person's behaviour would define his sense of self. You were either a homosexual or you were a heterosexual. Within this oppositional framework, the homosexual was defined as subordinate and less worthy than a heterosexual. And at some cognisant level the homosexual was deemed effeminate, more womanly-like,

and the penetrated (or the 'passive') partner. It was only in the 20th century that the penetrating (or 'active') partner was also deemed to be homosexual. Such distinctions are not valid in Pakistan.

There of course is a proviso. Among the elite - the middle and upper social classes - where education and language is highly Westernised, with access to the internet, English language, books and magazines, a sense of homosexuality has developed as a person's primary characteristic, with the adopted language of sexual politics- gay **or** straight. In Lahore, there are men who have developed a gay sensibility and a personal gay identity within the confines of Pakistani culture and social practice. This precludes the "coming - out" process that is seen as a central component of Western gay identities. In other words there are men who perceive themselves as gay, but find themselves too vulnerable to come-out as gay. They are 'closeted'. The reasons for such 'passing', or 'hiding', are of course obvious. This Assessment did not access any gay-identified men.

Several differing networks, definitions, and sexual ideologies were identified in the study. These included:

a. **Hijras** who are for the most biological males, usually fully castrated, and sometimes sell sex to 'real men". They form a specific community and follow specific relationship rules with each other, and within "guru-led families". The Assessment did not access *hijras*.

b. **Zenanas**, who are also biological males, are not castrated, and usually perceive themselves as "a woman in a man's body". They may or may not feminise their social behaviours in public spaces, will often wear make-up, dress in feminine clothes, and take on the female sexual role as the penetrated partner. Some of them (but certainly not all) are highly visible in certain public spaces by their feminised gestures and body language - usually quite exaggerated - their cross-dressing (both partial and fully) at melas and other functions where they perform as dancers, and for some of them, their availability as male sex workers. Such behaviours can be seen as a 'public performance' acting out the role of *zenana* to attract 'manly' clients and sexual partners. But it should be recognised that some *zenanas* will also sexually penetrate, but such behaviours are denied.

Other males may call themselves *zenanas*, but their public behaviours and performance are not readily recognised as *zenana* behaviour. However in what they deem as 'safe spaces' and/or with other public *zenanas*, their behaviour will shift towards such feminised behaviours and practices. In some ways, perhaps we can call this situational identities.

It should be noted that, like *hijras*, *zenanas* have a language of their own, secret and not accessed by the general public. The *zenana* terminologies and language can be seen as a derivative of the language used by *hijras*, and they term this *farsi*.

It is interesting to note that the terms and phrases used by *zenanas* in Lahore are also used across the sub-continent, whether in Dhaka in Bangladesh, or Chennai in India, with some local variations. But a *zenana* from Lahore can be

understood by a *zenana* (also known as a *koti*) in Chennai or Dhaka, or Delhi.

c. **Chavas** are usually young men who look and behave as ordinary males, and whose sexual practice is usually mutual. In other words they will penetrate and be penetrated, orally and anally. This means that they can have sex with a *zenana* as well as a *giryas* and between themselves. *Zenanas* express difficulties with this framework because it lies outside the context of a gendered sex act.

d. **Giryas**, the name given by *zenanas* to 'real men' who are seen as potential penetrating sex partners in the gendered framework. In a sense all 'manly' men are perceived as potential *giryas* by *zenanas*. A *giryas* who forms a relationship with a *zenana* is also known as a *pukka dost*.

e. **College Boys** are linked with *chavas*, in that they will often take both the penetrating and the penetrated sex role. *College boys* are usually dressed in shirt/pants, and are seen as more educated and come from middle-class families and perform as "normal" males.

f. **Malishias** are different from the above in that this is an occupational term rather than a term defining sexual practice or identity. It is believed that most *malishias* will also offer sex to their customers as well as a massage, and the Assessment did indicate that a substantial number of *malishias* do so. The perception is that *malishias* only take the penetrating role in sex acts, and that they will have sex with both men and women.

