

# Eyes Wide Shut

## Violence, stigma and social exclusion MSM, HIV and social justice in South Asia

Shivananda Khan, Aditya Bondyopadhyay, Dr. Carol Jenkins, 2004

Shivananda Khan, founder and Chief Executive of Naz Foundation International  
Aditya Bondyopadhyay, NFI legal consultant and human rights activist  
Dr. Carol Jenkins is an independent consultant on HIV/AIDS

*Torture and sexual assault by police personnel of Nyappanahalli police station  
(report from a hijra in Bangalore, India. 19/6/04)*

*Metis attacked by police coming out of a nightclub in Kathmandu  
(report from Blue Diamond Society, Kathmandu, Nepal, 15/5/04)*

*Outreach workers of local MSM sexual health project, and international NGO staff arrested for  
'promoting homosexuality'  
Report from 8/7/01, Lucknow, India*

*Kothi field staff sexually assaulted by police  
(report from Bandhu Social Welfare Society, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 15/8/03)*

*(Note, metis and kothis are local terms used by feminised males who have sex with males in Nepal,  
and Bangladesh/India respectively for themselves. In Pakistan the term used is zenana.)*

It can go on. People abused, violated, arrested, threatened, blackmailed, beaten because they happen to be *hijras*, *kothis*, or effeminate gay men. The very state agencies that are meant to protect citizens, actively support, or even directly involve themselves in targeting males who have sex with males, particularly those who are feminised.

More than just the fact of male to male sex, a central real issue is the abuse, sexual assault and violence. Males with feminised demeanour or gendered identities are considered “not men”, and are perceived to be penetrated by “real men”. Such penetration is considered to degrade the masculine status of such males and therefore give “real men” the right to target and abuse them.

87% of respondents in a study conducted in Bangladesh stated that they have been subjected to sexual assault or rape because they were effeminate. The situation is not much different in other countries of South Asia.

Such violence and terror has a dramatic impact on any focused HIV/AIDS sexual health intervention that works with male-to-male sex, not to speak of the devastating effect it has in creating an atmosphere where such males are incapacitated from taking effective measures to protect themselves from the infection.

HIV/AIDS has exposed the tremendous complexities of male-to-male sex. The simplified black and white binaries of gay/straight, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, cannot suffice as an explanation for these complexities. Any attempt at such a reductionist analysis would amount to denying the tremendous diversity of masculinities, sexualities, and gender identities, and would consequently also be insufficient to engage in effective HIV/AIDS prevention intervention efforts with male-to-male sex.

Hence the promotion of the term ‘Men who have Sex with Men’ or MSM by UNAIDS over the last 20 years or so. Originally perceived to denote a homosexual behavioural category to be targeted with HIV prevention efforts, today even this coinage has run into problems because of its usage of the term ‘Men’. For socially and culturally, what is the definition of ‘Man’, given the reality of the complexities

mentioned above? In South Asia, a man is not defined by the genitalia he is born with, but by his adherence to certain socially specified roles, by his discharge of certain social obligations and duties, by his sexual performance within the confines of certain culturally specified dos and don'ts, as well as by a sense of hegemonic masculinity that moderates the entire spectrum of his behaviour and social performance.

Gender and sexuality does not derive solely from biology, but are framed by social constructions specific to culture, language, religion, and geography. In South Asia for example, visible male-to male sex is structured on gendered frameworks, which govern the sex and performative roles. The public performance of the feminised male is to attract the so called normative masculine male. The former is clearly a gendered sexual identity; the latter is just a man. Neither see themselves as homosexual, or gay, or even as men who have sex with men. The 'man' sees himself as having sex with a 'not man', who in turn has the gendered sexual identity of either *kothi* or *hijra* and not of 'man'. Conversely these subaltern 'masculinities' like *kothis* and *hijras* do not perceive themselves as men, but have sex with what they call "real men". Thus neither see themselves as Men Who Have Sex With Men, or homosexuals, or gay.

To complicate matters even further, the term MSM itself has begun to signify an identity category and a 'target group', often losing any usefulness it may well have had once. As a consequence, these "targeted interventions" focus on groups of identifiable individuals, supposedly small in numbers, usually effeminated, and not as a behaviour. Of course who these feminised 'MSM' have sex with remains an invisible question. Through this crack, the vast majority of males, identifying themselves as real men, but having sex with such so-called MSM, slip off the intervention net.