There are of course other networks of male to male sex in a range of male only institutions, or between young male friends in neighbourhoods, and also between an older man and an adolescent boy. These frameworks can be seen within contexts of

- a. desire for a specific sexual act, i.e. anal sex
- b. 'body heat' that requires discharge
- c. mutual desire for male to male sex

It further needs to be recognised that the act of a male being anally penetrated by another male is highly stigmatised and those who are perceived to be recipients are usually treated with contempt. A *giryas* or *malishias* or any man/male who is sexually penetrated, orally or anally, will make extensive efforts to hide his desire and/or practice both from the public as well as from *zenanas* and others in their sexual networks to avoid such stigmatisation. Accessing such information is extremely difficult because of the intensive levels of denial that asking such questions generate. However, private discussions with a range of individuals indicate that such practices are common, but invisible.

Accessing sexual partners is not considered difficult by those interviewed. There are many spaces in Lahore (50 specific locations were identified in a mapping exercise) where *zenanas* could go to meet potential *giryas*, often marketing sexual availability through their feminised social behaviours. Many 'real men' also go to these sites, not only to meet such accessible *zenanas*, but also for quite legitimate purposes, where they get caught up "in the heat of the moment" and access *zenana* t at the time. But because of the visibility of

many *zenanas*, and their performative role, it is considered quite possible to access *giryas* for sex anywhere.

Malishias are also highly visible at a range of sites, clanging their bottles to advertise their presence, or standing by the roadside/pavement. It was noticed that not only passers-by were accessing their massage service (and often what is termed 'hand-relief', or where invisibility was assured, oral and/or anal penetration by the *malishia* - or even allowing themselves to be penetrated in secretive conditions), but many also have regular customers who will take them to local hotels or their own homes for massage and sex. And these were not only customers from the same social/economic status. They include men and women from middle-class backgrounds who can afford to have a car.

What is clearly seen is that language, behaviour, and identity was to a large extent gendered, within a hidden context of polymorphous behaviours, and that behaviour and sexual practice were the more significant markers than a specific sexual identity. In a way we could say that there were limited numbers of MSM with specific sexual identities, but significant levels with a gender identity which shaped their perceived sexual practices, and even a greater number of males who access youth and/or feminised males.

One more point needs to be made. Relationships between various networks (I use this term advisedly rather than groups) were often self-stigmatising, tense and sometimes abusive because of the social construct of penetration being seen as equivalent to feminising and stigmatising. 'Gender politics' and relationships come to the fore. Thus *malishias* may abuse *zenanas* because of their feminisation, *zenanas* will sometimes call *chavas zenanas* because they are also at times penetrated, *giryas* abuse *zenanas*, and substantial tensions exist between *hijras* and *zenanas*, since *zenanas* are not castrated. These tensions can at times explode into verbal and physical abuse.

As part of their public feminine gender performance, some *zenanas* will take oral contraceptives (many can't afford, or can't access, hormone injections) as a means of developing breasts, stating that *giryas* like to "squeeze" their breasts as a part of their sexual practice. From the range of discussions, taking oral contraceptives by these males is a significant activity, not so much as a means to become more like women, but as a tool to attract *giryas* as sexual partners.

Sociocultural, religious and family pressures ensure that the majority of *zenanas* will eventually marry and produce children, no matter how long they attempt to delay this process. The choice is often stark. Stay with your family, or leave! And with no social welfare system available, there is a perception of no choice. This intense pressure produces a range of psychological effects, sometimes depression, perhaps fear of non-performance with their wives, and always a constant search for a "real man" who will "marry" them and look after them.

For *giryas*, marriage and children are key identity markers of manliness.

Many of the *zenanas* from low income groups become sex workers as a

source of generating and income. Not that all may identify as sex workers. This income is to support their families and themselves.

Not all male sex workers are *zenana*-identified. Many *malishias* also sell sex as an additional source of income, while *chavas/college boys* will also sell sex.

But while poverty was a determinant of sexual behaviour for many male sex workers, it was clear from the discussions and interviews that pleasure and discharge was also involved.

Giryas are less clearly defined, being males of all ages and types, married and unmarried, across the spectrum of income and employment, who, at least at times, enjoy sex with other males, stating they could not access females, and they could not control their "body heat" and "needed to discharge". There was a strong sense of immediacy, urgency, opportunity and availability to their sexual behaviours with the *zenanas*.

This, of course, does not mean that many *giryas* don't also desire other males. But usually this desire is usually contextualised within a gendered pattern of 'penetrator' or 'penetrated'. And of course all *giryas* will either be married or will get married eventually, fulfilling the social, religious and family expectations for all men in Bangladesh culture. At the same time, some *giryas* who publicly performs as a 'manly' man will also get penetrated.

Beyond this "public" framework of identities, desires, and behaviours is a context even more invisibilised, an issue also relevant to HIV prevention. An unknown number of males/men experience male-to-male sex while young, often before male-to-female sex and often with family relatives such as cousins or uncles, or even with friends. Such behaviours will often continue into adulthood and sometimes beyond marriage. These behaviours are outside the "public environments" taking place in neighbourhoods, private homes, hostels, guest houses, hotels, and a range of vendor shops and other private places. Here the contexts may well play out a gendered framework, but often it is where access, immediacy and opportunity play a significant role in the prevalence of this behaviour. Very often both of the partners involved in the sexual activity do not express a sexualised identity, but rather speak of need and urgency, "the heat of the moment", or "I did it in my sleep", if they discuss this at all.

Some may well find that their experience of sex with men resonates with their own sexual desires and gender role preferences, and should they meet with *zenanas*, develop their own *zenana* identity. Others give no voice or name to their experiences, and may well stop upon marriage, or continue in their neighbourhoods with local *zenanas* and other males.

This does not imply that these sexual roles are limited to what they publicly speak of, i.e. "active" or "passive" since it is known that sexual acts and roles may well shift and change where space and time permit. Behind closed doors and under the blanket much more diverse behaviours may exist, where the *zenana* may well penetrate what was perceived previously as a *giryas*.

A *zenana* identity is very much around performance, both public and private, of declaring one's sexual interest and preference. It is a socialising role, a framework to meet similar individuals and share common desires, feelings and behaviours. It is also a mechanism of self-recognition and recognising others. To be socially excluded is devastating. Sexual behaviour is a component of identity, and if behaviour falls outside the identity parameters and it becomes known to others, then the person can fall outside the socialising role.

Thus, such "cross-gendered" behaviours are seen by *zenanas* and by the so-called *giryas* as even more shameful, and both would consistently deny involvement in such behaviours. Where this occurs, the behaviour tends to be kept even more secret than those that "fit" the prescribed gendered sex role.

Secrecy and shame control the frameworks of visibility and denial in regard to behaviours deemed outside the social and cultural norm. Not talking about sex and sexual behaviours is one way of not only invisibilising such behaviours and practices, but also of marginalising them as a peripheral phenomena, particularly in regard to male to male sexual encounters. At the same time such secrecy enables maintaining a socially acceptable public role.

This form of social control is constructed by traditional and religious concepts of honour and shame. Honour, not so much as what is deemed to be personally honourable, but in terms of one's standing in the community and family. Honour as a possession, not a quality. Shame, not so much as what may be deemed as wrongful (or even sinful), but by behaviour and conduct which brings shame to the family and/or community as a whole. These two intersecting frameworks arise out of understandings of value systems around what is public and what is private. What is visible and what is invisible.

Public behaviour, behaviour which is visible, is bound within a context of family duty, honour and obligation (both familial and religious). In this context any behaviour which is visible to the community (and/or family) falls within the scope of public behaviour and therefore falls within concepts of honour and shame.

Darkness and privacy creates invisibility. Bushes, trees, dark construction sites, badly lit alleyways, behind houses, under blankets, any place where space is available for mutual sex encounters and where darkness reigns. Darkness invisibilises behaviours creating deniability. It is in the dark that most male to male sex occurs.

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