To those who work with male to male sex, these issues are obvious. But many donors, NGOs, lesbian and gay activists, HIV public health specialists, international agencies, human rights activists, consultants, et al, persist with its usage. It is understandable, given that the intellectual pandemic of HIV continues to be mired in a new globalisation, which in a reversal of logic seeks validity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Cartesian reductionist philosophies, where understanding a phenomenon is possible only if it is named, catalogued, bracketed, and labelled.

Another factor that affects HIV programming is the mild and unstated anti-sex attitudes (if it is recreational) that governs the funding structures of much of HIV prevention efforts. Funders, like many others in societies around the world, are often conservative and narrow in vision. Therefore addressing diverse sexualities is deferred to addressing sexual health, if we are lucky, but usually reproductive health, even in the case of male to male sex. But the two biological organs that are most frequently used in male to male sex, namely the mouth and the anus, are not deemed either as reproductive organs nor sexual organs!

A reductionist approach often neatly fits the funders' mandat, for then he can set aside the little that he has to target the so-called small number of 'identifiable' MSM, and carry on with the 'real' work of protecting the reproductive health of the so-called 'mainstream' population. However the fact that the sexual partners of these 'identified' MSM are the ones who bridge the path of infection between the 'identified' MSM and the general population is lost in this scheme, reducing in turn the efficacy of the whole prevention effort.

But having a greater ramification is the fact that this reductionist viewpoint allows the continuation of the abuse and violence against feminised males, for they are identified and identifiable by the labelling and the bracketing, while the vast majority of their sexual partners dissolve into the invisibility of mainstream hegemonised masculinity. The labelling creates the 'other', the 'outsider', who can be attacked from within the confines of the fortress of mainstream masculinity by those who dwell there.

In the estimation of those capable of enabling a change for the better, the labelling and bracketing also reduce the importance of rights of those so identified, for in psephologically determinate democracies of the new globe, their numbers are just not significant enough.

Simultaneously lesbian and gay activists, along with many human rights activists, see the world in the largely western terminologies of 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender' without any thought as to how this translates into local languages, practices, significances, and meanings. One is either this or that. However the many for whom they speak, and who cannot often identify themselves with either this or that, feel alienated by their intellectual activism. Sometimes this alienation leads to actual confrontation.

This GLBT (or is it LGBT, or LGBTI) paradigm, where each person must fit into a box of this or that, and where space for the un self-identified, the unlabelled is denied, if not denigrated (remember the struggle to get a concept of bisexual behaviour/identity accepted by lesbians and gay men who often would state that those with bisexual desires were closet gay men or lesbians), Where do hijras, kothis, waria, bakla, kathoey, fa'fa'fini, or even the 'two-spirit' people of North America, 'fit'? What if they do not wish to be labelled as lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender, or whatever by others? Why bi-polar categories in the first place? The result is a brand of identity politics, often acrimonious, which invisibilises much of male-to- male sex (as well as female-to-female sex) and denies their actors participation in the fight for their human rights, for their sexual rights.

Across the world and in every continent, there is an enormous range of same-sex behaviours and lived identities that cannot be reduced to some simplistic framework of heterosexual/homosexual, gay/straight, or even man/woman. Understanding sex/gender systems should be based on what has meaning, significance, and lived experience, not on what others tell us to whom to be and what we should call ourselves and identify with.

There are 'men who have sex with men' because they desire other men. There are men who have sex with other males because they do not consider these males to be men. There are males who do not think of themselves as men, who have sex with real men. There are men who have sex with men because of fun, discharge, body heat, and so on. There are males who have sex with males and consider it 'lesbian sex'. The various possibilities are endless. However the polemics and discourse of these diversities of sexual possibilities are dominated by those who are lesbian or gay identified, but whose real life experience is not the same as the majority of those males for whom they speak. The rights to sexual autonomy, incorporating in its fold the rights to penetrate as much as the rights to be penetrated (or even the right not to have penetrative sex of whatever sort) gets lost in the identity politics that demands rights for gay men. Those who do not define as gay are somehow sidelined or forgotten. And there the moot question again raises its head; does anyone have the right to impose their philosophy, identity, or politics, on others?

We do not lose the concepts of rights within such an openness to be different, to explore ourselves in different ways, to experience other human beings in different ways. We are talking about autonomous, consensual human beings with sexual rights to be themselves, to define themselves, and to live their lives in meaningful and significant way appropriate to who they are and who they wish to become in a never ending process of becoming.